

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, what a wonderful world we live in. We see your beauty all around as we recognize the blessing of the day which you have made, a day full of potential. We recognize the blessing of each other, here and around the world. This is the day we gather as one, in the blessed community under the power of the Spirit, around the globe. What a blessing this is, a blessing that we often take for granted. We are a people who need each other, who need partners and helpers in all parts of life. Help us, Gracious God, to dismiss the notion that we are islands, that we can do everything by ourselves, that we have the ability to conquer whatever life brings us by our own power. Help us dispel the notion of the loner who lives life all by him or herself. "It is not good," you said from the beginning, for us to be alone, so let us seize the opportunity for us to be together as it is faithful.

May we be mindful of our partners everywhere we go, those we consider partners in the faith, those we consider partners in our professions, our family partners, and those we have made our partners in romantic love. We understand that each of these have a place in our lives as you intended, Gracious God; we are never meant to be alone. Help us to send this message to others, those who are alone by unfortunate circumstances or by broken relationships. Lead us to be the presence of Christ to them as we have experienced the presence of Christ in our lives of discipleship and among our brothers and sisters. We pray all these things in Holy name of Jesus, the one who knows us, loves us, and calls us to be together, as we pray the prayer he taught us, always in unison across time and space...

## SERMON

How do we work together? I remember the story of my great grandparents and how they resolved to work together. When they were married in 1933, they committed to

joint decision-making: my great grandmother would make the small decisions, and my great grandfather would make the big decisions. Until my great grandmother passed in 1994, throughout all those years of marriage, I learned that they never had a big decision to make. That's partly a joke, partly a pattern of how we can work together. To some people, that is working together faithfully, but my wife and I work together another way. We seek to sort through every decision with mutual say and understanding toward one another. Some people don't have a spouse, but that doesn't mean that they don't seek to make decisions with another person's input. In fact, we need the viewpoint of others to know we have made a good decision.

In other words, we need one another in all parts of life, whether you are single, married, divorced, or just have a lot of friends. In every phase of life, in every realm, there is one undeniable fact: "It is not good" for us to be alone. Let's delve into the scriptures from Genesis and Mark and see how they work together to teach us that we aren't meant to be alone in any part of our lives, as well as discern how we can best live in light of this everlasting calling.

Here we have the creation account of humanity in Genesis 2, and our account begins with an important statement: "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." God's choice of language is very important, considering all that had preceded this account. God makes each and every part of the world and the universe, and what was God's statement after each of these acts? God calls each of them "good," but now God comes back and looks at the man God created and says, "It is NOT good that the man should be alone." God says that there must be a partner, a helper. Therefore, God puts

the person to sleep and removes a rib; from that rib, there is another human being. Now they are fully male and female. Now humanity is complete.

Can you imagine what life would be like without partners and helpers? It goes beyond romantic notions in this passage; it talks about, well, everything we do! We need one another in big ways and small. I consider my wife to be my helper and partner, but it goes beyond marriage. We need to help each other out in big and small ways, from the biggest decisions to the smallest details. Just around the house, I am the one who keeps the house clean and tidy. Then we are truly partners when we do things like canning food. Especially when we can things like tomatoes, we have to make sure that we have citric acid in the mix, so I'm usually the one who reminds her. Otherwise, the batch is ultimately ruined. Partnership takes place in big and small ways, so much so that we don't recognize how much we depend on each other. But to be partners and helpers means that there be the importance of serving hand-in-hand.

This story has another level to it we cannot see in English. The man we see in the story is not considered a true man until the woman is created. The original creation of the "man" is a mistranslation into English. That is because, well, there really isn't a good word in English for who the man is at this point. The word for the man before the rib is removed comes from the Hebrew word for "dirt." The person here literally comes from the dirt; the person is an "earthling." Once the rib is removed, the genders come to be in the Hebrew text, with man ('ish) and woman ('ishshah) being created, according to the New Interpreter's Commentary. Our classic notions of man being before woman in the original Hebrew do not exist here. They are created at the same time; the creation of the woman makes the man complete. The word "helper" seems to indicate subordination, but there is

no sign of that here. One can easily be a helper without being just as much in charge. This is God's ideal, that men and women work together, not as subordinates one way or another. This is the way that we were created, but human sin has distorted this idea to where one is lauded over the other. That sin has existed through the ages, from the time this was written down, to the time of Jesus, to our day.

With these ideas in mind, we come to the Gospel reading today, which is a difficult passage. Jesus speaks of divorce, and it is a topic that can be so problematic in the world today. I don't want to stand here throwing platitudes at you because whenever we talk about divorce, it's a messy thing. Divorce is a difficult and horrible thing, for it has so much pain attached at one level or another. Some of us here today have been divorced; some of our parents or children have been divorced. I would go so far to say that all of us have been touched by divorce in one form or another. It is far from an easy thing to deal with. Whether it was within the marriage or in the separation, I have seen many around me enough to know that it is painful to experience. It's impossible to pair it down easily to why people get divorced; it's a lot of factors that play into the break up of a relationship. It all amounts to a lot of brokenness. Consequently, what Jesus is getting at is not totally obvious here. He speaks about divorce and how hard it is. It doesn't live up to God's ideal, but he makes concession that sometimes it is necessary. At this time, men had all the power. Men were the ones who had the power to divorce; women had no power here whatsoever. Men could choose to end a marriage with or without the permission of his wife. There was no recourse for the woman, and he knows it is not fair. He modifies the message a bit when he tells his disciples that it works both ways.

Practically, we have to understand what Jesus is saying. He recognizes that divorces happen because of the difficult world we live in. The dissolution of a marriage sometimes is necessary, but it shouldn't be welcome if at all possible. Sometimes there is abuse and maltreatment that call for the end of a marriage in order for there to be personal health. There is no way, with the life-giving nature of the Gospel, that Jesus would object to anything like that. What he is objecting to is the contradiction of our Genesis passage. We were created to be together in so many forms, marriage being one of them, and when that is discarded, it is a very sad thing. It is mournful because it goes against the ideal that God has set out of faithful loving relationship. When divorce happens, it has to be done faithfully and deliberately, not on a whim, a preference, or for a petty reason. It's not necessarily the dissolution of a contract but the tearing apart of a living being that defines divorce. It's sometimes necessary, but it's never the ideal.

Ask any pastor today, and I imagine 9 out of 10 would probably tell you they get a lot more energy performing a funeral than a wedding. Now why would that be? At a funeral, we tend to be much more attuned to holy things, mindful of connecting to God and God's intentions for us. We tend to be more focused upon meaning. It's not across the board, but with weddings, the focus is much more on the celebration and the party than the meaning of the ceremony. It's much more about all the details being perfect than the meaning behind the whole event. It's more about the show than the substance, and that's disappointing. In other words, there is a gap between the meaning and the actions.

When we talk about the sanctity of marriage, we have to look at the meaning of marriage today. Marriage in popular culture is considered to be little more than a contract these days. It's something to get in and out of easily. Just look at the prevalence of

prenuptial agreements these days. It's almost a safeguard that the marriage will fail. The sanctity of marriage is when we lift it up as a lifetime ideal and commitment. When it is not treated as such, the entire structure of marriage suffers. The Sanctity of Marriage is based on the fact that God created us for loving relationship with one another, and when that is thrown away for any petty circumstance, then marriage isn't holy anymore. It's nothing more than a contract or handshake agreement. Anyone married can tell that it is hard work, no matter what. Sometimes there are irreconcilable differences, and when there are, it is a sad and mournful but sometimes necessary thing to break the covenant for the wellbeing of those involved. That is an unfortunate fact of the world we live in, but it should only be done with the gravest discernment.

These are messages that lift up an important fact: we are not meant to be alone, in terms of presence or power. In all parts of life, we are called to have those who are partners and helpers. Marriage is one place where this flourishes, but if we only look at the Genesis passage as an ordination of that fact, we miss so very much. We come to these halls because we recognize that in God's eyes, we are meant to be together. We are meant to work, learn, understand, and grow as one family. Sometimes we disagree and quarrel. That's all a part of it. What matters is that we continue to grow as one body. In other parts of our lives, we need family to walk with us, care for us, and challenge us along the way. We need the best friend whom we can tell anything and who will validate us no matter what. We need coworkers to complete our necessary tasks and to be with us throughout the trials of our professions. Expand the circle even further. We need the farmers who grow the food, the workers who pick and manage it, and the transporters who bring it to us. We need the When you look at the circles and circles of people who support us and provide

things we so easily take for granted, there is no argument against it. There is no such thing as the “loner” who can go through life all by him or herself. “It is not good” that we be alone because we, bottom line, cannot survive. We need each other, we need to grow with each other, to be loving with each other because there is no other way to live.

All of these things play into a very important fact. This is not just any Sunday; this is World Communion Sunday. The world communes together. This is the day where we all come to the table to partake in these signs of grace. We normally interpret that we come individually to the table, but that is not what is happening. We communally come to the table to partake in the body, just as we are the Body of Christ. This small ritual affirms this fact we have affirmed all day: we are not alone. We do not change the world, we do not move in the Spirit of God as individuals. That wasn't the case in the creation; that was not a part of God's intention at any point. When we come to the table, we affirm that in the eyes of Jesus Christ, we work together for Christ's work in the world. It is a reminder, among other things, every time that we come to the table, we are to hear the timeless message of God: “It is not good that you be alone.” So, let us now come to the table prepared to affirm grace, to affirm our nature as creatures created to be one in the Body of Christ, to never be alone, as we affirm the community of the church. Thanks be to God! Amen and amen.