

Proper 22, Year B

- Spent middle part of the week at diocesan clergy conference
- Annual gathering of clergy from around the diocese, part team building exercise and part continuing ed offering - every year we have the chance to explore an important topic
- This year, presenters were from diocesan task force on Baptism - so it turns out we were talking about Baptism
- So we were talking about things like the importance of Baptism and how to do Baptism better, to make the big deal of it that it deserves
- And, because Baptism is the means by which people are incorporated into Christian community, we were talking about what it really means for congregations and worshiping communities to be a community of the baptized - about what community really means
- And something one of the presenters said stuck with me - said that we use community in a lot of contexts and with a lot of different meanings, but that anthropologists, at least, weren't so ambiguous - that they have a clear definition of community - when anthropologists talk about community, this presenter said, they mean "a network of mutual indebtedness"
- That stuck out to me immediately, and I've been thinking about it quite a lot since then - this idea that we are bound together, at least in part, because we owe each other something - have a responsibility to one another
- Have probably said something to that effect from this pulpit, in fact, because I think it's one of the messages of Scripture, not least of all our readings today
- First, I want to say that at first glance, the Hebrews reading doesn't seem to fit - has nothing to do with marriage or divorce - it's more or less a doxology - doxology literally meaning "word of glory" or "word of praise"
- It's almost like our Eucharistic prayers, right? "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds."
- But I think it's important, and I'll get to why in a minute
- But first, on the subject of community, of mutual indebtedness, want to talk about the passage from Genesis
- It's likely a familiar one - hear it often at weddings - says two important things:
- First, God says "It is not good that man should be alone." - in the beginning, God recognizes our need for community, our need for each other - it's what leads God to create

Eve - so that Adam won't be alone

- And, a few verses later, it describes the early biblical predecessor to marriage, when it says that people leave their old family behind and become one flesh
- When talking about marriage, one of the central social ties that bind, Scripture doesn't describe it in pragmatic terms, but in metaphysical ones - "they become one flesh"
- Marriage isn't just some partnership (although sometimes it's helpful to us to think about it as one) - it's two individuals becoming something new, something else entirely, a new creation
- Which is why, when Jesus is asked in the Gospel about divorce, his answer sort of turns the question on its head
- The question he's asked is about divorce - is divorce lawful?
- Jesus talks about the law Moses had established (law that said a **man** has the right to divorce his wife - notice no mention of women's right to divorce there) - and says that that law Moses gave them was because of their hardness of heart - then says, essentially, we shouldn't get divorced
- For a lot of people, raises the question: can Christians divorce?
- This is, I think, asking the wrong question - for one thing, there are plenty of faithful Christians who are divorced, so the answer is quite obviously yes - in turning the Mosaic law on its head, Jesus isn't seeking to set a new law in stone, especially one that's so clearly unattainable
- So if Jesus isn't laying down a new law about divorce, what's he doing? He's doing what he so often does - describing the kingdom of God
- Jesus is not answering the question, "how exactly should we act?" So much as "what does God intend?"
- Telling us the way that we and the world ought to be, ideally - the way we should aspire to be, the kingdom that we hope to see realized
- It's just like him telling us last week to cut off our hand or foot if it causes us trouble, or to pluck out our eye if it causes us to sin - or like in Matthew's Gospel when he says if we look lustfully at one another, we're guilty of adultery, or if we get angry with one another that we're guilty of murder
- Jesus wants to take us out of ourselves and recognize the debts we have to one another - and marriage is the perfect illustration of that - because it's the clearest example of our interconnectedness - because in Genesis it wasn't viewed just as a union or a contract or a

partnership - but of a change in our very being, where we become something new together

- And marriage and divorce in Jesus' time illustrate too how we neglected our debts to one another
- Divorced women, in particular, in the patriarchal Near East in Antiquity had no social safety net - there was no alimony, no child support, they had no property rights - so a woman divorced was disenfranchised, more or less cut loose with no way to fend for herself
- And even in our time, it's clear that with extremely few exceptions, divorce does tangible harm to the parties involved - (less than staying in a bad marriage, to be sure, but it still does damage)
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- So with that in mind, of course divorce is not what God ultimately intends for us - God does not intend us harm!... but for the same reason, neither are imperfect marriages, or harmful or damaging ones - unfortunately, in a broken world, bad marriages and therefore divorces are inevitable
- It is pride on our part to assume that we can, on our own, meet the standard that Jesus lays out for marriage - just as it's pride to assume that we can do so for the standard Jesus lays out for anger - the standard of the kingdom of God - but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't try to be better at adhering to the spirit of what he's saying
 - As Jesus responds to a question in which the reality of divorce is assumed - Jesus simply says, let's not just assume that - let's aspire to a higher standard - let's try to live according to the kingdom
- Jesus wants us to recognize that we have an obligation to each other - that other people in our lives are more than just means to an ends, more than just people for us to use as we see fit and cast away when they're no longer useful to us - we are connected by our obligation to one another
- So this brings me back to the Hebrews reading which bridges the gap between Genesis and the Gospel - the connection between that original human network for love and affection in Genesis and the ideal one described in Mark's Gospel is this description of the glory and majesty of Jesus Christ, and the work that he has accomplished, and the love that this shows God has for the world
- Because we are all connected, by virtue of our Baptism - in the font we become branches grafted onto Jesus Christ, the true vine - we become members of His Body

- Reminds me of one of the other highlights from clergy conference - when one of the deacons there described a Baptism she'd been a part of, and what she said was, "It was like a wedding for everybody"
- In a sense, that's true, right? If we are baptized into the Body of Christ, then we are baptized into one flesh, in a sense - we depend on each other, and don't often have the luxury of deciding we have no need of each other
- So when we gather at the font and at the table, we see at least a glimpse of this ideal reality that Jesus describes - as the author of Hebrews says, we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor, and we are made siblings with Jesus Christ
- We are, together, the Body of Christ - our debt to what Christ has accomplished extends to each other - it is not good for us to be alone