

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως  
**Proper 22-B; 7 October 2018**  
**St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster**  
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## **Divorce and Stewardship**

### **I. Divorce**

I want to talk about two things this morning: divorce and stewardship. Can I have a groan?

Both of these are topics we often avoid in polite conversation. Both are kind of ticklish, kind of intimate. Both have this feeling of guilt floating around them, like a dark cloud. Yet both these topics are meant not to be depressing and guilt-inducing, but liberating and life-giving.

Our Gospel reading centers around a couple different discussions on divorce, so let's start there.

The law the Pharisees quote about writing one's wife a certificate of divorce has its background in a world where women were second-class citizens, whose testimony was less valuable in court than a man's. Moses required a certificate of divorce so that a jealous, abusive, or vindictive husband could not go back and accuse a woman of adultery when she tried to move on with her life after he had expelled her from his house and his care. This law was an early, early step towards gender equality and the dignity of every human being. It was meant to protect women and children and to lessen the evil of what was already a nearly impossible situation when a relationship disintegrated.

So when the Pharisees come asking their question of Jesus, what's wrong with this picture? Matthew's account of this same encounter (Mt 19) has them asking, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *any reason*?" Men are taking a law that was meant, in a man's world, to give some dignity and security to women, and twisting it around for the supposed benefit of men all over again. They are using the law as a tool of oppression and alienation rather than for liberation and reconciliation, and that's what Jesus calls them out on.

Marriage is meant to give security to both spouses. Sometimes things fall apart. Usually a legal divorce is simply the recognition of a relationship that has already ended for whatever reason.

Sometimes marriages are broken by abuse or by tragedy or by incompetence. Sometimes they are broken by accident.

But to leave one relationship in order to pursue a different one (that's what Jesus is explaining to his disciples): that is a betrayal of trust, a negation of one's own integrity. Such a departure is not beneficial to either partner in the relationship, neither the one leaving nor the one left. Both are hurt and both are losing out on the deeper promises of relationship. Both lose the opportunity to change and grow and to learn to love more deeply. What's at issue here isn't the law of Moses: what's at issue is the capacity to love and to be loved.

Jesus is saying that marriage isn't meant to be something to be exploited, something where the smart man or woman makes the minimum possible investment while extracting the maximum possible value. The point of marriage is not personal gain, and the path to happiness is not by avoiding marriage's demands.

Rather, every relationship represents an opportunity for each partner to grow, to be challenged, to be changed, and a marriage is intended to be a safe environment both parties know they will continue to be accepted. A marriage is not a 50/50 arrangement, but is one where each partner is invited to bring her or his whole self in order to experience not only the joy of encountering the image of God in the other, but to allow the image of God to become more clearly visible in one's self. So to be a good *steward* of a relationship, to plumb the depths of the riches of a relationship, is not to be looking for the easy out, but to bring our "A game" to it, to bring it our all.

## **II. Stewardship**

Ah, stewardship. I told you we would get here.

Stewardship is to nurture something that has been entrusted into your care. Like a relationship. Or a cultural heritage. Or the family business. Or a church!

When we talk about stewardship at church, we often talk about money. That's OK as far as it goes, but it's not the whole truth. When we talk about stewardship here at St. Thomas there are two things that you need to understand.

1. Stewardship is about drawing closer to God. Do you remember where Jesus talks about, how a person is unable to serve both God and money? Stewardship is about liberation from the fear and anxiety that come from seeing money as a the source of our comfort and safety and security and well-being. Money can be like a god for us, and it is for most of us a scarce resource. But the resources that make our lives whole and complete and good are not scarce: they have their source in the true and living God who makes plenty out of a little and order out of chaos. Stewardship is about becoming clear on the role of money in our lives and drawing closer to the God who is able to care for us.

2. Stewardship is about empowering the mission and ministry of our parish. What is the mission and ministry of our parish? Well, we are a church. That means the mission of St. Thomas' is the mission of God. The mission of God is to reconcile all people and all things unto God's self.

Stewardship is about us drawing closer to God. Ministry and mission is about inviting and enabling others to draw close to God, too.

Part of our mission and ministry is about nurturing relationships with one another. Look around the room! See all the different people. Each of us brings a different perspective on, a different experience of God, and we are all enriched by each one's presence. The more different and diverse the perspectives we encounter, the more truly we will come to apprehend a God who is beyond all understanding.

Part of our mission and ministry is about welcoming new people who come among us. Have you noticed that more weeks than not we have visitors here at St. Thomas'? People are walking in our doors, of their own volition, seeking God. We are engaged in God's mission when we make people welcome by helping them to find a comfortable seat, by providing them with a worship bulletin, by helping them find their way through that prayer book, by passing the peace with them, and by inviting them to coffee hour or to lunch or to other events.

Part of our mission and ministry is staring us in the face every time we walk out the doors of this building! St. Thomas' is more accessible for the students at the Holly Pointe dorm's than half of campus itself! The explosive and continuing growth of Rowan University, and our proximity to the university, indicates that God has prepared St. Thomas' and placed us here for

a reason. We have something important on offer, and we can make a positive difference in the lives of generations of students if only we will have the courage to dream the dreams of God.

### **III. Invitation**

Today St. Thomas' is beginning our pledge campaign. This week you will be receiving pledge cards in the mail, inviting you to make a commitment to the mission of God in this place, as expressed through the ministry of St. Thomas' Episcopal Church.

Those pledge cards are like certificates of divorce, officially separating you from the tyranny of money in your life and the specter of scarcity. They are a tool for you to use as you seek to draw closer to God.

Those pledge cards are also a promise and a signal that St. Thomas' can afford to continue in our common mission and ministry. The checks we write may be to the electric company and to payroll. But what those dollars are actually doing is funding ministry, creating the contexts for us to gather and to grow in our faith. Those dollars are baptizing, making music to God, mourning our dead, and creating a space where we can all eat together and enjoy encountering Jesus in one another. Those dollars are creating a safe and welcoming space where we can show hospitality to the strangers among us, and issue invitations to those who don't yet know us.

Over the next few weeks we're going to be talking about stewardship. For our campaign this year, we have three principle goals:

1. 100% participation
2. Proportional Giving
3. Giving first

I'm going to be talking about each of these things over the next few weeks. We will also have a Ministry Minute each week featuring a speaker from our excellent Stewardship Committee.

St. Thomas' is a special place: a meeting-place between the Kingdom of God and this particular place and time. I urge to consider prayerfully your giving to St. Thomas' and to declare your intentions for giving on a pledge card. You can mail in your pledge card or you can put it in the offering plate any Sunday in October or November. Only the pledge secretary and myself will

see the actual amounts you pledge, but the Vestry and Finance Committee will use the sum of the pledges to more accurately discern how God is calling us to mission and ministry in the coming year.

St. Thomas' Episcopal Church is not a museum. We are a growing, thriving church where lots of exciting things are happening. I invite you to take your place in the community of St. Thomas'.

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