

FROM SUBJUGATION TO LOVE:

[27TH SUNDAY OF THE YEAR; GENESIS 2:18-24, PSALM 8, HEBREWS 1:1-4 + 2:9-11, MARK 10:2-16]

Introduction:

There is story told of an infamous bank robber, a Texan by the name of Hóse Revera. The story is set in a Western Saloon. A Texas Ranger walks into the saloon with six shooters at the ready. He looks at the barman and says, “Are you Hóse Revera?” the barman awkwardly points to the table at the far corner, there is a large man in a poncho and sombrero. The Texas Ranger addresses this man, asking, “Are you Hóse Revera?” The man shrugs, indicating that he does not understand the question. The Texas Ranger asks the barman to translate. It is established that this is indeed Hóse Revera. The Texas Ranger tells the barman to ask Hóse Revera if he is the infamous bank robber. This is confirmed. Finally the Texas Ranger says, “You have two options. Firstly, tell me where you have hidden the gold and give back what you have stolen. Secondly, don’t tell me and I will shoot you dead right now. The barman translates this. Hóse Revera ponders for a second then tells the barman, “When you exit the Saloon, head east for three miles till you come to a big tree. To the north of the big tree is a flat rock. Stand in the middle of the flat rock and take 10 paces west, dig down for about two yards, till you hit a chest, the gold is in the chest. The Texas Ranger looks at the barman expectantly. The Barman says, “Hóse Revera, says, go ahead and shoot.”

Our own agenda or bias significantly influences the way we translate and indeed the way we interpret. Scripture is not immune to the agenda and bias of interpreters. The readings set for today, in particular, have been used by those with a bias for subjugation, suppression and oppression.

Psalm & New Testament

Earlier we read the words of the Psalm. Let me draw our attention to the seventh verse, “You have made him (humanity) the master of your handiwork: you have put all things in subjection beneath his feet.” The Psalm continues to speak of humanities dominion over the environment. What a wonderful text to justify our Willful polluting of the atmosphere, our part in the degradation of the worlds forests and our flagrant abuse of water resources.

It is interesting that some have considered this a messianic Psalm, a Psalm that refers to Jesus. Certainly the writer to the Hebrews considered this to be the case. In chapter 2:6-8, which we omitted this morning, the writer quotes Psalm 8. In the section that we did read, the writer to the Hebrews asserts that it is Jesus who “is made a little lower than the angels” and thus Jesus has dominion over the environment. How does Jesus exercise this dominion? Well, there is that instance when Jesus zaps the fig tree for not being fruitful, don’t think that text would go down well with the tree-huggers! In honesty there is little or nothing overt in Jesus’ teaching about the environment. Jesus’ primary concern is for people, again and again he is moved with compassion, even to the point of tears, when he experiences the suffering of people. To be sure, Jesus’ primary concern is for people and not the environment. However we are discovering more and more how our abuse of the environment leads directly to the suffering of humanity. Therefore, indirectly, Jesus is all for stewardship of the environment. As Anglicans we are called to “strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain and renew the life of the earth” as part of our mission. To work and live for eco-justice is not the easy or inexpensive path to take; it is a path that demands sacrifice.

Old Testament & Gospel

How is one to interpret the creation story we heard read today? What does the writer wish to imply by the creation of the woman from the rib of the man? It’s impossible to know the authors original intention, but we do know that this particular text has been used to justify the suppression of women at points in history, even up to our current time. Some assume that this text supports the contention that woman are, some-how less than or, lower than men. Jesus quotes from this text in our Gospel passage for today, how does he interpret it?

The Gospel of Mark records the most stringent teaching on divorce of all the Gospel writers. In a perfect world the ideal would be for happy functional marriages and no divorce! Divorce leaves wounds and brokenness for the couple, the families and especially the children in most cases. However, divorce is a complex and sensitive subject, often we think of divorce as the worst possible outcome. Allow me to share a real story that challenges this theory. During this past week a woman, in her late thirties, told me that her parents divorce was one of the best days of her life, “why”, I asked. She said that as a child she was very aware of the icy atmosphere between her parents, this caused her great distress. The divorce helped to dissolve this atmosphere and helped her cope and even excel at life where before she had really struggled.

I do not tell this story to advocate divorce. However we need to hear Jesus' prohibition on divorce in light of his context and resist the urge to merely extract the words and foist them on our own context.

During the patriarchal time when Jesus ministered on earth, there were significantly unequal relations between men and women. A man could divorce his wife at a whim. The wife had no recourse let alone similar rights. In a very real way this passage is less about divorce than Jesus' insistence on addressing power imbalances. Jesus, by disallowing divorce is rejecting the male dominated system of his time. Mark seems to reinforce this by placing Jesus' teaching about children, who were also considered as less than human, right after the teaching on divorce.

Conclusion:

The issues remain just as difficult as they have ever been, there are no easy answers in this grey world of ours. I believe that our guiding principle as Christians should be love. The love that we see represented in the person of Christ. Allow me to borrow a parable told in New Delhi, India, to illustrate this kind of love. Please pardon the bluntness of the parabolic details, but that is apparently culturally reflective. It is the story of a young man who lived in a village and fell in love with a woman from a neighboring village. His love for her was genuine and he sought her hand in marriage. She, in turn, felt no such affection for him and only exploited his feelings to her own advantage. She made it a game, ever demanding more and more proof of his love for her. At last, when all her ploys were exhausted, she demanded the unthinkable. "If you truly love me," she said, "I would like to be confident that it is an unrivaled love. To prove that, I ask you to take your mother's life and bring her heart to me as a trophy of my victory over your love for her." The young man was left thoroughly confounded for weeks and grief stricken at his option. Unable to withstand his 'loss' any longer and seeing his mother alone, in a frenzied fit he killed her and took the heart out of her body. He ran as fast as he could to present this trophy to the girl he loved, all the while fleeing the guilt that tormented him. While running through a forest he stumbled and fell, and the heart bounced out of his hand. As he attempted to rise to his feet, he frenetically rummaged through the undergrowth looking for her heart. Finally, he spotted it and picked it up, and as he dusted off his knees he heard a voice coming from the heart saying, "Son are you hurt? ... Son are you hurt?" This is a message of undying sacrificial love. This is the type of love that should be our guiding principle.