



Trinity Church Wall Street 11:15am Holy Eucharist – Trinity Sunday
The Rev. Michael A. Bird Transcript

“Until Death Do Us Part”

The pandemic has postponed so many marriages that Father Michael is now counseling engaged couples on a weekly basis via Zoom. After discussing “the deep wisdom of the church on marriage” the conversations turn to the six stress points for most relationships: in-laws, children, religion, money, illness, and housework. “We walk through these six places and I try to help them understand that, although I am listing these things for them, it’s just life.” The readings are Job 1:1, 2: 1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1: 1-4, 2: 5-12; and Mark 10: 13-16.

Sermon Transcript:

The suffering of Job, or Jesus' one proclamation on marriage. Which would you have picked? I'm sticking with the gospel today because I feel strongly given the name gospel there's some good news to be found somewhere in the midst of it. One of the unexpected and unanticipated consequences of a pandemic is that marriages were postponed. Wedding upon wedding, upon wedding was moved a month or three months, or six months, or a year or 18 months, and still counting. Clergy have entered into a season of weddings. We are running to catch up. At this point in this fall, I will own I am just about to finish all the weddings I was supposed to do in my previous parish. I've been here almost 10 months. On a weekly basis I have these wonderful Zoom calls, these wonderful moments where I meet with these couples and I get to share with them the deep wisdom of the church on marriage. I get to spend time with them and talk about the theology of marriage, the fact that marriage was the last sacrament to the party. The fact that marriage is the only sacrament that is not conferred by the priest. That is the outpouring of love from one person upon another that sanctified the relationship, that makes it holy, that concentrates it.

The priests responsibility is to witness that sacrament and to bestow God's blessing on behalf of the church. We gather and we talk about the theology of marriage and when I have somewhat perhaps insufficiently exhausted that conversation, we get into the real stuff about marriage. I walk them through the six places in life where relationships come under deep stress. As I list them to you, please do not read into my own life or my own marriage. It's just the way they're coming to my head. Six places of stress. In-laws. Insert your own joke here. Children, religion, money, histories of mental illness, or drug and alcohol addiction in a family and last but not least, housework. We walk through these six places and I try to help them understand that although I am listing these things for them, it's just life. Life is full of trials and tribulations. Life is full of difficult moments. Life is filled with unexpected difficulties. As a married couple, we urge them not to do that thing that we often do, which is turn into ourselves and try to work it out on our own. But instead, in the face of those difficulties, turn to one another and love, and listen. I remind them that in the difficulties of this life, we are presented with great opportunities to stop and be grateful to turn to the people in our lives and recognize our deepest thanks to God for their existence in our lives and in so doing, bless them. I lift up for these relationships the opportunity to stop and recognize that sometimes we just need to listen.

To listen deeply enough to be changed by what we hear and what we learn because the person we enter a relationship with is not going to be the same person a year or five-year or 10 years, or 30 or 40 or 50, or whatever it happens to be. We are humans, we change. I sit with these couples and I try to give them all of this understanding to give it context and I remind them that in the best of times, in the worst of times in great joy. Boy, I'm having trouble saying joy today must be because it's my third sermon of the day! In the midst of great joy and even great sorrow, we may invite God in. When Jesus speaks about marriage in the Gospel of Mark, we get none of that context. We get this moment where Jesus is supposedly set up for failure. The Pharisees want to find out what he has to say on yet another of the difficulties of being human and yet another way that humans have changed and developed and perhaps grappled with their faith and the practice of their faith and so the Pharisees speak to Jesus and they asked him, is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife? Jesus answers, what did Moses command you? They say, Moses said it's okay. Jesus replies, Moses said it's okay because of your hardened hearts and your ability to negotiate. Jesus says just because it's permissible does not make it desirable. There is work to be done. Jesus takes it out of Deuteronomy Chapter 10 and places it's squarely in the story of our creation and God's intention for God's people.

From Genesis Chapter 2, we get for this reason, a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. Those whom God has joined together let no one separate. Jesus goes right back to the beginning and dares to imagine, dares to reclaim, dares to make alive again, God's deep desire that we find union in relationships. This is no longer about Moses or Deuteronomy or the Pharisees put before him, this is the stuff of life that God's intention is that we find ways, all of us everywhere. We find ways to be together and allow the glue that holds us together, allow it to be love and self offering and self-sacrifice and commitment. Jesus says all of these things and the disciples in classic Gospel of Mark fashion still don't get it. We get another question and answer session where Jesus says to them, "Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery and whoever divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery." In other words, oh, gosh, this stuff is hard. This stuff is really hard. Which is also why this reading is not in the top 10 of readings to be done at weddings. In fact, this stuff is so hard that we, with the love of Christ in our hearts pastorally respond and say, sometimes marriages get sick, sometimes marriages become hurtful, sometimes marriages die, and when they do, it is hard. We grieve, we mourn, we are sorrowful. We remember what God would have us do. We turn together to lift one another up and hold each other up and make sure no one is left out of the embrace.

In case the disciples didn't really get what Jesus was going after we have this final moment where people were bringing little children. You've heard this for weeks in a row now, little children, those who had the least status in society at that time. Jesus takes these little children up in his arms, lays his hands on them and blesses them, and reminds us that, that is the kingdom of God. When we are tempted to parse out a gospel reading to find our way and dig for that answer that we really want to use to prove our point when we are tempted to look in the Bible and cherry pick that thing that makes us feel better and someone else feels smaller, we have this moment where Jesus takes the most complicated pastoral situation, the commitment of two people to one another, and the difficulty of that, and finds a way in the midst of that awkward set of questions to lift up for us the Kingdom of God that we have been given each other. That God's love knows no bounds. That the Kingdom of God and our ability to be in relationship with one another is as wide as our arms can be and so much more. That our relationship with one another and with God will see us through. With that in our hearts, well, I'm excited to see what we do next.

Amen.