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Midrash is, in part, the name for a process of inquiring into the Scriptures for their meaning. Since ancient Israel, when rabbis were asked the meaning of a text they would often respond with a story. In our gospel reading this morning, Jesus points us back to the Creation story and invites an exploration of its meaning. In the spirit of looking for meaning in a story I'd like to share with you a retelling of the Creation story based upon Genesis 2:4b-25.

Light. Space. Wind. Dust. Emptiness. As far as new eyes could see. It, the earth creature, was alone. The horizon swept on to nowhere. When the sky's burning ball had gone to its unknown place and the gentler ball appeared, something wet came with it. Dew or mist, at least something, the only other something it could see. But how do you talk to a mist? What does the mist have to say? Alone.

But things changed. Suddenly, there was a green place to break the monotony of the dust. The green place, when IT looked closer had individual green and brown things in it (trees). Two of the trees stuck out right in the middle of the green place, a garden it turns out. One was the tree of life, and the other was the tree of knowledge, whatever those things are.

Then with a mighty roar, a giant stream of mist rumbled out of the ground and cascaded to the far horizon, branching as it went. But before the creature could plunge itself into the inviting water, it was lifted up and placed rather unceremoniously right next to the trees of life and knowledge. And the One who did the lifting and the placing told it to serve the garden and to guard it. For what reason? From whom? Alone.

And the unseen lifter suddenly had a voice. "It is not good that you are alone. I will make a companion who is like you." Now we are getting somewhere thought Dusty. Dusty? Well, it is better than 'it,' at least, and the name reminded Dusty of its roots in the soil and the dust and the mist. So the great lifter got out the potter's wheel (Hmmm, thought Dusty, had I been made like that?) and began to make; the great lifter was a great maker, too. Shapes began to fly off the wheel, strange and miraculous. After the wheel slowed and the shapes ceased, the maker brought all the shapes to Dusty and invited it to give names to them. At first it was a delightful game: horse, duck, platypus, lion, tiger, bear...it was exhausting work all that naming. And finally, it got boring. There was no companion here who was like Dusty! Still alone!

Put to the Test

October 8, 2006

Mark 10:1-16; Genesis 2:4b-25

The maker put the wheel away, and Dusty grew very sleepy. While sleeping, Dusty thought it saw all the newly shaped things coming toward it, growling and mewling and hissing and scratching for Dusty's attention, somehow all slightly threatening. A new creature awoke with a start. What he saw - according to the Hebrew - this is when Dusty became a he - was a new shape. There was now a companion who was like him.

Dusty broke into an excited song. Looking at the Great Maker, Dusty sang, "This at last (you got it right this time!) is my bone and my flesh. She is woman, because she is taken out of man. They were both stark naked, but felt not a shred of shame. (*The Storyteller's Companion to the Bible: Genesis*, 1991, p. 34)

The creation story is a vivid story of God's artistry. Thanks be to God for the gift of this story.

This week I spent a couple of days at Princeton Seminary contemplating how to embody the Sabbath, our fourth and longest commandment. One particular session was titled *Sabbath as Solitude: Boredom as Spiritual Gift*. The professor put forth the idea that to be bored is to be in a 'transitional, in-between state.' This transitional, bored state is a good place to be because that is where hope is secretly being negotiated. Boredom gives you time to discover a new interest or where you will go next -- what it will be that gives you hope. Therefore, to be bored is a very good thing! Hmmm, so is there a positive correlation between bored and church?

Now - I promise you I don't *intend* to be boring. It was shared with us that on the value scale, being boring was the exact opposite of being bored. Being boring indicates, according to one author, sickness and points to a need for counseling. To be boring means you are filling up space for the sake of filling up - or letting space be filled up. Furthermore, you may become boring as a result of compliance, when you focus your efforts to please those around you and in doing so you don't have much to say or much hope to offer.

As far as I can tell, Jesus wasn't boring and he wasn't worried about compliance in today's first Scripture reading. Compliance is the furthest thing from his mind as he's *put to the test* by a group of adversaries. He's confronted with a loaded question. Have you ever felt tested by a question? In our time the question posed to Jesus is akin to the question Christians and voters in Virginia are being asked in regards to the marriage amendment. It is a complex question.

Put to the Test

October 8, 2006

Mark 10:1-16; Genesis 2:4b-25

It's an interesting twist that the questions are polar opposites - in Jesus' day the question was who can divorce? The question voters are being asked in November is who can marry? We've gone from certificates of divorce to marriage amendments. The foremost claim for the amendment is to strengthen the institution of marriage. So -- why aren't we doing more with divorce legislation? It's a widely known fact that at least half of all marriages in the U.S. are ending in divorce - in part attributable to the ease of obtaining a divorce. That, to me, is more threatening than who can marry. And, Jesus is very clear here - no divorce for anyone no matter what.

If we want to be legalistic on the question of marriage there is no place to hide on this one. There is no room for divorce. (*Pause*) But the struggles with this Scripture started practically from the moment it was spoken. In Matthew's gospel account there's a loophole on divorce:

“...anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” **Matthew 5:32**

That's known as “the Matthean exception.”

St. Paul stretches the loophole even wider in his first letter to the Corinthians when he instructs Christians not to divorce their unbelieving spouses. This is because there is always hope that you may convert him or her. However, if a non-believing spouse wants to divorce you, let it be so, in such a case a brother or sister is not bound. This they call “the Pauline privilege.”

Even Mark must have tampered with the words Jesus spoke since in first century Palestine women could not divorce their husbands. Yet, in our morning reading Jesus refers to women who divorce their husbands. Well, women were allowed to divorce men in first century Italy, where it is believed Mark's gospel may have been written.

Divorce in ancient Israel was a contentious issue. Only men could initiate divorce and depending on who you listened to, the grounds could be as serious as adultery or as petty as a burned meal. Hebrew Scripture was clear, if a man decided he disliked his wife, he could divorce her by merely writing a certificate of divorce. She on the other hand had no recourse in a bad marriage; he could beat her, carry on with other women or even take in other wives.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that, “in many ways, Jesus' prohibition against divorce was a great favor to women everywhere. They could not

Put to the Test

October 8, 2006

Mark 10:1-16; Genesis 2:4b-25

be cast off like puppies who had grown up and were not cute anymore. They could rest secure in their marriage vows, without the everyday fear that they might do something to displease their husbands.”ⁱ

Yet, even more controversial about this saying on divorce is who it is being said to. Jesus is not talking with a troubled couple or having a family values discussion with disciples. He’s answering a hostile question from some religious leaders who were more than happy to turn him over to King Herod as a traitor and a heretic. You remember this King Herod from earlier in Mark’s gospel. He married his brother’s wife and when John the Baptist denounced the marriage; John’s head was literally served up on a platter. So the question about divorce was not innocent inquiry. It was a test.

Jesus, the good Jewish teacher that he was, answers the question with a question. He turns the test around and asks, “What did Moses command you?” The answer, “He allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her (Mark 10:4).

Jesus takes a poke at their memory saying divorce was an *allowance* on Moses’ part ‘because of your hardness of heart’ – it’s an allowance for sinfulness, for our propensity to sin against one another. Jesus then ushers listeners into the complexity of the question by moving from a discussion of rules, to a discussion of grace. His adversaries want to talk about rules and legality; yet, he takes them into the realm of grace and gift by way of the creation story. When we open ourselves to hear the creation story in all its fullness the question becomes “*why do we marry?*”

Why do we marry? The answer has evolved through time. The Apostle Paul advised that marriage was an anecdote for lust. If you’re burning with lust – get married – that’ll put an end to it. Ask any married couple.

Since the sixteenth century, our Reformed theology has moved away from the ideas that marriage is a remedy for lust, or that it’s for the procreation of children, or that it’s a means to serve some other economic, social, or personal goal – think marrying up to change social status. What we have come to believe and confess is that people freely and gladly decide to marry in order to establish a relationship that is good in itself and which exists for its own sake. (*Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, 1992, 235) And we establish this relationship -- because from the beginning God saw that it was not good for us to be *alone*.

John and I will celebrate twenty-six years of marriage this week. We agreed that early on, and on more than one occasion, one or the other of

Put to the Test

October 8, 2006

Mark 10:1-16; Genesis 2:4b-25

us thought, “Why *did* I marry you?” Over time, by grace, we’ve grown out of that question.

It reminds me of a story Michael Lindvall tells in his book *The Good News from North Haven* (New York: Doubleday, 1991). Lindvall writes a wonderful story of a marriage in which he ponders the difficulties and joys of being married.

“Life together is hard. There are no perfect husbands, no perfect wives, no perfect children, no perfect in-laws. Life in family – life in any community – is both our sorest test and our sweetest joy. Life together stretches us, pulls us, strains us, but in it we are nourished by the struggle.

It is the best chance [God] gives most of us to grow out of ourselves and into something more like what we are meant to be...For the only thing harder than getting along with other people is getting along without them...”

A wise man said once, “We talk of falling into love as if it were a blind stumbling, like falling into a mud puddle; no, we actually climb into love.” The climb is a test – a test of enduring faith in the purpose of creation. This climb has its gentle slopes, and its rocky terrain. There are times when one partner leads the way and the other follows; times when it’s reversed. The climb becomes precarious when you’ve lost sight of your partner as a partner or when you’ve gotten above the tree line and can hardly breathe – those are the times when all you can hang onto is grace that get you through.

It’s important to remember that the story opens this morning with Jesus’ journeying, ‘climbing,’ if you will, toward Jerusalem. For in Mark, this story about marriage is a part of Jesus’ teaching to his followers on the costliness of discipleship. What I hear from this teaching comes from a man who knows himself what it is to struggle with a promise. He’s been tested all along the way and He knows how hard he has to hold onto the vision God has set before him -- when everything in him may want to cut and run. Our public proclamation to join our lives to another is an outward sign of our Christian discipleship. Think of the requirements of marriage: mutual sacrifice, mutual fidelity, mutual patience, mutual faith and mutual love. Christian marriages reflect to the world around us, a world that often trivializes the union of flesh, what it means to maintain a covenant relationship.

Christ knows that marriage is not easy. A husband and wife must invest themselves in the relationship if they want to draw anything from it.

Put to the Test

October 8, 2006

Mark 10:1-16; Genesis 2:4b-25

That is the nature of all relationships – especially our relationship with the Divine.

The creation story helps us remember that God's hope and *ideal* is for all of God's creatures to be whole. We remember that we are not whole in the garden until we find one another, and our finding one another is grounded in God's union with us. God is a partner in the covenant relationship – a relationship reflecting the intimacy and companionship of God who knows us at the very heart and soul of our being.

I think if Jesus wasn't being tested by his adversaries, his approach may have been different. While I don't think he would've changed his construal of the law on marriage and divorce, the One who picks us up when life has kicked us down and who sets us on our feet again, would have acknowledged our humanity and the limitations of each of us. He knows the hurts we suffer, the hurts we inflict, the promises large and small that we've broken or had to break. He knows that sometimes our relationships are a parody on the divine intention. And, at times, breaking the relationship may be the only possibility in living. At those times and in those relationships Jesus does not try to throw the book at us but rather by grace gets us through and sets the ideal in front of us for our future wisdom.

We know from the somewhat oddly placed ending of the story – Jesus welcoming and blessing the children – that we are all receivers of God's grace no matter what. Children in ancient society were not valued because they had nothing to give or to offer. A successful marriage is not a requirement for acceptance into the household of God. But -- it is a witness to God's covenant faithfulness. We are all loved, valued, and forgiven for who we are. Creatures made for relationship with God and one another. May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.sermonmall.com/TheMall/06/oct06/100806m.html>