

**Proper 22Bi – October 4, 2015**  
**Job 1:1; 2:1-10; Psalm 26; Hebrews 1:1-4; 2:5-12; Mark 10:2-16**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**Marriage, Divorce...and this “Fragile Earth, Our Island Home”**

Now, on the one hand, some believe that all we have to do in any kind of ethical dilemma is look it up in the book, and then act accordingly.<sup>ii</sup> On the other hand, Jesus said all you have to do is love God and your neighbor and yourself. That may seem even more appealing until, in dilemma after dilemma, you have to try to figure out just how to go about doing that. As Frederick Buechner points out, “The difficulty is increased when you realize that by loving God, and your neighbors [and yourself], Jesus does not mean loving as primarily a feeling. Instead, he seems to mean that whether or not any feeling is involved, loving God means honoring and obeying and staying in constant touch with God; and loving your neighbors means acting in their best interests no matter what, even if personally you can’t stand them.”<sup>iii</sup>

Nothing illustrates the difficulty of all this better than the situation of two married people who for one reason or another decide to divorce, but take their faith and their relationship seriously enough to want to do what is right for themselves and each other. As the saying goes, marriages are made in heaven...and so are thunder and lightning, tornadoes and hail! Divorce has touched each and every one of us, whether as a spouse, or as a child, parent or friend. For the religious leadership of Jesus’ day, the law book on divorce was clear cut. For them, husband and wife were not equal—the woman was the property of her husband [Deuteronomy 21:14; Exodus 21:7; Jeremiah 3:8], a possession among others. Thus she had no claim on the fidelity of her husband, and therefore, her husband could never be accused of adultery towards her. Only a man had the right to divorce [Deuteronomy 24:1], and the consequences for women after divorce were often devastating socially and economically. Given that marriage was also the marriage of two extended families, divorce was also a great challenge especially for the now dishonored family of the divorced woman. So, for the man, divorce was an easy process; but for the woman, it was nearly impossible. In fact, for the man the process became so easy that for the most trivial reasons, or for no reason at all, divorce could be granted by the religious (rabbinical) court. According to Moses’ original provision on divorce found in the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy [vv. 1-4], a man could divorce his wife if he found in her “something objectionable.” Although there was a school of teachers (rabbis) and lawyers who interpreted that crucial Scriptural phrase as referring only to the occurrence of adultery, the prevailing school of (rabbinic) thought was considerably more open-ended than that. The school of Hillel, for example, said that the phrase, “something objectionable” could mean even if the wife spoiled a dish of food.

This view, of course, had roots deep in the patriarchal cultures of that day, and we *still* see it playing out in some of the more traditional cultures and even so-called “modern” societies up to the present day. Some of this is even enshrined in the Creation stories. We say in our service of Holy Matrimony, “The bond and covenant of marriage was established by God in creation” [The Book of Common Prayer, p. 423]. But *which version*

of the Creation? In the creation story from the second chapter of Genesis, we read that God creates Adam first, and only afterwards, realizing that “it is not good that the man should be alone,” God decides to make a “helper” for him, thus fashioning Eve out of one of Adam’s ribs and calling her woman, because she was taken out of man. However, in the first chapter of Genesis, a completely different creation scenario is told. To quote that first chapter, “So God created humankind in His image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). In this version, the female as much as the male is a reflection of the Creator. They are created at the same time, and they are created equals. God blesses them and charges them together—the female along with the male—with stewardship over God’s earth. This first chapter of Genesis is in stark contrast to the other version in the second chapter. These conflicting views of woman’s place and role in the order of things scarcely needs to be spelled out further, as it’s obvious which version of the creation story has prevailed and has been played out the most through the centuries.

In speaking against divorce (especially to marry another) in today’s gospel reading, Jesus is reacting to the easy, quick double-standard, male-initiated divorce allowed for in the religious law. “What God has joined together let no one separate,” is the way Jesus puts it in Mark’s gospel (10:2-12, esp. v 9). In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus acknowledged the religious law that marital unfaithfulness on the woman’s part may be considered justifiable grounds for divorce, but he was clearly not happy about it (Matthew 5:31-32; see also 19:8-9). In today’s gospel from Mark, however—and in Luke’s gospel (16:18)—Jesus takes his law of love and his insistence on coherence of thought, word and deed, and supersedes the religious law on divorce—and he puts an extra dig in at the popular double-standard against women by saying that the husband also would be guilty of adultery for divorcing his wife in order to marry another.<sup>iv</sup> And so, it is also Jesus’ reaction to injustice against women that leads him to a rather hard line on divorce. But presumably, even this hard line is to be assessed by the same standards as mandates to love God, and neighbor and self that Jesus upholds as the greatest commandments.<sup>v</sup>

Broadening the institution of marriage to include same-sex couples as our nation and denomination have done, has opened these ethical dilemmas to a broader range of people.<sup>vi</sup> And so, it is incumbent on all of us as an open and affirming Christian community to support all couples in their life together, for better or for worse.

Now, I’m going to speak of another kind of divorce on this Sunday, what the Church has come to call Creation Sunday—falling on the day closest to the 789<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi. We need now more than ever to look at, and live into the vision and witness of St. Francis. Francis lived out a vision of the world that was broad and generous minded.<sup>vii</sup> He found sources of that devotion in all of nature and in the cycles of life from birth through death. He chose the simple life so that he could be less encumbered and more available to all those sources of devotion to God. Francis’ vision and witness was not something sweetly sentimental or simplistic and thus irrelevant, as he is sometimes portrayed. Rather, his was a witness and vision that we as a nation and as a human race have only begun to appreciate; and because we are so late to practice, we are facing consequences which we are only beginning to realize are having major

impacts on the planet and our lives. How much we need to recover our reverence for creation, and to acknowledge the fact that our very existence depends on it!<sup>viii</sup>

Unfortunately, besides the vision of St. Francis' that has been with us at least on the margins for 800 years, we 21<sup>st</sup> Century people are also heirs of a nearly 400-year old vision that has separated and divorced in our minds Nature from Nature's God, the Creation from the Creator, as William Sloane Coffin pointed out.<sup>ix</sup> This relatively modern vision created a divorce in the so-called enlightenment mind that left Nature without any animating purpose, the Creation without value in and of itself. Nature still held its beauty, but the greedy eyes of human beings focused more on the riches in the warehouse than on the beauty in the shop, as it were. It's no coincidence that philosophic thought so paralleled the emergence of modern economic society in which Nature was to be seen merely as a raw material and a commodity, a means only to our ends. "We shall become the masters and possessors of Nature," summed up Rene Descartes. This perspective put humanity at the center point of Creation and relegated the rest of Creation to apparent meaninglessness *unless* it had usefulness to us.<sup>x</sup> In contrast to this prevailing view, the best of our Christian Franciscan—as well as Buddhist, Native American and other spirituality and modern scientific ecology—are all blowing in like a strong clear wind. These are not merely calling to us asking for caution lest we exhaust our natural resources and kill ourselves in the process. They also ask for reverence, to a *re-marriage* of Nature and Nature's God.<sup>xi</sup> And why a call to reverence? Because Nature has animating purposes of its own—intrinsic value, beauty and meaning unto itself. Obviously we cannot disregard our modern knowledge, nor the necessity to be *tough-minded* about the basic needs of our present and future society, and more so, the needs of the whole human family, more than seven billion of us. But for our very survival we cannot be spared the vulnerability that comes from being *tender-hearted*.<sup>xii</sup> Reversing the separation or "divorce" between Nature and Nature's God, or rather us and God, that has occurred in our modern minds and actions over nearly 400 years is the greatest challenge we face, alongside the related efforts to seek peace with justice in places of conflict, indeed conflicts which more and more will be fueled by disputes over natural resources. In the meantime, as we come to terms with our mastering, dominating, controlling, polluting, deforesting, exhausting and destroying, we can by God's grace repent and rediscover a countervailing spirituality such as St. Francis'. Then, like him, we can exercise responsible action that shows more respect, more humility, more reverence, more love, more compassion, more heart, more communion, more joy, more simplicity, more sustainability.<sup>xiii</sup> It's as simple and ordinary and as profound as that. Would that all of us live according to the prayer from the Taize Community: "May the Lord keep us in the joy, the simplicity and the compassion of the Holy Gospel." Those three things are the bottom line.

I leave you with these thoughts this morning. May God bless us as we deal with all our various ethical dilemmas amongst our family and friends, and as stewards of God's good, albeit fragile, earth.

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<sup>i</sup> See also Epiphany 2C (#2), Epiphany 6A, Lent 3B, Proper 22A, and A Wedding Homily

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ii Obviously, there are lots of commandments and laws not just in Scripture but throughout society. Some of them seem too harsh, others not protective enough. A lot of times laws are confusing, even conflicting—for example laws which serve local concerns but which violate higher laws of the land. Then there are even higher laws, such as international law and international agreements which, according to our own Constitution, are the highest laws of our land, but which often seem to be too undesirable or breakable, unattainable or subtle, ineffective and unenforceable, as evidenced in the ways some of these higher laws have been flouted. As well, there are unjust laws, laws that have had to be broken and then repealed. Whole movements such as the anti-slavery and women's suffrage movements, and later the Civil Rights movement—and other movements for social justice at work today—have had to struggle to get unjust laws replaced by just laws. Here at home and around the world we still have some ways to go.

So, what is law anyway? As Frederick Buechner points out, there are basically two kinds. The first kind are laws of the way things ought to be. The second kind are laws of the way things are. He cites the law of "No Trespassing" as an example of the first kind and the Law of Gravity as an example of the second kind. Now many people think God's Law, like the 10 Commandments, or the Sermon on the Mount, has to be spelled out in terms of the first kind of law, a compendium of do's and don'ts, ought's and shall nots (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 50-51). Certainly, most laws of society fit this first category. These laws are the work of legislators, courts, and custom. When obeyed, these laws serve the useful purpose of keeping a degree of order within a free civil society, and of keeping us from each other's throats. Human beings, being prone to evil either as perpetrators or victims, need the support of law. As the theologian Paul Tillich stated: "Since the law cannot be wholly internalized in the conscience of imperfect humanity, conscience must be externalized into law." Therefore we need to elevate people to the level of most laws and not to lower the law to the level of the people. At the very least, if laws cannot make evil people good, they can make the innocent safe. As Martin Luther King, Jr. stated, "morals cannot be legislated but behavior can be regulated" (Martin Luther King, Jr., Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), Ch. 11).

Then what about God's Law, such as the 10 Commandments? If all they are are a compendium of do's and don'ts then they can do no more than keep us from each other's throats. From ancient times to the present, various religious institutions and communities have been highly structured, with clear-cut policies and procedures, routines and rituals, laws and statutes that build cohesion, identity and a certain resilience to face an otherwise hostile world.

It was such a religious "in-group" legal system, which Jesus found himself confronting. Whether by violating certain dietary or ritual laws, as he associated with foreigners and social outcasts, and healed on the Sabbath; or as he overturned the tables in the Temple precincts, Jesus cut through certain laws to expose legalism and inequity and called for a refocusing on the real purpose and heart of God's law, namely to promote justice and love.

But rather than abandoning all the wisdom and guidance of the ethical tradition of religious law for a love and justice ethic that is somehow separate from all that; instead, Jesus, by going to the heart of God's law and finding the love and justice ethic within his own tradition, in fact extended the law rather than abandoning it. Jesus says it this way in his Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew. 5:17). Of course in fulfilling the deeper meaning of the law, Jesus ends up breaking some lesser laws.

As Buechner points out, all this doesn't mean that there isn't a positive Law of God good for all people and between nations even though it's no secret that ideas about what is Right and Wrong vary from time to time and place to place. For example, King Solomon with his 700 wives would not be apt to see eye to eye with a Southern Baptist missionary on the subject of having more than one spouse. Now does that mean that morality is all relative to the tastes of the time and is not to be taken any more seriously than tastes in food, dress, or anything else? On one level, this may be so. But there is a much deeper level. We can see this in the following ways. Again, Buechner states,

"In order to be healthy, there are certain rules you can break only at your own peril: eat sensibly, get enough sleep and exercise, avoid bottles marked poison, don't jump out of boats unless you can swim[, and so on.

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And in order to be satisfied with life,] there are also certain rules you can break only at your peril: [such as] be at peace with [yourself and] your neighbor; get rid of hatred and envy; [speak] the truth; avoid temptations to evil [that] you're not strong enough to resist; don't murder [or] steal [and so on]. Both sets of rules, [rules of health and rules for a satisfied life], are as valid for [Moses or Solomon, or a first century Jew or Christian like Paul; or for a Christian as for a Muslim here and now]. Both sets of rules—the hygienic as well as the moral, describe not [so much] the way people feel life ought to be, but the way they have found [that] life is" (Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC Ibid., pp. 63-64).

The Law of Love—Spiritual law—is thus a law of the way things are, and only then is it the law of the way things ought to be. It is stated succinctly in the Bible in the First Letter of John (3:14): "Whoever does not love, abides in death." Like it or not, that's how it is. "Whoever does not love, abides in death" That applies to individuals, communities, and whole nations. Just as Jesus did not abolish the wisdom of his religious ethical tradition with his love and justice ethic but instead fulfilled it by focusing on its true spirit and intention, we too would do well with the opportunities and pitfalls of living in a global village and with our modern technology to balance all that with the wisdom of the ethical traditions shared by the world's great faith traditions including our own. We should uphold those principles of the God-given dignity of the human person and the preciousness of life as we attempt to live out this love and justice ethic in our perilous times. As the Bible puts it, "whoever does not love abides in death." Or, as Buechner concludes, if we don't believe that, we can always put it to the test—interpersonally, or internationally—just the way if we don't believe the law of gravity, we can always step out a tenth-story window. - Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 50-51, 63-64. See also Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), pp. 72-74.

And as Henri Nouwen pointed out, "We are all legalists most of the time. All of us enjoy the feeling of peace and security that can come from obeying a clear, specific code of conduct; and every society and religious community does its best to provide them...[such codes of conduct] have a certain place in our lives. They also offer us a certain safety and comfort, but when they become our main coping device, they make us rigid, even dead." - Henri Nouwen, Lifesigns (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1986), pp. 92-93

<sup>iii</sup> Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 73.

<sup>iv</sup> In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus called forth congruence between the inner heart and the outward action. He even creates an "ethics of perfection," as it were—because thoughts matter, and words matter and tone of voice matters, because we need both right attitude and right action in right relationship to be complete, to be whole and to live faithfully in this world. Jesus had elsewhere re-affirmed that the two supreme laws are to love God with all our hearts and minds and souls, and to love our neighbors as ourselves. "On these two commandments depend/hang all the law and the prophets" is the way he put it (Matthew 22:40). By going to the heart of God's law and finding the love and justice ethic within his own tradition, Jesus, in fact, *extended and transcended* the law rather than abandon or loosen it—as he said earlier in his Sermon on the Mount, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I have come not to abolish but to fulfill." (Matthew. 5:17). Jesus came to give us life abundantly, and as he wants us to live lives of deep gladness and purpose, he knows the way to do that is with singleness of heart. And so, diving into today's gospel—Jesus calls forth congruence between the inner heart and the outward action as he calls us to strive for a life not given over to destructive and self-destructive dispositions and actions.

<sup>v</sup> As Buechner asks,

"Who knows what has gone amiss in [a] marriage? Who knows which partner, if either, is more at fault? Who knows what the long-term results, either of splitting up or of staying together, will be? If there are children, who can say which will be better for them, those small[er /younger] neighbors?...Will it be living on with married parents whose constant battling, say, can do terrible things to a child? Or will it be going off with one divorced parent or the other, and falling victim thereby to all the feelings of rejection, guilt and loss which can do equally terrible things to a child, if not more so? What would the Law of Love have you do in a situation so complex, precarious and fateful? How can you best serve, in love, the best interests of the [spouse] you are miserable with,

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[and] your children, yourself, [and] God? There is no book to look up the answer in. There is only your own heart and whatever by God's grace it has picked up in the way of insight, honesty, courage, humility, and, maybe above everything else, compassion." (Buechner, Whistling in the Dark, *Ibid.*, p. 74).

<sup>vi</sup> I do not see how Church or State can define and then exclude people from marriage on the basis of sexual orientation alone - not if the law of love is more important than the laws of biology or precedents in civil or canon law. If we judge what is natural and appropriate according to the Law of Love, and if we can affirm that same-gendered couples can be as loving and responsible spouses and parents as straight people, then how is homosexual love and same-sex marriage contrary to human nature or societal customs? What makes heterosexual relationships and marriage any more special or worthy of support and legal sanction? Shouldn't a relationship be judged by its inner worth rather than just by its outward appearance? Isn't it in the interest of the Church and the State to support family stability? So, then, why should anyone deny support for overtly gay stable monogamous relationships and same-sex marriage?

<sup>vii</sup> He lived for others in joy and compassion through the practice of simplicity. His devotion to God was so wide that he found sources of that devotion in all the diverse people he encountered—rich and poor, healthy and sick, young and old.

<sup>viii</sup> This has been a problem especially for many Christians; for as a former colleague of mine, Elizabeth Garnsey put it, the Church has had a tendency to mystify God in Jesus over the centuries, disconnect him from his Creation, and remove him from the realm of the earth-bound. After all, if we imagine him too much like us, we'd have to look too much like him. Instead, tradition has built up walls around the mystery of God made known in Jesus, giving the impression that God is untouchable, far away, unapproachable. In so many ways, the Church presumed to be the keeper of the mystery of God in Christ. We locked him up in ornate buildings and shrouded him within convoluted doctrines and creedal formulas, and sacramental altars with strict boundaries as to who could or could not participate or partake. As a result, many lives were lived under the weight of guilt and the sense of unworthiness or distance. See Elizabeth Garnsey, "Reclaiming the Earth-bound Jesus" (New York: St. Bartholomew's Church, April 22, 2007). Also, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote:

"Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God  
But only he who sees takes off his shoes.  
The rest sit round and pluck blackberries."

Unfortunately, for the most part we *don't* see "earth crammed with heaven." As William Sloane Coffin points out, it's not that we're evil, we're just a little dull at times. Or maybe it's not that we're dull, only very much caught up in the grip of life and its circumstances, rushing to the next thing, losing sight of what or who we can discover in the present moment. Thomas Merton remarked that "being attentive to the times of the day...the reason that we don't take time is a feeling that we have to keep moving. This is a real sickness. We live in the fullness of time. Each moment is God's own good time. The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer, a chance to realize that we have what we seek. We don't have to rush after it. It was there all the time, and if we give it time, it will make itself known to us" (Thomas Merton, A Hidden Wholeness, p. 49; see also Quoted in David Steindl-Rast, "Recollection of Thomas Merton's last days in the West" in *Monastic Studies*, 7:10, 1969).

<sup>ix</sup> William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), pp. 86-92.

<sup>x</sup> And so, the qualitative view of Nature as expressed in Scripture and later, in the witness of St. Francis and Hildegard of Bingen—and even later, in Galileo and others gave way to a quantitative view. Nature from then on was seen as neutral—essentially, a machine, as some Enlightenment thinkers put it. And a machine has no purpose, only a function, a utility. It was obvious Nature's function was to serve human beings, the only purposeful creatures around, or so they thought. As Theodore Roszak describes, this led in a philosophical progression of thought to something like this: once the stars, planets and this earth were

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seen as parts of a great machine, it was only a step to view animals as machines, as did Descartes; then to view human society as a machine, as did Thomas Hobbes; then to view the human body as a machine, as did Julien de La Mettrie and others; and then to view human behavior as machine-like, as did I.V. Pavlov, John Watson, and B.F. Skinner. Need we add that if you can objectify all creation under a telescope or microscope, and depersonalize all aspects of humanity, you can do all that all the more easily under the sight of a GPS/computer-guided missile-firing drone. Thus we have progressed as the inheritors of this three-hundred year old vision.

<sup>xi</sup> I don't mean in some "new age" way that Nature is the same as God, nor am I suggesting a notion of Creationism. But there has been this divorce between the Creator and the Creation, caused by our "enlightened" culture.

<sup>xii</sup> The fact is, Jesus, the Word who is God, through whom all things came to be, the Word who was made flesh and dwelt among us; the one who died for our sins—personal, societal, ecological—is Risen and loose at this moment repairing a broken world and restoring humanity and all Creation to right relationship, and inviting us to join him in his ongoing mission.

<sup>xiii</sup> A former colleague of mine, Elizabeth Garnsey, reminds us that, "God in Christ is forever intimately connected with us, forever involved and in touch with our human experience...God in Christ is involved not just with the elements of creation as he sustains the universe, he is also a lover of the whole human experience; the human experience of mistakes; the human experience of suffering and illness and violence and death; and [is] all the more bound up with the human experience of redemption, of changed hearts, and of hope and of love that gives life a new chance, not just once, but again and again." Elizabeth Garnsey, *Ibid.*

To be sure, God is mystery. But God is in the flesh too, God in Christ became flesh and dwelt among us, and as the Risen Lord is with us to the end of time. We treat that revelation either with reverence and gratitude, or we demean and even desecrate it by not recognizing God's purposeful presence all around us. All of God's creatures belong to God, no matter their particular fold. God's sheep and lambs are not a special breed or a chosen few; they include people and creatures everywhere. How very much we need to know that God can change us and that God in Christ does not give up on us. From our perspective as Easter people in a Good Friday world, let us not forget that the great mystery of God's Purpose and Power is present to us, in the experience of love and forgiveness, communication and communion, responsiveness and responsibility—if we would but stop, look and listen, and be open *now* to the legacy which is in store for us when "God will be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28; Ephesians 1:23).