

**Conference of Bishops Sermon**  
**Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson**  
**October 7, 2012**  
**Lutheran Center**  
**Chicago, Illinois**

19<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Pentecost  
Genesis 2: 18-24  
Hebrews 1: 1-4, 2: 5-12  
Mark 10: 2-16

Grace to you and peace in Jesus' name. Amen.

“So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept.” (NRSV Genesis 2: 21) Oh yes, God the anesthesiologist. Hearing these familiar readings in the context of the complexities of our relationships and the realities of our contemporary controversies, it may be one of those Sundays when we preachers wouldn't be all that offended if God the anesthesiologist shows up and causes a deep sleep to fall upon our hearers. For we simply cannot ignore that hearing these readings will bring to mind for many, perhaps most of us, the complexities and the pain of our relationships—if not ours, then those of family members, friends and colleagues. The realities of tensions, conflicts, separation, divorce, misconduct, living together and not married, or being single but tired of being regarded as less than a whole person, or being gay or lesbian and wishing one's sexual orientation is not how one is solely defined, or perhaps those who are adjusting to life alone after years of being married came to an end with the death of your beloved spouse or divorce. If not personal situations, then maybe these readings brought to mind the cultural controversies and division that we continue to experience over marriage amendments on the November ballot or the continuing conflicts in congregations, families and communities over our 2009 Churchwide Assembly decisions.

So is it the responsibility of the preacher to bring these readings into those contexts—personal, ecclesial, cultural—and speak definitively God's answer to the questions “What am I to do? What are we to do?” Or is it to acknowledge the context in which we hear these readings but to ask the question, “What is God doing?”

God is amazingly busy. God is creating—making stuff, lots of it—not just one thing but many, all of it good. Then suddenly God the creator becomes God the evaluator. Well is that comforting or threatening for you? For us who are very self-critical, always evaluating our own work and lives in terms of what we think we could, even should, be doing better or differently, it may be consoling to know God engaged in critically evaluating God's own work in creation. Following the repeated refrain after God's creating, “And God saw that it was good. And God saw that it was good. And God saw everything God had made and indeed, it was very good.” God said, “Oh but wait just one minute. It is not good.” God the creator became God the evaluator. “It is not good that the man should be alone.” (NRSV Genesis 2: 18) God does not intend to abandon that creature of God's creation, Adam (us) to a lonely existence, to a life of isolation.

God the creator, who became God the evaluator, becomes as Phyllis Tribble wrote, “God the rectifier!”<sup>1</sup> God did not stop with God’s evaluation, “It is not good!” God declares what God will do to make things right. “I will make him a helper as his partner.” (NRSV Genesis 2: 18)

I wonder how many of you heard that phrase “helper, partner” and either winced or wondered what it says about gender roles and relationships, about power and patriarchy. Such resistance is understandable when “helper” is understood as someone inferior, a lesser partner in a relationship. Yet as Sara Koenig reminds us in her reflections on this text, the Hebrew word *ezer*, helper, is used most often to refer to God. “My help comes from the Lord, who made heaven and earth.” (NRSV Psalms 121: 2) It connotes assistance/help from a superior. Which then is immediately tempered by “as one next to him”, suggesting the overall message is mutuality and equality.

But to bring our questions of gender roles and even gender justice to this text and make them the dominant issue could lead us to miss hearing God’s declaration that isolation—aleness—separation—alienation are not God’s intention for us so God acts to make things right. God the creator, who becomes God the evaluator, who becomes God the rectifier, who becomes God the anesthesiologist now becomes God the surgeon. God takes one of the human’s ribs and then closing up the flesh creates woman. *Adam*, one (gender neutral) earth creature, becomes *ish* (masculine) and *ishah* (feminine), thereby becoming male and female.

God the architect of creation becomes God the matchmaker, bringing the woman to the man. Then we are told the man leaves his parents and clings to the woman, who is standing alone—a contrast with many wedding practices. An interesting thing happens at this point in the story. Many want to go from this scene to say now God has created an organization for all time, complete with a charter, bylaws, rules and regulations. All these details are spelled out in the “natural law”. Or sometimes we call it an “institution” or “estate”. Don’t get me wrong. This is a perspective, held and supported by many in the Church. But so often that move can take us away from what God is doing. What is God doing? God is creating:

- Human companionship – the simple yet profound gift of not being alone in a vast universe; friendship, marriage
- Human community – the joy of living in households and neighborhoods, extended families
- Human diversity – the gift of differences that is not a threat to be solved or a burden to be tolerated but a gift where my weakness creates space for another’s strength, my weariness for another’s vitality
- Human vocation – God calling us into a life of tending to, serving one another, all of God’s creatures and creation
- Human sexuality – the wonder, mystery, responsibility and fidelity that belong to God’s gift of intimacy

When the question amidst all the complexities—even tragedies—in our human relationships, our controversies over sexuality and marriage becomes “What is God doing?” God is generously giving life—life lived in relationship; God is steadfastly,

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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978, 89.

mercifully, faithfully calling us, forgiving us, reconciling us, restoring us into relationship with God and one another.

The Pharisees wanted to trip Jesus up on this question—trying to create a controversy that would cause Jesus to choose on which side of this line he would stand. The Pharisees were out to test Jesus. Has anyone here had such experiences in recent months? The Pharisees were scrupulous in their observance of the law. They wanted nothing more than clear, orderly boundaries—red lines, green lines, lines in the sand—dividing lines that could define and divide between what’s clean and what’s not, who’s pure and who is not, to tell right from wrong, not just actions but people.

But Jesus did not help them out in their crusade for moral purity. Instead, he did something else. He took them to a place with a different sort of line—a starting line. Rather than answer the divisive question about divorce, Jesus brought them back to God, who had made a covenant with them through Moses, a covenant to be their God, to be steadfast in love and mercy. Jesus took them even further back to when God made the first creatures, to God the creator–evaluator–rectifier–anesthesiologist–surgeon–architect–matchmaker. Jesus took them back beyond (Or should we say behind or beneath?) God’s law to God’s will, God’s intent, God’s desire that we are created to be in relationship with God, with God’s creatures, with one another in relationships of intimacy and wonder, complexity, fidelity, yes sin and brokenness.

Jesus wanted to get to the heart of the matter, specifically “hard hearts”, human lives that become sacrificed to self-interest, greed, loneliness, hatred, recrimination. All things we see when the joy of intimacy and the life of community in human relationships become poisoned.

What does God do in response to our hardness of heart, our brokenness? What does this God of generous mercy have for such lives, our lives? Among other things Jesus says is legal divorce and its protections. Not as a way of life that becomes an excuse or cover to undermine relationships, but simply as protection for fallible human lives (such as ours).

Really? Is God that generous in mercy? But it wasn’t just the Pharisees who had questions—so did Jesus’ disciples. In the middle of a sermon, a discussion of important matters of marriage and adultery, divorce and remarriage, others started bringing children to Jesus. My goodness, can’t you just feel the waves of irritation the disciples must have felt? You know what one restless child or crying infant does to a congregation when you are delivering or trying to listen to a sermon. And if a couple children start running around in a tense congregation meeting; now there is a guaranteed stress intensifier. I remember when I asked Ione to bring our six children to the Easter Vigil. After the service, I asked what she thought about the service. After over two hours of restless children she was quite clear, “Don’t ask me to do that again. If you do, I will have three of our children and you will have three. And I will choose which three!”

The disciples were saying, “Come on, Jesus, focus.” Don’t get distracted by children. Stay central and focused on the tension with your disciples and the Pharisees. The great issues of our day need to get sorted out. Jesus, be the moral leader we want you to be. Endorse our partisan crusades.

What if the debates that consumed the Pharisees and disciples do not hold Jesus’ attention in the way that he holds the children? Jesus, what are you doing in taking the children in your arms and blessing them? Jesus is saying “I am staying the course of the

God who is unfailingly merciful, embracing children.” For Mark the Gospel writer, Jesus is welcoming all those left on the margins of humanity, excluded, isolated, abandoned, rejected, bringing all into the loving, forgiving, embrace of God’s kingdom. Jesus is staying the course all the way to the cross, hanging there alone, not abandoning God’s mercy, God’s faith and God’s promise. God is saying, “In the midst of your complex and broken relationships and intense-driven controversies, I am here in my son, to be in relationship with you. Nothing can separate us any longer.” That’s what God is doing.