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Deuteronomy 25: 5-10; Mark 10:1-9

First Parish UCC, Brunswick

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Dearly Beloved

A number of years ago I was sitting with a group of women and one of them, Donna, was telling the group that she and her husband were going to be celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary. One of the other women gushed, “Oh, 50 wonderful years together!” To which Donna responded, “No, but forty of them were pretty good.” Anyone who has been married any length of time will resonate with her honesty.

Whether we ourselves ever marry or not we are affected by the marriages around us. When we talk about marriage we touch on so many emotional hot spots for all of us – about our parent’s marriages, about our own, about our children’s marriages (or lack thereof) or of society’s restrictions which don’t allow us to marry. When we talk about all the different facets and factors of marriage it is important to remember that these are not abstract matters, we are talking about real people and their real lives. We are talking about people with whom we worship each week. In other words, we are talking about our real lives.

In all our families there are marriage stories that are heartwarming and some that are deeply upsetting. One of my family’s heart breaking stories is about a great grandmother who married a sailor who came to town. They had five children together and then his wife showed up. He left with his first wife, and my relatives were devastated by this turn of events.

In the midst of such experiences, you’ve probably heard statements like this, “Marriage has universally fallen into awful disrepute.” With the divorce rate what it is, and with an increasing number of people uninterested in marrying even though they live together as partners, marriage does seem to be under considerable reevaluation. Is this something new? Not really. The person who made that statement was Martin Luther, in 1522. Such a statement could probably be said in most any time and place, because marriage is so intertwined with our social, economic and cultural realities, which have shifted significantly in human history. Our Torah reading today is an illustration of such shifts. How many of us today would want to be required to marry our brother or sister-in-law under similar circumstances? How many of us would be willing to live in the biblical model of marriage under which the patriarchs operated, which wasn’t “one man and one woman,” but “one man and as many women as he could afford?”

Not only our cultural definitions of marriage have changed, but our religious sensibilities about marriage have shifted, also. Today, we see marriage as a matter of religious significance. By contrast, the early Christian church paid little attention to marriage for roughly the first thousand years of Christianity. There were no wedding ceremonies in the church. It wasn’t until 1215 that the church identified marriage as a sacrament and consistently began to celebrate marriage ceremonies. Then in the Reformation, the

Protestants decided that only baptism and communion are sacraments and marriage shifted out of prominence in their practices.

Considering Jesus' comments about marriage in today's gospel, why was it not a more significant ritual in the life of the early church? The early Christian community put a big wrinkle in marriage traditions of their day in its acceptance of, and at times even emphasis on, the spiritual benefits of being single and being celibate. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 7 suggests that people would be better off not getting married, because then they would be able to focus on their union with the Lord. If our ancestors had followed this biblical model of marriage none of us would be here. Paul does say if your physical passions are too strong to control then you should marry. Yet, he definitely elevates celibacy as a higher spiritual practice. The Catholic Church is still very engaged in this conversation.

Marriage is a relationship which throughout history has been concerned about many matters - money (land), sexual expression, children, extended kinship, and matters of the heart and spirit, what we typically call love. At different times in history, and sometimes even at different times in an individual marriage, one of these matters often has greater prominence. When you study the history of marriage you realize that even though people have always paired off, formal marriage contracts were initially developed out of concerns about money/land. Throughout history marriage has been primarily a concern of the well to do because the poor can't afford to get married.

Yet practical matters are still part of married life. One person who was recently asked why he got married responded, "Because of health insurance." When Ron and I sit down to pay bills, we find ourselves realizing, "We're running a small business here."

So what of love? Remember Tevye, in *Fiddler on the Roof*. He is deeply puzzled when one of his daughters says she wants to marry for love. He goes home and asks his wife of twenty-five years if she loves him. It strikes them both as an odd, yet intriguing question.

In our western culture we can't imagine not asking that question. When our girls were little one of them said to me one day, "You're lucky." I said, "Why?" She replied, "Because you married a great guy," which is true. She was in touch with matters of the heart. In western culture today we marry for love.

But love is about more than just feelings of love, which come and go over time. Love is also about commitment and steadfastness. It is about kindness and honest. It is about matters of faith and the Spirit? I think looking at today's gospel lesson will lead us to further reflection on this.

From the lesson in Mark we learn that divorce was an accepted part of Jewish life. In other words, it is not a new development in human history. Note that divorce was not something that the courts controlled but it was a private matter between the couple. A man could simply write a certificate of divorce. So, why did Jesus say no to this well-established practice? Here are some possibilities.

1. A political concern- maybe the conversation is not really about divorce in general, but it is a reference to the political leader King Herod who divorced his wife to marry his sister-in-law. John the Baptist has already lost his head in speaking out against this. Maybe the Pharisees are testing Jesus to see what he will say to Herod, even though the question is cloaked in more general terms. From this perspective Jesus wasn't making a universal decree about divorce. Indeed, there are other places in scripture where Jesus makes some exceptions.

2. A justice concern - In those days a man could simply decide to divorce his wife, no matter what his reason. In reality, when this happened, if the woman had no other adult male in her family who would care for her, she often had no recourse but the streets to support herself. Jesus is saying that is no way to treat women.

3. A spiritual concern – Although Jesus' culture primarily paid attention to the practical matters of marriage, he was also concerned about its spiritual realities. Along with all its other facets, from a faith perspective, marriage is at its core a spiritual journey- a very specific spiritual journey with another human being. It is often this part of marriage that even we in the church pay little attention to. In the midst of all the practical aspects of marriage is it also a spiritual discipline. It calls us to love our neighbor in a very intimate relationship. This spiritual facet of marriage is about more than just the emotions of being in love, it is also about the commitments, the covenant of love. It is about the deepest realities of life, individually and in community. Jesus points out that when two people have been joined together, it is not a trivial thing to separate them. That is still true, even though we recognize that in some instances it is the necessary and right thing to do.

There are legal, social, and cultural implications for marriage. The state has a great deal of interest in those matters. The church is interested in this as well, especially from a justice point of view. Yet, as a community of faith we are called to focus our attention also on the spiritual implications. From the religious and spiritual point of view marriage is a covenant (a promise binding one to another) where the two people offer mutual care and companionship for life's and faith's journey. That is why when the church, back in the 1200s, began to develop marriage liturgies it took the then very radical step of saying that even women had to give consent. People were stunned and many were outraged. Yet, the church has at its core always said that marriage is a spiritual covenant.

When we gather for a wedding ceremony here in the sanctuary we are participating in a covenant ritual. It is one of the many covenant rituals that are part of our life together. In Communion we own our covenant with God and one another. In Baptism we covenant with the one baptized and their family to share in the faith journey with one another. In memorial services we remember the promise that we are God's- in life and in death- and we stand steadfast with those who are grieving.

In a wedding we give witness to our conviction that God loves each person. We witness the vows of commitment that the couple makes to one another. And, we offer support, prayers, and blessing for their life together. For me, this blessing is the significant part of what I do in a marriage ceremony. I only sign the state's marriage license as a convenience to the couple, even though I do not like being an agent of the state in that process. My responsibilities as a religious professional are not identical to the state's

concerns. My responsibilities focus on the blessing part of the ritual.

Two years ago there was a blessing ceremony here in our sanctuary for two men who had been legally married in Massachusetts. They came to us because one of their mothers has a connection with our congregation. When this couple asked for this ritual of blessing on their marriage, the Deacons' and Council's discussions about the request focused on our welcoming statement.

The First Parish Church is open to everyone and welcomes your participation in our services and activities. We are a congregation diverse in economic status, race, ethnic origin, mental and physical challenges, religious tradition, sexual orientation and many other ways. We affirm that the love of Christ for each person knows no bounds.

We celebrated this couple's covenant with one another as a reflection of this statement.

I have found the question for many people is the word marriage itself. I know people who are willing to accord civil rights to same gender couples but don't want to call their relationships marriage. As people of faith, as we stand with our brothers and sisters, why would we not want to support them spiritually as they covenant one with another on life's journey? Why would we not want them to know the blessings of God and the community of faith? Why would we not invite them to marry?

Dearly Beloved, the love of Christ knows no bounds.