

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 3, 2021

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Year B, Proper 22: Genesis 2:18–24; Psalm 128; Hebrews 2:9–18; Mark 10:1–16**

Concerning the first lesson that we heard today, I think a more appropriate passage from Genesis to pair with today's gospel lesson would be the story of Abraham sending his senior servant to his own family that he left behind, at the Lord's call, to bring a relative to marry his son Isaac. Abram tells his servant, "The LORD, before whom I walk, will send his angel with you and prosper your way; and you shall take a wife for my son from my kindred and from my father's house."¹ The servant leaves Canaan for the homeland, Haran.

As the unnamed servant reaches his destination, he comes to a well and sees a woman approaching. He entreats the Lord for it be the Lord's intended for Isaac. It is. Rebekah is the granddaughter of Isaac's great uncle. The next morning, the servant is ready to return with her. But Rebekah's mother wants her to remain for ten days. So, her mother and brother respond, " 'We will call the maiden, and ask her.' And they called Rebekah, and said to her, 'Will you go with this man?' She said, 'I will go.' "² Consent is there in the beginning. Consent is at the heart of what it means to be married.

Genesis says, "Isaac brought [Rebekah] into the tent, and took [her], and she became his wife; and he loved her"—the first mention of a husband loving his wife in the Bible. Unlike Abraham, his father, and Isaac and Rebekah's son Jacob, Isaac had no concubines. Biblical marriage is not a simple subject.

Many of you may remember that we use the original 1979 Lectionary for Sundays and other feast days. Today we heard more than the 79 Lectionary

¹ Genesis 24:40.

² Genesis 24:57–58.

appointed, as the Prayer Book permits. The appointed passage ends with the words, “What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.”³ But I think it is important to hear what Jesus explained privately to his disciples⁴ and hear Mark's next story related to marriage, of Jesus welcoming and blessing children.⁵

In the New Testament, Matthew and Luke follow Mark in repeating Jesus' words about divorce and remarriage.⁶ Divorce is also mentioned in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians—and that's it. Paul wrote, “To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, let her remain single or else be reconciled to her husband)—and that the husband should not divorce his wife.”⁷

He continued, “To the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him . . . But if the unbelieving partner desires to separate, let it be so; in such a case the brother or sister is not bound. For God has called us to peace.”⁸

Frederick Buechner is an American writer and an ordained Presbyterian minister. It's easy to find out more about him on the web. He has a website that includes a blog. In a post on July 16, 2016, he wrote, “Jesus said that the one supreme law is that we are to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls, and our neighbors as ourselves. ‘On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets’ is the way he put it (Matthew 22:40), meaning that all lesser laws are to be judged on the basis of that supreme

³ Mark 10:9.

⁴ Mark 10:10–12.

⁵ Mark 10:13–16.

⁶ Matthew 19:3–12; Luke 16:18.

⁷ 1 Corinthians 7:10–11.

⁸ 1 Corinthians 7:12–15.

one. In any given situation, the lesser law is to be obeyed if it is consistent with the law of love and superseded if it isn't.”⁹

One of my early experiences as pastor was to return home to learn that one of the couples who were active with the parish's youth groups first child died in childbirth the day before. Like a significant percentage of couples whose first child dies very young, their marriage did not survive. I haven't been in touch with them for many years. But I do know they remarried. I understand through mutual friends that they made good second marriages.

As Buechner wrote, “Jesus said that the one supreme law is that we are to love God with all our hearts, minds, and souls, and our neighbors as ourselves.” I'm not a great fan of the New English Bible, but I like the rhythm of the translation from Paul's Letter to the Romans of one of Paul's admonitions: Chapter 14, Verse 19, “Let us then pursue the things that make for peace and build up the common life.”¹⁰ It suggests a higher way forward as we humans try to do what we can to have the right relationship with God and each other.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁹ <https://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/7/8/law-of-love>, (accessed 3 October 2021).

¹⁰ *The New English Bible with the Apocrypha Oxford Study Edition*, eds. Samuel Sandmel, M. Jack Suggs, Arnold J. Tkacik (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976).