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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

October 3, 2021

Year B, Proper 22, Track 2, Revised Common Lectionary

[Genesis 2:18-24](#)

[Psalm 8](#)

[Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12](#)

[Mark 10:2-16](#)

Splendor and honor and royal power are yours, O Lamb that was slain, for with your blood you have redeemed us as a royal priesthood to serve our God.

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When I meet somebody and they ask me what I do, there's sometimes a moment of slight awkwardness, and it's sometimes a bit different depending on what I say. Sometimes I say I'm a pastor. That's a word many people understand, whether they come from a more Protestant background or a non-Christian background or whatever. The difficulty is that it comes with a lot of baggage and assumptions. People start wondering whether I'll try to convert them or whether they can swear around me. But a pastor is at least something people have a sense of.

Sometimes instead I say I'm a priest. And that word conjures up a whole different set of associations for a lot of people. Some wonder if I'm single and celibate. Others imagine me performing arcane ceremonial rites. Introducing myself as a

priest brings a different kind of sensibility to the conversation. There's a kind of esoteric mystery to it. It's almost as if I said I'm a wizard.

The thing is that being a priest isn't a job; it's an identity. And in the most important sense, it's an identity we all share: you and me and everyone who's been baptized into Jesus Christ. You too can introduce yourself as a priest at parties, although you might have to do even more explanations than I do. For Christians the word "priest" has more than one meaning and they're all related. Probably the most common one we think of is the group of people who are ordained to a certain ministry of leading the sacraments, preaching the scriptures, and shepherding the churches of God. And there is a certain priestly quality to what ordained priests do: a ministry of being stewards of sacred things on behalf of the whole church. But that priesthood, to the extent it's sacred at all, is so only in a secondary sense. Because it exists wholly to serve the well-being of the more basic priesthood of the church, which is the baptismal priesthood. The great Roman Catholic scholar Aidan Kavanagh used to say, "The church baptizes to priesthood, it does not ordain to it."

Now that baptismal priesthood is derivative of even a more basic priesthood: which is the priesthood of Jesus Christ. The letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus is the Great High Priest, the one true mediator between humanity and God. Because he is one of us, he can truly speak to God on our behalf, and truly speak to us on God's. He pronounces God's blessing. He intercedes with God. He is the one Great High Priest, the steward of sacred things. But when each of us is baptized, we become part of Jesus Christ. We are grafted into him, so to speak. We become part of his body. And in him we are restored to the status and character that God intends for us—which is the priestly role of all humanity.

“What is a human being, that you’re mindful of them?” asks the letter to the Hebrews. “You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor.”

The Book of Genesis gives a beautiful picture of this priesthood that human beings were created for. The first human being is called *Adam*, which is a word that means “humankind” as opposed to a word that means “male.” And God gives Adam the job of naming all the other living things. This human being is to be the part of creation that has language, that can name things into their identities. It’s a priestly ministry by which humanity cares for all the rest of creation and offers it back to God with thanksgiving.

In the book *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the little prince from another planet comes to Earth, lands in the desert, and meets a fox. The fox asks him to tame it. And when he does, the fox tells him that now he and the fox belong to each other. Before, the fox was just another animal, but now, he is the prince’s fox. “When you tame something,” says the fox, “you become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed.” And in a way that describes the relationship humanity is to have with God’s creation of which we are a part. Not to ignore it. Not to be at war with it. Not to dominate and exploit it, as in our sinfulness we have done and are doing so grievously. But rather to love it and cherish it, to tend it and care for it, and in a very real sense to give it a voice: to be the part of creation that uses the gift of language and self-awareness to give thanks and praise to God on behalf of the whole.

Jesus shows us a way back to our full humanity: the humanity that lives completely in tune with God and completely in tune with our vocation as the priests of creation. As St. Irenaeus wrote, “The glory of God is a living human being; and the life of a human being is the vision of God.”

Now before we close with this glorious vision, we’d better come back to earth for a moment and talk a little about divorce.

We need to talk about it because our gospel today often gets used to clobber people over the head about issues of sex and morality. Sometimes this passage gets used to reinforce the idea that only opposite-sex couples should be able to marry, but that’s really not the focus of this passage. But it *is* about divorce, and this passage is at the root of many Christian traditions’ prohibiting remarriage after divorce. Now for several decades the Episcopal Church has been in a different place on this issue, and thank God for that. My own family growing up went through divorce, as have many of the most faithful people I know.

The fact is that none of the divorced people I know would argue with the idea that there is a tragic element about any divorce; that divorce is the breaking of a vow. Actually all the divorced people I know are very acutely aware of the sacredness of marriage and the seriousness of ending one. That doesn’t make divorce the unforgivable sin. God is in the business of forgiveness. And God is present in the tangled and messy places of our lives. There are times when divorce is simply the least bad or even the only way forward. Times when it’s absolutely imperative, like in cases of abuse and violence. And times when it’s simply the sad acknowledgment that a marriage has died while its two participants need to go on living.

What we miss about this passage when we read it as a morality guidebook is the social context. These men who come to question Jesus ask a very specific question, not “Is it lawful for people to get divorced,” as we might put it today, but “Is it lawful for *a man* to divorce *his wife*?” This is a patriarchal system in which the man has all the authority. And if he chooses, for whatever reason, to initiate a divorce, the woman in this first-century context is left in a potentially nightmarish position. She’s without legal rights, without provision, burdened with a social stigma from being divorced. If her birth family refuses to take her back in, she may be left without recourse other than begging or prostitution. And so this passage isn’t simply about some abstract question about whether divorce is theologically acceptable. Rather it’s about protecting the vulnerable. Pushing back against a culture in which men can do what they want and women are forced to accept it.

It’s that same theme of protecting the vulnerable that makes the connection with the second half of this passage, the famous scene where Jesus says “Let the children come to me.” Because in Jesus’ place and time, women and children are very much in the same position: vulnerable members of society, without legal rights of their own. subject to the authority of men, and easily neglected or abused. Instead of ignoring the children, Jesus respects them, loves them, pays attention to them. He treats them as fellow human beings with their own inherent value. Which is what they are. Because they share in the fullness of the priestly calling of all humanity. That’s a priestly calling where there’s no place for hierarchies of male over female, adult over child. In Christ, as Paul writes, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. But we are all one in the new humanity of Jesus, the royal priesthood of all creation before God.