

**Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost,  
October 7, 2018**

**Solemn Mass**

**By the Reverend Stephen Gerth**

*Year B, Proper 22: Genesis 2:18–24; Psalm 128; Hebrews 2:9–18\*; Mark 10:1–16\**

In the late Roman Catholic scholar Raymond Brown's short book, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections*, in remarks about the development of a celibate priesthood in the Christian West and its value for today, the late Brown wrote, "If some of the Gospel demands, such as permanent commitment, seem very difficult to us today, I find no proof that they were not very difficult in the 1st century."<sup>1</sup> Brown's words, about the demands of the gospel being difficult in the past and in our time, have stayed with me. They remain something of a touchstone for me when I think about questions presenting difficult moral and ethical choices.

For the greater part of my life, my conscience has also been haunted by many of the different verses of Scripture that I memorized while growing up Southern Baptist. Especially annoying is a verse from the

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), 26.

Second Letter to Timothy, “All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”<sup>2</sup>

Ever since the short sabbatical I had in 2009 that I used to begin to relearn New Testament Greek, I have urged people who are going to seminary to learn to read New Testament Greek. Many are the mistakes Stephen Gerth has made in the pulpit and in writing because he did not take the time to continue to learn it after leaving seminary. Even after all these years, it is not at all unusual for me to learn something about a Sunday gospel that I’ve just not noticed before.

And finally, as Father Pete Powell brought home to us in his sermon at the end of July on Jesus walking on water, the historical and cultural contexts of the New Testament matters for how we understand its narratives. I wish I knew a lot more about first-century Palestine under Roman rule and much more about the Hebrew Scriptures and Judaism of Jesus’ time.

I’m not trying to avoid the hard words, if you will, of today’s gospel. But they make me glad for the grace of

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<sup>2</sup> 2 Timothy 3:16.

being an Episcopal, Anglican, Christian. Today's gospel invites us, encourages us, to think and to take responsibility for our faith as individuals and as a community and for how we as individuals and as a community choose to live.

Now I don't think we needed to hear this morning the familiar words from the story of Adam and Eve. More on point are the words of Moses to which the Jesus refers, Deuteronomy 24:1–4. They are a little confusing.

From Deuteronomy: “When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, and he writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, and she departs out of his house, and if she goes and becomes another man's wife, and the latter husband dislikes her and writes her a bill of divorce and puts it in her hand and sends her out of his house, or if the latter husband dies, who took her to be his wife, then her former husband, who sent her away, may not take her again to be his wife, after she has been defiled; for that is an abomination before the LORD, and you shall not bring guilt upon

the land which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance.”<sup>3</sup>

Before I review this, I want you to hear the next verse that I might well use as the text for my next wedding sermon, “When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, to be happy with his wife whom he has taken”<sup>4</sup>—and I trust that God intends for his spouse to be happy with him.

The words from Deuteronomy are not about whether a man can divorce his wife, but that a man may not remarry a wife whom he has divorced and who herself has remarried, even if her second spouse has died.

If I have read this right, it is not clear that the woman cannot remarry, but that she would be “unclean”—the root Hebrew word here—if she were remarried to her first husband.

One notes that the though the text from Deuteronomy is all about the husband, Jesus is living

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<sup>3</sup> Deuteronomy 24:1–4.

<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 24:5.

in a time when Roman law, if not also Hebrew custom of his day, means that a woman can divorce her husband too. What were the practices for divorce in Palestine in Jesus' time remains an open question for students of the period.<sup>5</sup>

So alone with his disciples, Jesus says, “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her; and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.”<sup>6</sup>

Here's a detail that I picked up from the New Testament blog of the Reverend Dr. Mark Davis, pastor of St. Mark Presbyterian Church, Newport Beach, California—and which is not mentioned in any of my commentaries. He points out that the literal grammar of the verb for having unlawful intercourse is passive. So for Jesus, a person who marries one who is divorced is “adulterated by/against, her”<sup>7</sup>—or him? I'm still wondering about what that might mean.

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<sup>5</sup> Joel Marcus, *Mark 8–16*, Anchor Bible 27A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 205–07.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 10:12.

<sup>7</sup> <http://leftbehindandlovingit.blogspot.com/2012/10/legal-intended-and-permitted.html>, (accessed 2 October 2018).

Many of you know, might remember, that my own parents divorced when I was 21. Both made lifegiving second marriages. Early on, both were unlucky in the support they had from their parents for making a good marriage. I don't mean at all to be sarcastic or disrespectful, but if God could find a way to love and support David, who murdered the husband of Bathsheba, and his son Solomon, both of whom had hundreds of wives and concubines, I think God will also understand those of us who are far more ordinary.

Divorce and remarriage aren't the only hard questions Scripture raises by its contradictions and ambiguities. The world of the Old Testament and New Testament is a patriarchal world. I'm still reading through two books by Professor Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror* and *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*.<sup>8</sup> One thing I do know, you can't fix the Bible by pretending it doesn't say what it says.

This morning, I discovered that the online version of the Revised Standard Version, that comes from the University of Michigan, has the beginning of a verse,

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<sup>8</sup> Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

but not its crucial conclusion for one of these texts of terror, the story of the unnamed daughter of Jephthah.

The verse begins, “And Jephthah made a vow to the LORD, and said, ‘If thou wilt give the Ammonites into my hand.’”<sup>9</sup> Someone doing the editing for Michigan couldn’t handle the end of the verse, even though the rest of the passage makes no sense without it. The verse continues, “whoever comes forth from the doors of my house to meet me, when I return victorious from the Ammonites, shall be the Lord’s, and I will offer him up for a burnt offering.”<sup>10</sup>

But it’s not a “him” who opens the doors, but his only child, his daughter, unnamed by Scripture. After the two months passed which she asked for to “mourn her virginity . . . [Jephthah] did with her according to the vow which he had made.”<sup>11</sup> A text of terror indeed.

I have no time for intellectual dishonesty when it comes to matters of faith. Many questions do not admit of easy answers, but I trust in a God of mercy

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<sup>9</sup> Judges 11:30.

<sup>10</sup> Judges 11:31.

<sup>11</sup> Judges 11:39a.

for trying to be honestly faithful as I am able. I have no time for a Christianity that has no way to welcome divorced and remarried persons back to the table of forgiveness and fellowship.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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