

If I were to ask each of us to raise our hand if you have ever been divorced, if your parents were divorced, if a brother or sister has been divorced, or if your children have been divorced I suspect that very few folks would be sitting with their hands in their laps. Divorce has become an intricate part of our culture and of our lives. And so Jesus' words about divorce hit especially close to home; and to make matters worse, only rarely is Jesus this direct about a subject matter; most may feel that at least a part of us is convicted in his pronouncement. I have a friend who will say about her preacher's sermon, "He was doing fine, until he got to meddlin'; and then he just got personal!" Maybe that is the case here: Mark's gospel was going along fine, until Jesus started meddlin' and got personal.

Now it would be easy enough to rail against the state of marriage in our country, throw out a bunch of statistics, and denounce the institutionalization of divorce. But I am not sure that would help any of us. We who have been affected by divorce don't likely need a whole lot more guilt. We know. And so rather than getting wrapped around the axle of the problem, divorce, I would like to focus on the particular and unique relationship to which Jesus' words point. And I am speaking of a committed life-long monogamous relationship with one other person. To get at this relationship I will speak of love, and I will borrow the language of Dr. Timothy Sedgwick from his book, *The Christian Moral Life*. Dr. Sedgwick is an Episcopal priest and ethics professor, and I am deeply indebted to him for his interpretation. He speaks of three outcomes or stages of love, all on a continuum. We may think of these as deepening experiences of love, with three different Greek words for each of these "loves." Each of these words finds their way into our New Testament, and are meant to inform our understanding of that simple word: love.

The first movement is the love of "eros." Eros is the love that gives us pleasure. "Eros love" makes one happy, secure, fulfilled. This is the love that attracts us to one another. "Eros love" is the stuff of love songs. When the Temptations croon, "I've got sunshine/ on a cloudy day;/ when it's cold outside/ I've got the month of May..." the focus of "eros love" is on the self. It's all about me, so to speak. And this is a good thing. If we did not enjoy the company of another person immensely we wouldn't bother. "It is not good for the man to be alone," God posits in the opening pages of our Bible. The authors of Genesis knew; we are made to be in relationship, and we are meant to find immense pleasure and joy in our relationships.

But there is more. Eros love deepens into "phialia love," what Sedgwick calls "unitive love." This is the love that looks beyond the eros goal of pleasing the self, and seeks to make the other person in the relationship happy. Unitive love seeks to unite in order to satisfy both persons. I find joy in pleasing the other. It is no longer just about me. We have here the first inklings of covenantal relationship, where care and concern for the well-being of the other becomes significant. I bring a bouquet of wildflowers for Jennifer, not because I want to get something from her, but because they will make her smile. In unitive love we sometimes speak in terms of "completing one another." You complete me. You are my soul mate. We find that with this other person we feel whole. Our spirits shout out with joy, "At last, bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh." Unitive love is that "oneness" to which the words from Genesis point.

But there is something missing, isn't there, in both eros and unitive loves. Aren't we forgetting about someone? The deepest of loves then goes beyond to harness the love of God. This is the love of "agape," which most Christians rightly understand to be the love that surrenders oneself, that pours oneself out. We understand agape love as the love that Jesus demonstrated to humankind in his passion on the cross. Agape is the love of self-sacrifice. At least this is the language for agape love in the church. But really if we only understand agape love as simply self-sacrifice then we are missing a vital aspect of this deepest of loves. Agape

love is ultimately about new creation. Good Friday was not the endpoint of Jesus' relationship with humankind. Agape is all about the reality of resurrection, about the new life that came out of the ultimate act of love on Jesus' part. This is why we hang empty crosses in our places of worship in the Episcopal tradition. Agape love finds its fullness in the new creation which results from the pouring out of oneself. Dr. Sedgwick calls agape love "generative love," meaning the love that generates – creates something new and wonderful beyond the two parties involved.

Now I would suggest that it is this particular level of relationship to which Jesus points in our gospel reading, because it most closely mirrors our covenantal relationship with God. And perhaps our high divorce rate in this country is not because it is the easy way out (we all know better), but rather because we frequently make the fatal mistake of thinking that the goal of marriage, the goal of our most intimate relationship, the goal of our deepest covenantal relationship is eros love or unitive love. If my happiness is the only endpoint in my relationship, then when I become unhappy – which will happen – the relationship is at an end. If the only endpoint in a relationship is my capacity to make you happy, then when I fail to do so – as I inevitably will – then we are at an end. Sometimes divorce is necessary, as in the cases of abuse or addiction. But for the majority of divorces these other processes are at work. One of the great truths of marriage that I have ever heard came from a member of a clergy group, who said "Every marriage dies." Sit with that a moment. Every marriage dies. When I heard that I thought, "No. No way." But this wise man went on to say that statistically speaking about half the people will see this reality and go their separate ways, and the other half will build a REAL relationship going forward. What he meant of course was that every marriage, every committed relationship, must experience the death of all the illusions of what the relationship is "supposed to be." The goal of "only-my-happiness" must die. The goal of "only-my-making-you-happy" must die. We must understand that marriage points to something much larger than these, and that in realizing this greater love then a deeper joy and satisfaction follows. This greater love is generative love, something deeper and more like new life than it is a happiness pill.

My good friend Ron David talks of this kind of relationship in chemical terms. Ron is a scientist, so he can't help himself. He uses the examples of hydrogen and oxygen. Now hydrogen gas is highly combustible; it is the stuff of stars. And oxygen just loves to support combustion. If you want something to burn brighter and hotter, just add a little oxygen. And so if we were to combine hydrogen and oxygen we would expect to get one fiery explosion. Instead, we get water, H<sub>2</sub>O. We never would have suspected in examining the properties of either gas that wateriness would be the result of their union. I can think of no better image for generative love. In this agape love each person pours out themselves into their relationship, and something altogether surprising and life-giving results. In generative love our lives are transformed.

And we often may not even realize that we are indeed engaged in agape love. I am reminded of two of my favorite theologians, Tevia and Golde from the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*. Tevia tells Golde that he is permitting their daughter Hodel to marry the poor teacher Perchik outside of an arranged marriage because they love each other. And then Tevia shocks Golde by asking her, "Do you love me?" "Do I love you?" she asks. "After twenty-five years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow, after twenty-five years why ask of love right now?" But after a little more reflection Golde goes on, "For twenty-five years I lived with him, fought with him, starved with him. Twenty-five years my bed is his. If that's not love what is?" A marvelous question. Golde, in her laundry list of her life comes to the conclusion that something that is hers and Tevia's – but

larger than either of them combined – has been created, and it has been born out of love. Generative love.

Agape love always creates. By this we know it is God's love. And we have been given the privilege of sharing this love with one another. Think about this: God has given us the privilege of sharing God's love. It is the one and only thing that Jesus asks of us: love. "Pour out yourselves in love for God. Pour out yourselves in love for your neighbor. Pour out yourselves in love for yourself," he commands time and again. Perhaps this is why Jesus is so direct in his denouncement of divorce. If in our unions we mirror the covenantal love of God for creation then the imperative is to make that love real, and growing, and life-giving.

Yes, Jesus gets to meddlin' ... because it is personal.