

27th Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 4, 2009

Jesus' teaching on marriage and divorce is extremely challenging to a society like ours, where self-fulfillment and personal happiness are held as higher values than the common good. Many people would find His words to be incomprehensible. It is important for us to step out of our social mores to try to understand what Jesus is saying.

Jesus is speaking from a religious perspective and the Jewish understanding of the covenant with God. That covenant is constantly compared to a marriage between God and the Israelites. The Scriptures are a history of God being faithful to a people who keep breaking the covenant by being unfaithful to its terms. This infidelity is seen by God as hardness of heart, a refusal of Israel to yield to the divine love being offered and a lack of trust in the promises made. Jesus sees the broken state of marriage as a reflection of the broken state of the covenant. God had intended that both bonds be permanent unions. Sinfulness, lack of faith, and lack of trust harden the human heart and strain both covenants, that of the couple with God, and that of the spouses with each other.

When the Pharisees test Jesus, they remind Him that Moses allowed a husband to write a bill of divorce and dismiss his wife. Jesus responds to them that such action is rooted in hardness of heart and sin. Such a bill of divorce is not God's will, but Moses' concession to human weakness. When His disciples later question Him, Jesus calls for them to aim for a higher standard. Seeking and trusting the will of God helps to keep the bond of marriage, as well as the covenant intact. To accept such a teaching demands great faith and great trust.

Perhaps this is why the passage ends with Jesus blessing the little children and saying the kingdom of God belongs to them. They know and accept that they are dependent on the adults in their lives because of their limited experience, their inability to survive on their own, and their littleness. If only we could have the same humility before our God, and the same trust...

God bless you.

Fr. Pat