

# ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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## GOD GETS HIS FAMILY BACK

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Text of a Sermon preached the 18th Sunday after Pentecost

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GENESIS 2:18-24 | PSALM 8

HEBREWS 1:1-4; 2:5-12 | MARK 10:2-16

The prophet Malachi, who has the last word in the Old Testament, said it quite plainly, “God hates divorce.” Jesus was being tested by some teachers of the Law. He framed his answer with a reference to what Moses permitted, but his aim was at the heart of what bothered Malachi: “What does the one God desire? Godly offspring. So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth. For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel, and covering one’s garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts.”

Malachi was sick of liars, of cheats, of priests and people who sacrificed blind and lame animals on the altar of the Lord. Of priests and people who kept back their tithes and did not pay a fare wage or respect their elders. Malachi called out the violence we do every day to the most vulnerable. And because of it he said Elijah would come and announce the terrible day of the Lord’s justice. Elijah would prepare the way of the Lord.

So God hates divorce, and the Son of God perhaps seems hard and unreasonable. He had already put a child on his lap and the disciples had forgotten about the lesson, keeping the children from him.

He raised his voice just a bit. “Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

Surely the Lord didn’t mean it. He was after all, looking at his disciples who had just left family and obligations to follow him. There is a memory in Matthew’s gospel that he made an exception for unfaithfulness. St. Paul would later say, given that the Lord was returning soon, better not to marry. And show compassion to unequal unions between believers and non-believers. So how do we hear what the Spirit is saying to us?

Let the opening of the book of Hebrews be our guide this morning. “Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.” Jesus refers to Moses, but uses as his main argument, the second chapter of Genesis. Look, he says, at what God intended, and proceed from there.

Genesis, chapter 2, follows the harmonious creation story of Genesis, chapter 1, where order is patiently carved out of chaos, and everything is good because the ordering creates a balance, a harmony, between the earth and sky, the waters above and below, the seed bearing earth and its fruit, and the birds and the animals, who will all be taken care of by the image of God.

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” And all was very very good. But then the story continues. News from the ground. Genesis, chapter 2, should give us whiplash. It is primitive, chaotic, improvisational.

In the beginning: God took clay. Added water. Breathed. God created the earthling from the earth. ‘Ha-adamah’ from ‘adamah’. And so did God, quite literally, put the human being together. Almost like

an experiment. Because somehow, in the beginning, it wasn't quite right. It wasn't quite finished. We hear these haunting words: "It is not good that Ha-adamah - the human - should be alone."

Hence, the first comedy sketch in world literature. Adam gives a name to all the animals looking for a companion. Not just any companion. We look for the real translation even today. The ancient word for helpmate, for partner, for companion, used here is most often the word used for God. The human needs someone to complete them, to call them forth, to complete God's image on the earth.

It turns out that Adam does not find this co-conspirator among the animals. And so God must continue the experiment. God cuts the human in two, takes out the regenerative part of his anatomy, for the rib is where we get bone grafts to this day, and makes two individuals who together will equal what God means by a human being.

When it is over, when Adam and Eve have both recognized God's image in themselves, and have been cast from the garden for dishonoring it, Adam, the one who toils, and Eve, the mother of those in search of the image, can both say, "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh."

Jesus brilliantly summarizes all this simply: "What God has brought together, let no one put asunder." Indeed! The problem is, of course, from the very beginning we have been going against God's intention. And the many changing customs and rules for marriage, for putting families together and keeping them together, is proof of our different experiments to be faithful to what God wants.

Just as no two marriages are alike, no two divorces are alike. Just as we die, so can marriages die. Violence and indifference kills marriages and families. Jesus must remind us of what is important. God's intention for us – and the children. The real challenge is putting families back together. The real call to faithfulness is the call, after the brokenness and sin of divorce, to put families back together. To take responsibility for all.

And so remarriage is not impossible, but it is always a noble calling, an everyday miracle. In the Episcopal Church, remarriage is permitted after a pastoral conversation. There are only two rules. Have

you received forgiveness for your part in the failure of a marriage, and are you taking care of the children.

In these later days God has spoken to us by his Son. We should never read the Bible as if it is a simple moral rule book. It is not even a theological dictionary. We should most certainly not read it only for the comforting verses and skip over the hard ones.

The best way to listen to what Jesus is saying to us is to truly meditate on what he is saying here. Scripture is a unified story that leads to Jesus, that leads to him saying, for instance, “God hates divorce... because God wants his family back.” Remarriage is not impossible, but it is always a noble calling, an everyday miracle.

Think of it. God lost his family when they disobeyed him and went their own way in the garden. God lost his family to slavery in Egypt. God lost his family when their unfaithfulness and pride led them into Exile. But each time, God determined a way to get his family back.

If you are called right now to transcend a broken marriage, a scattered family, to start anew and bring them back, then you are walking in brother Jesus’ steps. This is always what is on his mind. Suffer the children to come to me. Do not keep them back. Let’s take care of all the children.

The ancestors and the prophets spoke in various ways, in the past. But now, the Son. And this is an image the writer of Hebrews would give us today.

“It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying,

‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters,  
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’”

In the Son, in his great work of love for us on the cross, God gets his family back. May we raise, build, and let go our families in a divine partnership. May our families be shaped in that patient, long-suffering, love of brother Jesus. May we always get our family back.