

**27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 4, 2009**

One of the advantages of preaching at the 5:30 liturgy on Sundays is that one gets to hear various and sundry comments about the readings and the homilies from all the earlier Masses. Today was a particularly interesting day to eavesdrop. Today's readings, particularly from Genesis and Mark's gospel, illustrate marvelously that the scriptures can often be seen as "an equal opportunity offender." There is something to annoy just about everyone today.

Anyone who has suffered the breakup of a marriage or struggled with the impermanence of many human relationships has reason to complain. The gospel seems so "blanket" and unforgiving in "real-life" terms. And, of course, the first reading frequently annoys any females just within hearing. Woman "taken" from her "man" just seems so patriarchal and almost quaint these days. Then there are the gays and lesbians among us, or the parents of gay and lesbian children, who find the whole Genesis account primitive and exclusive—and in the worst sense of those words. And I could go on. In fact, all of these comments were actually heard right here at St. Ignatius today.

The best summary probably came from a woman who said to me earlier today: "I just can't believe my ears with those readings. They sound not only

so old-fashioned, but so dead wrong.” “Can’t believe my ears!”

So let me try to shed a little light for us all. First of all, that parishioner is at least partially right. So don’t *simply* believe your ears. For example, today’s gospel is not really about what it sounds like it’s about. To most contemporary ears it sounds like a flat-out, no-exceptions-allowed, treatise on divorce—much as we would understand divorce in today’s terms. And it does sound that simple, but, I’m afraid, it is not that simple!

Whatever else we might say about him, Jesus was always too smart to get caught-up in the Pharisees’ plots to catch him with trivia. Both Jesus and the Pharisees knew the Mosaic law. No one was looking for “new” information about divorce. Jesus—as he does so often in his answers to their questions—pushes the envelope much further and much deeper.

It is this much bigger framework to which Jesus points in his answer. He is not simply supplying marriage laws. And other later followers of Jesus and other Evangelists knew that clearly. Both Matthew’s version of this saying and Paul’s letters already reveal exceptions to the apparent blanket statement about divorce here in Mark’s version. It is not about a marriage law. And so, from a historical perspective, the church began listing “exceptions” to the divorce laws very early on and we have continued down

through the centuries. (Just ask anyone who has ever tried to get an annulment! Lots of new rules and exceptions.)

The real point in Mark's gospel says something important about relationships, all relationships! Relationships between men and women, and between men and men, women and women, and men, women and children—relationships between people and peoples become for Jesus a rich symbol of something bigger. These relationships are a symbolic expression of the reality of how God created the world and how God expects us to live in that world. It is not as simple as it might sound on first hearing.

The real message here—the sub-text, if you will—is God saying to us all: let no one, for whatever reason, ever separate men and women from their partnership with God, or from their partnership with all their fellow creatures, or from their partnership with each other. It is a reminder from God of what we too easily forget, namely who we really are, as meant for each other.

The reading from Genesis today sets the stage for what Jesus was really saying. God created *everything* and *everyone* to live together in harmony, in peace, and in loving relationship. God creates *Adam-ah* from the dust and breathes—literally blows the Spirit—into him. And from the same “ground” or

dust, God fashions all the animals and birds, all living things. And from the exact same material, the earth itself, God fashions man and woman as complimentary partners to enjoy the earth, their earth, in all its splendor.

We all come from the same basic dust—all living matter does! We can now call it a “big bang,” or a double helix of DNA, or whatever we will next discover. But there is only one *source* of all life. And that source intends mutually respectful and even loving relationships among all the “dusty” entities.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews states it theologically but succinctly. In speaking of Jesus, he says: “He who consecrates and those who are being consecrated all have one origin. Therefore he is not ashamed to call them ‘brothers’ [and sisters].” That means us!

Many of us forget too easily that we were created for each other—men, women, and children (and all the animals and plants, brother sun and sister moon, and the hungry wolf too—all friends of St. Francis of Assisi whom we normally remember today.) Most of us forget so quickly.

But it is the children who seem to have forgotten the least. That’s why Jesus keeps using the children as examples of little people so aware of God’s kingdom. As theologian John Shea puts it: “Children, by definition, know

they are not the cause of their own being. They have not forgotten their source, and they do not delude themselves by fantasizing that they are completely independent. Instead, they are aware of being in relationship. This is not an equal relationship. It is a relationship with their origin, their beginning.” (*Eating with the Bridegroom*, p. 82)

Jesus wants his listeners—and perhaps us—to literally re-member the blessed unity and union and love in which we were all created. And he says, with perhaps a touch of anger, let no one divide or separate another from that memory. It is as simple as that. But it’s not very simple, is it? Nor is it exactly what it sounds like on first bounce. So let it bounce twice.