

The Wedding Album

Time after Pentecost - Lectionary 27
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, October 4, 2009
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 8;
Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I'm not quite certain where to store my wedding photos. They used to be in an album, given to Randy and me by the photography studio which handled our wedding. But recently I discovered the album itself was disintegrating. This was truly strange. I was busy filling up photo albums with this past year's events (Christmas, birthdays, summer vacation, Sarah's graduation, first day of school, first day of college, etc.) and now I was ready to stow those completed albums on the shelf in the cupboard where we keep all our other photo albums.

In order for the new albums to fit on the shelf I needed to shift older albums around, and my hand reached out to the album furthest on my left—our wedding album—and promptly stuck to it. The plasticky-outside of this album was all sticky and icky. When I pulled my hand away, gray goopy stuff came off the album and adhered to my hand. The album itself was stuck to the wall of the cupboard and the photo album next to it. I had to pry the wedding album out from the cupboard with both hands, and now both hands had this gray goopy sticky stuff on them, which required paint thinner for removal.

Our wedding photos were intact, but I had to throw away the album. What had we done to make this happen? Did we, the last time we looked at our wedding photos, somehow contaminate the album with a residue of sorts that began the deterioration process? Had we simply neglected to take care of the album the way we should, and through that neglect, allowed the thing to disintegrate? I don't know. I'm just glad our photos weren't damaged.

And I kind-of wanted to joke with my husband that I hoped the disintegrating album didn't "symbolize" our marriage. Except that it wouldn't be a very funny joke. You and I know—through our own personal stories or the stories of others—that the deterioration of a marriage is a sad and often painful event. Whether through willful actions that harm that relationship, or through neglect that allows the relationship to wither on the vine, we know that marriages do come to an end, and that in the process people experience hurt, or hurt one another, and that children and extended families and friends and even the congregation to which the couple belongs can be sorely affected either by the effects of a bad marriage, or the effects of a bitter divorce.

The only way you and I cannot possibly be affected by the disintegration of a relationship is if we are thoroughly content and satisfied to exist alone. I'm not talking about remaining single. I'm talking about living in isolation from community. If one is content to be isolated from the rest of community, the end of a relationship isn't ever an issue. Because there was no relationship there to begin with.

But you and I—to begin with—from creation, were intended to live in community. What does it say in our lesson from Genesis? *It is not good that the man should be alone.* In its narrowest interpretation (certainly a faithful interpretation), we can see in this lesson how marriage is lifted up as a wonderful reflection of the relationship God has with us—a marriage does, in its best sense, reflect divine goodness, and exhibit mutual devotion and love. But we can take that same scripture passage and broaden its interpretation to refer to human beings in general (another faithful interpretation), to community in general, and we learn much about God’s purpose for you and me, married or otherwise.

There are two distinct creation stories in the book of Genesis. Today’s Old Testament lesson is from the second story. You might, however, recall the language of the first story, where, as God finished each day’s creating, God looked at what he just made and *saw that it was good.* Move onto the second story and today’s passage, and we learn that God saw something, however, that was **not** good. What was **not** good was that there was no helper in all creation fit for the human being. That was not good. Yet God was determined that what he created **would** be good. So it came to pass that God created a second human being. Not for each of them to go off in opposing directions and live in isolation from one another, but for the two of them to be in relationship. And that would be good.

The gift of community, of living together, of caring for and serving one another, of being helpers to each other—this is God’s grand design for the people he made.

Oh, but what damage we’ve done to community by our actions and what neglect has resulted from our inaction. Relationships deteriorate. We have witnessed that reality at all levels of community—in marriages and partnerships, in families (immediate or extended), in neighborhoods, in congregations. Whether we have watched from the sidelines, or been active participants in the story, you and I have seen community fall apart—sometimes through willful selfish behavior, sometimes through failure to pay attention to the relationship and nurture it carefully.

But it is clear from scripture that that disintegration is **not** God’s intention. In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus is asked a question: *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?* This was an attempt by some zealous religious leaders to catch Jesus off-guard. The answer to the question was already apparent. It was legal for a Jewish man to divorce his wife. But various groups within Judaism hotly debated what constituted grounds for divorce—what objectionable behavior did the wife commit to make it legal for the husband to divorce her. (By the way, if you hadn’t figured out yet, the divorce laws back then represented a highly patriarchal society.) The Pharisees wanted to trap Jesus, who was becoming way too influential with the masses. If Jesus said yes, divorce was legal, and then went on to describe what the grounds for divorce were, he would surely offend some religious group and get in trouble for that. If Jesus said no, divorce was not legal, he risked the same outcome as his cousin John the Baptist, who was beheaded by King Herod for proclaiming Herod was wrong to divorce his wife and marry his brother’s wife. Jesus was caught between a rock and hard place.

But look how Jesus responded to the question. First, he gets the Pharisees to acknowledge that Jewish law permitted divorce. They admitted that scripture said Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal for his wife and divorce her. Then Jesus said, *...because of your hardness*

of heart (Moses) wrote this command. In other words, yes, divorce was legal, something that could be done, but it was not what **God** originally intended. It was only allowed because of the people's inability to live in relationship well. And then Jesus goes back to the first story of creation, reminding the Pharisees of what a good relationship between husband and wife was intended to be, this relationship created by the hand of God. In so doing, Jesus moved the conversation from what human behaviors were permissible under the law to what human hope-filled endeavors were possible in the light of the kingdom. So this is not an instance of Jesus making the law more rigorous or restrictive than it already was. Jesus was moving beyond the legalistic approach to things and instead provided a theological framework for how God's people could live. For if God's reign of peace, justice and love was making itself known in the world through the person of Jesus, just how might that transform those who followed him? How might God's healing, forgiving, strengthening presence change the way human beings actually lived with each other? Jesus' teachings made the possibility of what human community could be sound both wonderful and within our reach!

Trouble is, our hands always seem to reach out and grab that album that's deteriorating, and our hands come back with gray, goopy sticky stuff on them. We've still got that "hardness of heart" thing going. You and I struggle each day in our various relationships, our various communities. We say things and think things we ought not. We hold grudges and deny forgiveness and allow our own desires to run roughshod over others' needs. We have good intentions that go awry; we have bad intentions that do irreparable harm. And sometimes we simply don't do anything to nurture community, which can be just as bad. So what are we to do, if our "hardness of heart" is the lay of the land, and we wonder whether everything we touch might not fall apart? We might despair of all our relationships!

Did you notice that attached to these challenging words of Jesus is a story of how people were bringing little children to him in the midst of his instruction. The disciples fretted that the children's presence would be a burden to their teacher, so they shooed the children away. But Jesus declared, *Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.* And then, writes Mark, Jesus took the children up in his arms and blessed them.

Now, just what might Jesus mean by these words? Well, little children cannot do much of anything on their own. They are totally dependent upon the one who will care for them. Do you suppose Jesus was calling **his** followers—you and me—to live in that same complete dependence? Utter dependence on God to see us through this challenging life. Ultimate reliance on God to help us nurture community. And complete trust in God that, in spite of our hardness of heart, in spite of our failures—including the relationships we've been in that are now over, those relationships that have fallen apart—God will still offer us forgiveness and peace. It is in that state of total dependence on God that at last we can reach out again—reach out to receive and hold his loving hand, and find ourselves—and our relationships—blessed. **AMEN.**

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