

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 4, 2009

Homily of Anthony T. Padovano

Mark 10:2-16

Liberation

Today's passage deals with themes of justice and sex, marriage and children. No one of these themes has failed to engage us over the millennia and no one of them has been fully resolved or settled.

I would like to respond to this reading by considering three issues.

1. Law and Custom

There is much in law and custom that is beneficial. A good law, ironically, liberates us by limiting us. It tells us what we may or may not do so that we can move forward together more peacefully and so that we become aware of our rights but also our responsibilities. A very simple example of the beneficial aspects of law are traffic regulations. We drive more safely and peacefully and more quickly by being compelled to stop on occasion and to drive more slowly on other occasions. We are limited and liberated. If all traffic regulations were annulled, and we could do anything we wanted on the roads, but we would get where we had to go much later, with greater stress and more danger. Without limits, we are not liberated but confined.

A law is bad when it limits and oppresses someone rather than liberating. It is bad when the majority makes a law that only the minority have to follow while the majority remains exempt.

Jesus confronts this in today's Gospel. The law in Israel at this time was that only men could divorce women. A woman could not divorce her husband. The husband could divorce his wife for any reason he chose. No judicial process was necessary. He simply put in writing that she had to leave and give the letter to her. She must then abandon her home, children and possessions and exit with nothing. All belonged to the husband, including herself, by law.

Mark has Jesus say that a woman could divorce her husband. Jesus never said that. He could not because in Israel that was illegal and impossible. Under Roman law it was possible but that is Gentile, not Jewish law. Since Mark is writing in Rome, he includes a provision that no Jew would have accepted, adapting the teaching of Jesus to the conditions Mark is facing conditions that Jesus never addressed. Matthew's Gospel corrects this and has Jesus speak only of husbands and divorce.

Jesus is dealing with two Hebrew Bible passages. The Pharisees base their question to Jesus on two Hebrew Bible passages believed to have been written by Moses.

In Deuteronomy 24:1-4, we read:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman but she does not please him ... so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand and sends her out of the house: she then leaves her house ... [if] she goes off to become another man's wife ... [and] the second man ... [divorces] her ... or ... dies, her first husband ... is not permitted to take her again as his wife after she has been defiled ...

Under Jewish law, then, a woman was a slave, property. There were no rights for her.

In Leviticus 21:7, we read that priests may never marry a divorced woman because she has been defiled.

Jesus cleverly plays one biblical text against the other, in rabbinical fashion, to refute the Pharisees and Jewish, Mosaic law. He goes to Genesis and directly to God and says that in the beginning, God made man and women equal, both fashioned in the image of God, both created simultaneously.

Jesus adds that a man will leave his father and mother for his wife but cannot leave her because she is not property but his own body and she is, therefore, with him as his life companion.

Jesus liberates women by asking for an implementation of Genesis rather than Deuteronomy or Leviticus. In Genesis, both husbands and wives are bonded together and there is no law that favors men or exempts them. Jesus says, in effect, Moses is wrong and so are you. God never wanted women treated this way. Custom and convention undermined what God wanted and you, Pharisees, and Deuteronomy, made a bad law out of it.

2. Family Values

The latter part of today's passage deals with children coming to Jesus for a blessing. One would suppose there were women, their mothers, bringing their children. The disciples tell

them to go away. The reason is not given. Just go away. If there were women bringing the children, the male disciples would find it easy to speak harshly to them and dismiss them and give them no reasons.

Mark says Jesus was angry, indignant with the behavior of the disciples. Children matter. They are not property. The Hebrew Bible presents children as examples of unreasonable behavior or as objects who need to be trained properly. Jesus sees them differently.

Jesus liberates children and blesses them, holding them in his arms and then putting his hands on their heads in a blessing.

Then Jesus says that children are property but those to whom the kingdom of God belongs. Indeed, no one enters the kingdom of God unless that person receives it as a little child.

A child, like a married woman, has no power, no status. A child knows that it is all dependency and that it relies on the love and generosity of its parents.

The kingdom of god, Jesus says, is a gift. Children understand gift better than adults. Without gifts, the child has nothing. The kingdom of God is a gift. God is not a law or a weapon or a way to solidify power and status or a means to oppress others.

3. Problem and Gift

Jesus overturns the whole social order of the day in this passage. He redefines what a family is. It is two equal partners whose children are to be taken seriously. All are a gift from God. To have a wife is a gift, so precious you will give up everything for her. If you leave father and mother for her, you must also leave all this desire to have power over her and oppress her with your bad laws. And children are a gift, not something to be used as you please. Indeed, they are a blessing. And they will lead you to the kingdom of God if you are attentive to the innocence, simplicity and love in their hearts.

No one owns anyone. Jesus demands we stop treating one another as things or objects. All are precious in the sight of God, Jesus tells us, all equal, all a blessing. This is the good news he brings. Jesus puts himself in the place of women and feels their oppression, their terror, their helplessness. He says to the men of his day, this must stop. It has nothing to do with God but only with your own agenda.

And he puts himself in the place of children and senses their helplessness. He says to the people of his day, these children are not property but a gift. Treating children as your way to power or status, has nothing to do with God but only with your own agenda. Children are a gift. If you do not see that, you are not really parents and, furthermore, you will not enter the kingdom of God.

It has taken centuries for us to recognize the rights of women. Some of our churches have still not gotten there. And it is only recently that we have disclosed so clearly the rights of children. Rights for women and children are built on the premise they are gifts to be cherished. Men are gifts too. It is not about power and status. It is about gifting and generosity.

When God said “Let there be light,” God made all creation a gift. When God said “Let us make a man and a woman in the image and likeness of God,” God did not make property but something as sacred as God.

In God’s name, we ask, how did we get it so wrong, for so long?

In God’s name, Jesus says, the oppression stops now, here.

If it does not, you will not enter the kingdom of God – even if you belong to the Temple or are a religious leader. You will not enter it because you would not want to: you would not be happy there. There is no room for oppressors or bullies in the kingdom. The Kingdom of God is a gift. Those who seek power and status would not know what to do there.

God in the beginning said “Let there be light.” Those whose hearts are blind choose darkness and never see the light or God. They never see their wives or children either.

The Kingdom of God is light. A child cannot see the gift you give it in the darkness. You cannot see the Kingdom of God if your heart is blind. If you enter the kingdom and you seek power and status and are blind, you miss everything. As you leave, children and liberated people rush in.

The Kingdom of God is light. Come into it as a child and God will give you everything.

