

Proper 22 B 2018      October 7, 2018

Back to the Beginning

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Although she is best known for being the author of her Lord Peter Wimsey detective novels, Dorothy L. Sayers was a woman with many impressive accomplishments. In addition to being a writer, she was also a scholar whose translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* is said to still be one of the very best. She was a lay theologian, who hung out with the Inklings – the writer's group that included C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. She wrote a powerful play about the trial of Jesus called *The Man Born to Be King* that C. S. Lewis is said to have read every Holy Week as part of his personal devotion. She graduated from Oxford University – one of the first women to do so, and with first honors – with a degree in mediaeval literature. In addition to these many accomplishments, Dorothy Sayers was also a speaker and lecturer. In 1938 she was invited to speak to a women's society on the subject of feminism, which was a controversial topic of the day.

Back in 1938 one of the main concerns women were facing was their clothing, as it was considered inappropriate if women wore slacks or trousers. Another issue women faced was what work was appropriate for women to be employed in or what was the appropriate role for women in society, a question that some might say hasn't been satisfactorily answered even today.

When addressing the members of the women's society, Ms. Sayers surprised them all by not touting propaganda or political jargon. Instead, to address the appropriate place for women in society, Dorothy Sayers went back to the beginning. To Genesis. To the first two stories in the first book of the Bible about how God created the world and everything in it and in those stories, she explained, all the other issues and questions we human beings worry over and fret over have already been addressed by those who attempted to capture God's vision for humanity.

Ms. Sayers, who you must remember was educated, an accomplished scholar and theologian who also served as a warden in her parish in London, did address how society and the Church has been guilty of plucking bits of Biblical text out of context to suit their sinful purposes of denying women and other minorities their appropriate status. She also said that far from being a text that puts women in a place below men, the stories of Genesis state clearly that God created both men and women in God's own image equally. And in the second story of creation, which we heard a small part of in our first reading this morning, God created woman from the same stuff as man. The word translated as rib has been mistranslated forever; the word in Hebrew is the word side, meaning the other half of an architectural structure like the ark, therefore

meaning women are half of humanity. The way Dorothy Sayers not only handled but lived into the question of women's role in society was to say that women are human beings, the same as men, and since men and women are both human beings, we have far more in common than is different. Both men and women are gifted with skills and talents and callings and both men and women should be supported by society to be given the opportunities to live into those callings, whatever they are. And we as a society need to see people more as individuals and less as members of a higher or lower class based on gender. And stop seeing jobs or types of work as being only for one gender. You can read Dorothy Sayer's relevant essays based on the speech she gave in the little book titled *Are Women Human?* It is enlightening, empowering, and remarkably like how Jesus handled a situation he was in where he was asked to answer a question that might not have been quite as nuanced, but was an attempt to trap him.

That is where we find Jesus in today's Gospel, where he was approached by Pharisees who asked him a question about what was legal or lawful. You know it's a trap because the role of Pharisees in the society of the time was to know and follow the law. They were asking what they already knew the answer to. Perhaps because earlier in Mark's Gospel we read the Pharisees had already made up their minds about Jesus, they wanted to get rid of him, and were on the lookout for any opportunity to trip him up, and this was one of those times. So they asked him about something controversial. Divorce and the law.

Now, what made divorce controversial in the context of this moment in Mark's Gospel might not have been for the same reason we might see the subject of divorce as a sensitive issue in our modern day. It was controversial in Mark's Gospel because of King Herod. Both he and his wife Herodia had divorced their spouses in order to marry each other and this was what John the Baptist preached was unlawful and reason why Herod was not and could never be the King of Israel and, it is what got him beheaded. So, it's possible the pharisees wanted to see if Jesus would answer their question the same way John the Baptist did, so he would get in the same trouble as John the Baptist.

But Jesus, being Jesus, didn't take their bait. Instead Jesus answered their question with one of his own. That is one of the ways Jesus constantly evaded the Pharisees attempts to trip him up throughout the Gospels. Noticed Jesus asked them what Moses commanded and they knew right away how to answer, referring to passages in the Hebrew Bible Deuteronomy. But then Jesus went even further back into the scriptures in order to show the Pharisees how humanity was sick and suffering from hardness of heart. To do that, he did what Dorothy Sayers did in her speech, Jesus took them back to the beginning.

To the first stories in the first book in the Bible. I want to be clear here, Jesus did not go back to Genesis to condemn divorce, or merely to remind his listeners what the purpose of a marriage ought to be instead of the economic arrangement marriage had become and in many places around the world it still is. Jesus was going back to the beginning to remind the Pharisees and us what Dorothy Sayers believed: that men and women are both human beings and were created for a purpose. That purpose isn't to be used or exploited by each other. That purpose isn't to hurt each other. Look carefully at the Genesis reading again. Look at the first line, where it says something was not good. Think about that long first story in Genesis where God was creating lakes and oceans and birds and fishes and whales and dolphins and land and trees and grass and flowers and insects and animals and joyfully pronounced all those things good. Then God said it was all very good. The world God created was not just good, it was very good. Then, in this second creation story, there was man and something was not good about man. Think about that for a moment, in a story known for pronouncing everything good, here is God saying something about God's creation is not good. What wasn't good?

It wasn't good for man to be alone. It seems humanity's first disease, our first problem, before the fall from grace, was loneliness. There was something missing from humanity. Again, too many people have been told by too many poor scholars that the word translated as "helper", means something less or menial. But the word in Hebrew is so much more awesome. It is a word that has been used only one other way in the Old Testament, as a reference to God. The word translated helper is a word that means to provide succor, or support in times of hardship. It really does mean partner, someone to equally share the burdens and delights of life with.

So God observed man's loneliness and, according to scholar and former professor at Union Seminary Samuel Terrien, created woman in order to heal that loneliness and make humanity whole. Let that sink in. And when the man saw the woman, he did not complain and say he wanted something younger with different colored eyes. Nor did he grumble about having to provide for her or complain about her weakness. Instead, he looked at her and delighted. And we see that God did not intend for men and women to be divided, but to delight in each other as a metaphor for humanity. We were created for each other, to ease the loneliness that maybe God understands too well. That could mean our differences are what make humanity whole.

But we know the rest of that story. The part called the fall. That led to a lot of divorcing, not just the kind that refers to marriage, but the kind that refers to any division from God and each other, especially the kind that creates systems of classism based on race, age, gender, all the ways we choose to see each other as less than

human. While God intended human beings to delight in each other, to work together to create a world where there is room for everyone to live into the gifts and skills and talents they have been given, we human beings had other ideas, made other choices, and too often we still choose to use each other instead of give succor to each other, to take advantage of each other instead of care for each other, to compete against each other instead of work together, and see our differences as justification for separating and isolating ourselves further and further from each other instead of providing enriching community. That is what sin is, our refusal to see each other God's way and insist on our own way. Jesus sometimes, like in today's Gospel, called sin hardness of heart.

I often wonder what it was like for Jesus to see and experience the effects of sin or hardness of heart as he dwelt among us. I wonder if he was ever disappointed by how we human beings who were created for each other's succor and support through whatever life throws at us, keep pushing each other further apart by using our differences to create more isolation and fear and loneliness. Like the man in Genesis, loneliness is still part of the human condition.

I wonder if that is what Jesus was referring to when he was talking to the disciples in the house about divorce. Because he referred to not only men divorcing their wives, but women divorcing their husbands, something that wasn't allowed at least in Jewish law in Jesus' day. It's tempting to listen to today's Gospel and think Jesus was being less than compassionate about people who have been through a divorce and have healed enough to find the joy of new life in a marriage again. Besides realizing that marriage in Jesus' day was a very different arrangement than it is for us in the Western world today, where women have rights they did not have in Jesus' day, we have to be careful about taking what Jesus said out of context, just like last week when Jesus referred to cutting off limbs that caused people to sin. Jesus was not advocating for self-mutilation. That is why I don't believe Jesus is being uncompassionate in today's Gospel. I believe he was referring to brokenness of humanity, our failure to live into the dream God has for us, and preference to hurt each other, our hardness of heart and the loneliness we insist on creating, and our need for the kind of healing Jesus brings through his resurrection.

Which is why I believe the women and men who decided how our lectionary was divided up left us today with the account of the people bringing Jesus children. We heard Jesus chasted his disciples for sending them away and opened his arms to welcome the children. Notice he welcomed them by laying hands on them, which can be another way of saying he healed them. Perhaps they were ill, or perhaps Jesus was healing them of the human condition called loneliness. In Jesus' day children were considered vulnerable, of low esteem, and it is a good reminder to us who follow Jesus

today that Jesus says it is to such as those children that the Kingdom of God already belongs. For them, it already exists. Perhaps because that is who God especially relates to, not that God doesn't relate to all of us. But to those who are not afraid to be close to God, to approach God, to let God show them how God is present in all that God has created, who are willing to go back to the beginning and embrace the dream of God that is still possible; to this day it is to such as these who are willing to see God in all God's goodness beyond the hardhearted loneliness humanity at its worst creates, that the goodness of Kingdom of God is already bringing new life of healing love and forgiveness for all people of all genders all races all ages, the single, the married, and the divorced, right here and right now.