

Marriage Chemistry

Proper 22, Year B (BCP) – October 7, 2018

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

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The LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

- Genesis 2:18-24

Some Pharisees came, and to test Jesus they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" He answered them, "What did Moses command you?" They said, "Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her." But Jesus said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate. - Mark 10:2-9

As you've now heard, the appointed readings from Genesis and Mark touch on marriage and divorce, respectively. Knowing that these and related matters cut close to the bone for some of us, I will seek to address them with particular sensitivity. My unlikely but congenial starting place is a modern love poem, "*Why I Love Being Married to a Chemist*," by Barbara Crooker.

Because he can still cause a reaction in me
when he talks about SN2 displacements,
amines and esters looking for receptor sites
at the base of their ketones. Because he lugs
home serious tomes like *The Journal of the American
Chemical Society* or *The Proceedings of the Society
of the Plastics Industry*, the opposite of the slim volumes
of poetry with colorful covers that fill my bookshelves.
Because once, years ago, on a Saturday before our
raucous son rang in the dawn, he was just
standing there in the bathroom, out of the shower.
I said *Honey, what's wrong?* and he said *Oh,*
I was just thinking about a molecule.
Because he taught me about sublimation, how
a solid, like ice, can change straight to a gas
without becoming liquid first. Because even
after all this time together, he can still
make me melt. ¹

I trust that we can hear the curiosity and playfulness that Barbara Crooker shares from what is presumably her own marriage. I hope we may recognize her take on the age-old notion that opposites attract.

*[His] Proceedings of the Society
of the Plastics Industry, the opposite of the slim volumes
of poetry with colorful covers that fill my bookshelves.*

The poem implies intimacy—the implied intimacy of two physical bodies and also the intimacy that transcends the body. Consider the poignant line, nothing more than a qualifying clause, toward the end: ... *even after all this time together* ...

Even after all this time together. The long road of an enduring marriage includes some thrilling landscapes! And on that same road are plenty of tedious stretches, the same-old-same-old, mile after mile, day after day, night after night. And then there are the marital intersections in the wilderness with no map and no guide. And yet, still, together.

Crooker ends her reverie romantically: *Even after all this time together, he can still make me melt.* That was the line that came to my mind and heart again in conjunction with this morning's first appointed reading, from Genesis. In the course of the Genesis narrative, the six days of creation are apparently complete. Chapter 2 of Genesis actually begins with a verse that says "*the heavens and the earth were finished.*" But the first line in today's text suggests that God's creation remained incomplete: "*The LORD God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone ...'*"

Here, in one statement, is laid bare a fundamental dilemma of our human condition: our native *alone-ness* and the complicated riddle of *the other, I and Thou*. *This is the first quality of any human being described in the Bible.* And in contrast to all the moments during creation that God *saw that it was good* ², here, for the first time, "*The LORD God said, 'It is not good...*" This *not-good alone-ness* with which this text opens is held in tension throughout the story until Adam's thrill of recognition when, for the first time, he lays eyes on Eve:

*This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh...*

If you can feel by proxy Adam's elation, maybe you also wondered if there was an intended *double entendre* in the notion of *chemistry* in Barbara Crooker's poem. Both the Genesis reading and the gospel text from Mark mention the two becoming one flesh. It's an alchemy that can and does take place between two bodies and souls, particularly when cultivated under the right conditions over time. *Even after all this time together, he can still make me melt.*

For reasons that I am unable to fathom, the Genesis reading this morning goes right up to, but does not include, the final verse of Chapter 2 of Genesis. That verse explains that "*the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.*" (Genesis 2:25)

An allusion to nakedness lies in the heart of Barbara Crooker poem, as she remembers that *Saturday*, long ago, when her husband *was just standing there in the bathroom, out of the shower*. Maybe that was nothing more than a lighthearted moment, or perhaps she wrote that with the Genesis story in mind. She may have been seeking to examine and marvel at the naked knowing that can accrue in the best of relationships in the conditions of trust and safety.

Adam's beautiful recognition of Eve in today's Genesis account takes place all too soon before the serpent enters the picture and the human condition becomes immeasurably more complex and murkier and more troubled and painful. Thereafter, more often than not, we cover our

nakedness with shame. Our intimate knowing of the other too often becomes a weapon. Our marriages or other significant commitments rupture and end in acrimony, lawyers and divorce.

Jesus draws an apparently hard line on divorce in today's Gospel text. But we should note that he is responding to Pharisees who are clearly cynical. And from the vantage of our own culture, we may also see how the Pharisees' question to Jesus is framed to emphasize the power and prerogative of *the man*. A number of commentators I reviewed suggest that Jesus' apparent prohibition on divorce here is not as concerned with the letter of the law or a moral absolute as it is with the welfare of women, who too often suffered, and who continue to suffer, due to the aggression, impulsiveness and stupidity of men. And that brings us right into the bosom of our own present cultural and political and social moment, doesn't it?

Even if you or I have never been scrutinized in any national or local spotlight, most or all of us struggle with shame or regret or anger relative to some aspect of our own sexuality and relationships, "*those things of which our conscience is afraid*," to use the language of today's collect. Some of us may wonder if we will ever heal, and if so how, from some past betrayal, act of violence or other victimization.

Relative to marriage, or partnering, and divorce, allow me to also acknowledge the many members of this parish family who are alone and who are celibate, or not, by choice, or not. By my count, twelve people were present for this morning's 9:00 a.m. mass, of whom only three are married. Those proportions, I believe it's fair to say, hold true as well for the entire parish. If not marriage and divorce, what are the experiences and questions about being, relationships and faith that are of more relevance and interest to the *majority* here in our own community of faith?

I suppose a final reason I was drawn to the poem of Barbara Crooker is that her chemist husband brings to mind the laboratories in which so much chemistry takes place. Those labs can be explosive environments, places from which the worst toxins are unleashed. They can also be the sites of miracles and breakthroughs that are a blessing to many. So it seems with the realm of our own sexuality and relationships. Frederick Buechner once wrote: "*Contrary to [the priggish] Mrs. Grundy, sex [per se] is not sin. Contrary to Hugh Hefner, it's not salvation either. Like nitroglycerin, it can be used either to blow up bridges or heal hearts.*" ³

The notion of the lab also seems pertinent to our present social milieu, in which in which so much is changing so rapidly, in which many of us are making sense of and responding, for instance, to the opportunity for same-sex marriage, both in the eyes of the state and in the eyes of our own church. Most of us here, I gather, but perhaps not all of us, view this as a breakthrough and a blessing. Many of us here will also recognize that, as with any new discovery, we all must continue, or in some cases begin, to climb a learning curve.

All of us are indirectly invited, it seems, both by today's readings and by current events, to wonder about the laboratory of our own lives, our own choices, our own relationships, our own voices. We may wonder how or where or with whom we should seek amends. Some of us may wonder about how to go about forgiving ourselves or forgiving another as we heal from some deeply personal wound. All of us can go back to the lab in hopes of finding or recovering some important connection between our bodies and our relationships and our God.

¹ From *Les Fauves*, C&R Press, 2017.

² e.g. Genesis 1:4,10,12,18,21.

³ Originally published in *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row, 1973.