

*“The Order of Things”*

It had been my intention this morning — and thus the title printed in the bulletin — to address an issue that reappears in our church body regularly. That issue is called “The Order of Creation.” It basically sets forth the point of view that, because males (Adam) were created first, males have preeminence over females. It has always struck me as a spurious argument; but it has strong and vocal proponents in the LCMS. It is, in fact, the officially teaching of our church. That bothers me.

It bothers me because the logical progression would be to say that, since horses were created before male human beings — horses should have preeminence; as should kumquats, sea slugs, and bacteria. Since humans were made last in the order of things, and are thus regarded as the “crown of creation” — the logic would suggest that since Eve came after Adam, God did indeed save His best until last.

But I changed my mind about the title (in part because a full-blown sermon wasn’t coming together on that topic); so here’s what comes instead.

I’m betting that you have had the experience of seeing a sunset so brilliant that it literally stopped you in your tracks. You’ve witnessed the shaft of sunlight that finds its way through a dark and cloudy sky. Some people find a starlit night sky one of the greatest joys of their experience of creation. What experience is that for you? Is there one particular spot that comes to mind when you think of the most peaceful scene in all of God’s glorious earth? For the Psalmist, who gave us the words of Psalm 8, it was the night sky.

As a kid, I would accompany my parents and sisters for my Dad’s two-week vacation in August to a place we called “Camp.” This was a cottage owned by my mother’s Aunt Ella, on Fearings Pond in the Miles Standish Forest Reservation near Cape Cod. It wasn’t much of a cottage — three rooms, no indoor plumbing, no electricity, no telephone. We kids

loved it. My Dad loved the fact that nobody could reach him for two solid weeks. I'm reasonably certain that my Mom tolerated it (it wasn't that much of a vacation for her).

One of the things I loved about "Camp" was the night sky; because we were so far from any human sources of light, the stars seemed to jump out at you. I can understand when the Psalmist says: ***"When I look at your heavens, the moon and stars which you have created . . . what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?"*** The Psalmist is saying: *"I feel so insignificant that it causes me to wonder that you should care for the likes of us human beings!"* What an amazing thing that is. Our Creator God cares for us.

But this is not the most amazing thing in our Psalm — hang on to your hats — there's more: ***"Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet . . ."*** [Psalm 8:5-6]

Can you believe that? When you consider all the beauty and wonder of creation — the most glorious sight you can imagine in all of the universe, the crown of it all is the human race. Created, ***"just a little lower than God,"*** the Psalmist affirms, ***"crowned with glory and honor."***

Among the wonderful things about creation is the ability of God's greatest creation — human beings — to have relationships with other human beings. A relationship of intimacy, characterized by love and trust is the central joy of our lives. Why? Because we are created in the image of God and in the very deepest sense that image is about relationships of love.

The steadfast love of God (חֶסֶד *hesed* in the Hebrew scriptures) creates the crown of creation with an ability for relationship. The wonderful story of creation and the Garden of Eden is the story of God and persons sharing an intimate relationship of love and trust. The sound of the words "Man" and "Woman" are more striking in Hebrew. It is "Ish" and

"Ishah" — the sounds are complimentary and harmonious.

There was a genuine community among God and Ish and Ishah — between God and the crown of God's creation. If everything could have concluded at the end of creation and the formation of the amazing bond between the Man and the Woman things would have been wonderful. All nature was at peace under the dominion of the Man and Woman.

But hold the phone! There's just one big problem with this notion of human beings as the crown of creation. If you watched the news last evening or read the newspaper this morning, you encountered major stories about evil and wrongdoing and disaster. Crime and corruption will fill the airwaves and the printed pages while God's creation endures terrible turmoil. The crown of God's creation has lost its glory. The tarnished crown of creation and faded image of God are as painful spiritual memories in the soul as in a world that struggles under the weight of broken relationships and battered ideals.

The creation story of "Ish" and Ishah" and the glory of God as reflected in Psalm 8 is the backdrop against which the gospel lesson from Mark and Jesus' words on divorce are to be seen. When asked about the contemporary issue of divorce and on which side of the theological debate about divorce He stands, Jesus brings the whole discussion under the eye of God's creative intent.

What are we to make of Jesus' words on divorce? Debate has been lively over the meaning of the words and implications for contemporary religious standards and practice. While we will not settle those long-standing arguments with one sermon, there are some important issues that emerge when the gospel is heard in light of the remaining lectionary texts for today.

It is important to note that our Gospel reading is about an incident where the Pharisees came to "test" Jesus. The word "test" here carries the meaning that the Pharisees were going to "scrutinize" His answer so as to find some fault. There are several incidents in the gospels where the

Pharisees and other religious leaders ask Jesus some question to “trap” Him in an incorrect answer. This was simply another attempt on their part to get Him caught up in a debate, find Him on the wrong side of their religious notions, and build their case against Him.

If the disciples had come to Jesus in private and asked something like, “*Master, what is your opinion on the tragedy of divorce and what should happen to people who go through divorce?*” — we might have some additional insights. They didn’t. But ... Jesus’ encounter with the woman at the well who had been in several marriages, or the woman caught in adultery, brought about a very different response than we see when Jesus answers some very “letter of the law” religious males’ question about divorce. The reality is, we do not have a discussion of divorce from Jesus apart from very specific circumstances and it is difficult to lift His words out of context to construct a purely didactic view of divorce.

The debate over divorce is not new with our generation. In fact, it was a matter of debate in Jesus’ time. There were specific rabbinic views which were in conflict. The two major schools of rabbinic teaching were the Hillel school and the Shammai school. A loosely defined reason for divorce Deuteronomy says is that a man finds “some indecency” in his wife (24:1); the Hillel school viewed this as a general term, the Shammai school took it to mean adultery only.

When the Pharisees came to Jesus, they were hoping that Jesus would choose one interpretation or the other. The “loosely defined” school had those who went to the extreme of considering anything a man disliked to be an “indecency” and thus reason to send a woman away. The “strict” school maintained that the only “indecency” to be considered was adultery. Either way He answered, Jesus was bound to make some enemies — they hoped!

Though we do not get a discussion of divorce from the mouth of Jesus apart from these specific circumstances, the conversation between Him and the Pharisees is instructive. The Pharisees come with a loaded question: “*Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?*” Jesus’ reply is a

standard tactic He uses with those disingenuous detractors who dogged His every move: ***“What did Moses command you?”*** Bingo! They think they have Him. Here comes His decision to go with one party or the other. ***“Moses,”*** they pointed out, ***“allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.”***

Note that the right of divorce was given solely to males. Jesus response to this “out” for Jewish males went along this line: ***“Moses permitted this ‘because of [do not miss this] your hardness of heart.’”*** But — marriage is rooted in God’s creative union of “Ish” and “Ishah.” This is a divine union that ought never to be broken. The Pharisees could not very well argue with the creation account from the Torah could they?

The disciples ask Jesus privately to say more about the divorce issue. His reply is in light of His remarks to the Pharisees. There is no such thing as an alternative to God’s divine intent; God intended for the bond never to be broken. If human beings break the divine bond, any other union would be adultery.

One could wish the dialogue would have continued with something along the line of, ***“So, Lord — in this broken and sinful world, what should be our attitude and ministry relationship with people who experience the tragedy of divorce?”*** Although there is no such discussion, we might revisit the incidents of the woman at the well and the woman caught in adultery to gain insight into the practice of Jesus — and thus see the practice of our ministry when the tragedy of broken relationships has come to pass: take people where they are and lead them into God’s embrace.

There is an important lesson in this Gospel story that goes to the heart of all our lectionary texts for today. Anything that blemishes God’s good creation is a tragedy. Divorce is a tragedy. Broken families are a tragedy. A lake or river that can no longer support life is a tragedy. Injustice is a tragedy. Poverty and hunger in a world where there is abundance is a tragedy. Anything that blemishes God’s good creation is a tragedy.

This world can be an overwhelming place where it is easy to give up on working to make things right. Many have.

There is no doubt that the crown of creation has been seriously distorted. The grief of broken human lives is matched only by the grief in the heart of God over the lost glory which was once the joy of creation. But this world is also a place where followers of Jesus Christ give their heart and soul to bring hope and healing, renewal and re-creation wherever tragedy has invaded God's good intent.

Today the readings draw our attention to the institution of marriage; it is an institution in trouble. It is said that fifty per cent of marriages wind up in divorce (I maintain that this is a bogus figure; it's actually more like 27% — but that is still way too high — and the tragic cost to persons borders on unthinkable). Today's lessons deal with marriage — but that is hardly the only place where broken people and broken relationships need healing.

Take a look around you (and up here at the front while you're at it): There isn't a person sitting here this morning who has not experienced some form of brokenness. Some of us have gotten pretty good at covering up the scars; but there are scars nonetheless. Some of our brokenness is physical; much of it is emotional; a ton of it is relational; and — this is kind of the main point — all of it is spiritual. All brokenness is eventually tied in with our relationship to God.

This is what makes the Psalmist's wonder so magnificent: ***“What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?”*** Rendered insignificant by the stars in the heavens; dwarfed by the grandeur of mountains; as nothing compared to the vast oceans — yet in our moments of pain and distress, we are drawn into the intimate and loving embrace of God. That's what the church is called to represent, and what I believe this congregation has been about and needs to be about in ever more focused and intentional ways.

I have said repeatedly and truly believe, the Church is called, to be a

healing place. We have made inroads in providing healing for the hungry and dispossessed by our work with the Community Pantry. We are considering a joint ministry to reach out to Afghan refugees. We have the beginnings of a relationship with Akron Pregnancy Services. I am enabled to use the training from my doctorate to engage people and groups of people in inner-healing prayer. We should be looking very hard at how we, as a congregation, can provide support and counsel for families that are in trouble, for persons who have gone through a divorce, for those in grief — something like, but not necessarily, The Stephen Ministry. My engagement over many years with Lutheran Metropolitan Ministry opens doors to many opportunities to share Christ's love and as many resources to make that possible.

I invite you to begin praying with me about this direction for ministry. Pray God to give us grace for the tragedies of our own lives and abundant love to share with a broken world. Pray God to bless us to be a healing place for our community, our region, and our communities.

The title for this sermon, as it turns out, is not so misplaced as I first thought. No, I did not wind up preaching about “the order of creation.” But when we align ourselves to where God wants us to be in ministry, I think we will have found that “The Order of Things” is indeed in order.  
Amen.