

All week I've had this poem in my mind:

Everyone  
Is God speaking.  
Why not be polite and  
Listen to  
Him?<sup>1</sup>

The poet is Hafiz, who lived during the 14th century in what is now Iran. He was a practitioner of Sufism, which is a mystical tradition within Islam. What speaks to me about the poems of Hafiz—and this poem in particular—is the way he recognizes the Oneness of God in everything and everyone. Although he comes from a completely different faith tradition, he sees and testifies in his own way to the same truths seen and testified to by the Christian mystics, people like Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross. One of the ways these mystics often talked about this truth was by using the image of marriage. Teresa and John in particular spoke of the union of the Christian and Christ as a nuptial union, as marriage.

I wonder if this marital image—which is much older than Teresa and John and Hafiz—is part of the reason why the Scriptures, both Hebrew and Christian, are so concerned with marriage. There are not only numerous laws about marriage and adultery in Torah, there is also this intimate and profound justification for those laws in the story we read from Genesis. The Epistles of the New Testament frequently talk about proper and improper sexual practices and place a high value on marital fidelity or celibacy. What if the lawyers and prophets and apostles wrote so much about this not simply for the purpose of property law or maintaining purity, but because both Jews and Christians recognized marriage as a sign of the relationship that God has entered into with us?

The prophets, for example, especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel, often compare Israel to the bride of God. Hosea graphically illustrates Israel's relationship with God by marrying a prostitute and giving his own children meaningful names like “Unloved” and

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“Not-my-people.” And then, of course, there’s the Song of Solomon, an erotic poem in which two lovers pine for one another and praise each other’s beauty. The book has a long history of metaphorical interpretation as the love of God and humanity for one another.

We can’t read St. Mark’s story today without thinking about these things. Without this background, the story is simply a commandment about divorce, the justification for various Church doctrines such as annulment and excommunication; but in context, it becomes a story about what God intends for all of us, and the ways we resist and fall short of God’s intentions.

Jesus says that, although the Law allows for divorce, it was Moses’ provision for our “hardness of heart,” not a divine mandate. God’s work is to join together; separation is our work. It happens when we are unwilling or unable to participate in God’s work. For example, when the prophets use marital metaphors to describe God’s relationship with Israel, God continues to be faithful even while Israel is portrayed as faithless and adulterous. Jeremiah describes the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai, “‘a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband,’ says the LORD,” and then describes God’s continued work to renew the covenant in spite of Israel’s infidelity. (Jer 31.32).

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The implications of this seem to explain (to me, at least) why Jesus seems so harsh and strict on this particular point of Mosaic law. You’ll notice that Jesus quotes from Genesis, from the story we read today. In that story, the man and the woman are not just alike, or complementary, but the same: she is “bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh.” This is why, Genesis says, they become “one flesh:” they are One from the beginning of creation.

In the story recorded just before it, God says, “Let us create humankind in our image, according to our likeness,” and that’s what God does: “In the image of God They created

them; male and female God created them.” Each and every person is created in the image of God. In other words, each and every person is an expression of God; and because God is One, so are we also One in God from the very beginning of creation.

Divorce, then, is not about the dissolution of a marriage, but about our separating what God has created from the beginning as One: not just the divorce of one spouse from another, but of any one person from any other. Merton writes, “[I]n my soul and in your soul I find the same Christ Who is our Life, and He finds Himself in our love, and together we all find Paradise, which is the sharing of His love for His Father in the Person of Their Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Our self-separation, our “divorcing” of one another, is our self-imposed death sentence as we cut ourselves off from the God who dwells in the people around us and prevents us from finding this Paradise.

This is also, I think, why St. Mark follows this teaching on divorce with the apparently unrelated story of Jesus welcoming the little children. “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it,” he says, though it’s hard to understand what he means. I wonder if Jesus isn’t offering this vision of entering the kingdom of God—entering life, as he said last week—as an alternative to the vision of divorce and separation.

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The separateness that the disciples see and try to enforce is an illusion; divorce is an illusion. What God has joined together, no one is able to separate—but that doesn't stop us from trying, and it is in that trying that we subject ourselves to the unquenchable fire and the undying worm of Gehenna because such separation denies not only who God is, but who we are.

St. John writes, “We love because God first loved us.” Dr. James Finley, author and psychologist, says it this way: “At first it seems as if compassionate love originates with our free decision to be as compassionate as we can be... As our practice [of compassion] deepens, we come to realize that in choosing to be compassionate, we are yielding to the compassionate nature of God flowing through us...” God creates us in God's own, compassionate image to be compassionate, to love as we are loved. When we participate in that love, we are only yielding to the nature God gave us. When we resist that love, when we instead condemn and separate and divorce one another, we deny our very humanity by denying who God has created us to be and attempt to recreate ourselves in our own image. To reject love is to swim upstream, to fight a losing battle. To accept love and practice compassion is to accept our birthright; it is to recognize that to love my neighbor is the same thing as loving myself, because in God, my neighbor and I are One.

And yet, as Moses realized, sometimes divorce—whether between spouses or siblings or any other people—is sometimes necessary. Sometimes, because of our hardness of heart and our imperfect love, the relationships that should give us life instead take it. Though I may love another, they may hate or harm me. Sometimes the most compassionate response is to let go of relationships that are abusive, co-dependent, or parasitic. Sin is real, and brokenness is real, and this is why Moses made provision for divorce, because sometimes the tearing apart is healthier than the slow dying; it is better to cut off one hand and enter life maimed than it is to keep both hands and be thrown into Hell.

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In the story recorded just before it, God says, “Let us create humankind in our image, according to our likeness,” and that’s what God does: “In the image of God They created

them; male and female God created them.” Each and every person is created in the image of God. In other words, each and every person is an expression of God; and because God is One, so are we also One in God from the very beginning of creation.

Divorce, then, is not about the dissolution of a marriage, but about our separating what God has created from the beginning as One: not just the divorce of one spouse from another, but of any one person from any other. Merton writes, “[I]n my soul and in your soul I find the same Christ Who is our Life, and He finds Himself in our love, and together we all find Paradise, which is the sharing of His love for His Father in the Person of Their Spirit.”<sup>2</sup> Our self-separation, our “divorcing” of one another, is our self-imposed death sentence as we cut ourselves off from the God who dwells in the people around us and prevents us from finding this Paradise.

This is also, I think, why St. Mark follows this teaching on divorce with the apparently unrelated story of Jesus welcoming the little children. “Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it,” he says, though it’s hard to understand what he means. I wonder if Jesus isn’t offering this vision of entering the kingdom of God—entering life, as he said last week—as an alternative to the vision of divorce and separation.

It is our hardness of heart, Jesus says, that makes divorce necessary. It is our need to cut ourselves off from those who we deem to be “not one of us,” our desire to control to whom we are joined and not joined. Little children, on the other hand, have no such needs or desires or even the capability to imagine such things. They cannot change who their family is, nor even conceive of the desire to do so. Family is simply a reality, as immutable as the stars in the sky.

I wonder as I read this story if this is what Jesus is talking about as he takes these children in their arms. The disciples, attempting to “divorce” these children from him, miss the point, but Jesus knows that these children—as well as their parents and communities and even the stodgy disciples trying to stand between them—are all siblings, all unique

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<sup>2</sup> Merton, “New Seeds of Contemplation,” p 66

expressions of the One who makes us One from the very beginning of creation, and that without one another, we are not whole.

The separateness that the disciples see and try to enforce is an illusion; divorce is an illusion. What God has joined together, no one is able to separate—but that doesn't stop us from trying, and it is in that trying that we subject ourselves to the unquenchable fire and the undying worm of Gehenna because such separation denies not only who God is, but who we are.

St. John writes, “We love because God first loved us.” Dr. James Finley, author and psychologist, says it this way: “At first it seems as if compassionate love originates with our free decision to be as compassionate as we can be... As our practice [of compassion] deepens, we come to realize that in choosing to be compassionate, we are yielding to the compassionate nature of God flowing through us...” God creates us in God's own, compassionate image to be compassionate, to love as we are loved. When we participate in that love, we are only yielding to the nature God gave us. When we resist that love, when we instead condemn and separate and divorce one another, we deny our very humanity by denying who God has created us to be and attempt to recreate ourselves in our own image. To reject love is to swim upstream, to fight a losing battle. To accept love and practice compassion is to accept our birthright; it is to recognize that to love my neighbor is the same thing as loving myself, because in God, my neighbor and I are One.

And yet, as Moses realized, sometimes divorce—whether between spouses or siblings or any other people—is sometimes necessary. Sometimes, because of our hardness of heart and our imperfect love, the relationships that should give us life instead take it. Though I may love another, they may hate or harm me. Sometimes the most compassionate response is to let go of relationships that are abusive, co-dependent, or parasitic. Sin is real, and brokenness is real, and this is why Moses made provision for divorce, because sometimes the tearing apart is healthier than the slow dying; it is better to cut off one hand and enter life maimed than it is to keep both hands and be thrown into Hell.

Nevertheless, the hope remains that somehow, just as God created all humankind as One, all humankind will eventually be One again. We do not see this hope realized yet, but

we do see Jesus, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh; Jesus, in whom compassion has taken human form. Even as the political and religious leaders of his own people tested and condemned and plotted against him, he offered himself in love for them, for us. Even as he died, he prayed for forgiveness. We may be faithless, prone to separation and divorce, but he is not. If even the cross, the great certificate of our divorce, signed in blood, can be used by God as a marriage bed, then perhaps even our variously broken and sundered relationships can be the seedbeds of new love, as well. This is the only reason we can hope for healing: because although we are not able to bring life from separation and death, God is, and God does, because that is who God is.

If marriage is the image of God's love for us, then Christ is the image of who we can be—who we will be—in the perfection of God's love, when what was One in the beginning will become One again. Until then, my friend Hafiz reminds us:

Everyone  
Is God speaking.  
Why not be polite and  
Listen to  
Him?