

**Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Oct. 8, 2006)**

Until Death Do Us Part

The Pharisees, we are told, came to test him. Why did they do that? Was it to put him in difficulty on an issue that had caused the execution of John the Baptist? Or was it to catch him on a cause that was then, as it is now, very delicate?

We don't know. We only know that Jesus in his turn put them to the test. We also know that they failed it.

When he asked them, "What command did Moses give you?" they answered, "Moses permitted divorce, and the writing of a divorce letter." He did not agree.

He told them that is not what Moses did. "He obliged you to write such a letter because of the hardness of your hearts."

Moses had a very good reason to prescribe in God's name that obligation. An obligation that in a time when hardly anyone could write was a rather complicated affair, almost equal to a legal procedure nowadays. Before that law, and even after it, men had been accustomed to sending their wives away for the smallest and strangest of reasons: a badly cooked meal, sickness, age, boredom, having fallen in love with someone else, and things like that.

That is why Moses put them under the obligation of a formal dismissal letter, to at least somewhat protect the rights of the women. Actually it was possible for a woman to initiate the process for a divorce against her husband in Jesus's time but it apparently was more difficult than for the man and it was very rarely done. In the Roman society where Mark's readers lived, men and women equally divorced one another, apparently on very flimsy pretexts.

Jesus adds his own reason why this cannot be done. This relationship between husband and wife is such that the two become one flesh. Therefore he says, no one can separate what God has united. And he also appeals to scripture, a more ancient text than the one cited by the Pharisees, the second creation story as it appears in the Book of Genesis, our first reading

today.

Now this ideal that Jesus presents is what all couples hope as they stand before the altar, surrounded by their families and friends, and promise to love and honor each other all the days of their lives. And I am sure that this hope is sincere. It is their promise. It is their prayer. It is their blessing. Yet we know that in these United States 50 percent of those who begin their marriages with such high hopes will be divorced within ten years.

Today's teaching on the permanent and indissoluble character of Christian marriage is as inspirational to some as it is painful for others. There are those in every Sunday gathering who have lived this ideal with generosity and intensity. Others have endured great suffering because they could no longer live that ideal. Yet in the Church there is room for everyone. The Church continues to proclaim this teaching on marriage because it has no choice. It not only comes from Christ, but its wisdom lends itself to building up the human family, the Church, and society. On the other hand the Church suffers with those who have found it impossible to live this commitment and does its best to help them in their situation.

Even in the time of the evangelists, the Christian community realized that there were situations where the ideal of marriage was not really attained. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus himself states an exception to the more idealistic vision of Mark's Gospel, and Paul would find still another reason why marriages might not work out.

Today as we all know the Church in its revised annulment procedures recognizes exceptions to an absolute prohibition.

The Church must also constantly reflect the pastoral concern of Jesus for those who have suffered divorce. While Jesus presents a vision of what marriage should be, he utters no word of condemnation of the divorced, and the Gospel of John shows Jesus defending a woman about to be stoned for adultery and giving a special mission to an often-married woman, the Samaritan woman at the well.

There is one false notion that should be corrected. Some people who have been divorced think that they cannot receive the sacraments. That is not true. Divorce in itself bars no one from the sacraments. Divorce and remarriage without the Church's approval technically prevents someone

from receiving communion. But even there people in that situation should follow their own consciences if there is some reason why they cannot go the route of annulment.

It's curious that immediately after this discussion about marriage we see the disciples trying to keep little children, the fruit of marriage, from coming to Jesus. But Jesus as we heard rebukes them, just as he rebuked the Pharisees, and says that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

At first glance there seems to be no connection with what went before, but I think there is. The attitude of a little child is one of openness, trust, acceptance. A child looks on the world with eyes of wonder. When a man and a woman come together to give themselves to each other in marriage, they must have these same qualities. They must be open to each other; they must trust and they must be accepting. Marrying someone is like the leap of faith. You can't be absolutely certain about how it is going to turn out. Sometimes life together is a sheer joy. Other times it will be difficult. Every relationship has to be worked at. Indeed there is very little in this life that is worth while that does not include some struggle. Marriage is no exception. The wonder, the awe, the marvelous feeling of any couple as they walk down this aisle after their wedding will wear off, and when that happens, when the honeymoon is over, husband and wife must both take special care to preserve the bond that love and the grace of God have created. "For better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health until death" is a solemn promise that can only be realized with the help of God. Fortunately we know that God's love and care are always there. The rest is up to us.