

I think that this is rather ironic. We have a gospel reading speaking about divorce and vows on Valentine's weekend. Also, that a divorced woman married to a former Catholic priest is preaching about it to you today!

Our readings today focus on living out God's commandments. In the reading from the book of Sirach we're told that we have a choice – we can choose whether or not we will live out these commandments. The Psalm continues in this vein – “Happy are those who are blameless, who walk in the way of the Lord. Happy are those who keep his decrees, who seek him with their whole heart. In other words – if you want to find happiness, you'll find it in living out God's decrees.

The Gospel is taken from Matthew's version of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.” This part of the Sermon isn't full of the

“Blessed Be's”, but rather focuses on our moral actions.

I believe that the Ten Commandments are simply good common sense if you want to live in community. You don't steal, you don't murder, you don't covet your neighbor's goods and you don't commit adultery with other people's spouses! Make sense – right?

In this Gospel, Jesus is expanding our understanding of how to live in community – how to live in God's love. I don't think that most people take literally some of his directives. After all, how many one-eyed men would be walking around after the Super Bowl halftime show with Shakira and J-Lo?

You wouldn't cut off your son's or daughter's hand or arm if they got sticky fingers in a store would you? Of course not – you'd explain to them the wrongness of taking something that didn't belong to them.

It's a good thing that IRS didn't exist when Jesus walked with us - there's no telling what he'd suggest for cheating on your taxes!

However, the Christian churches did (and some still do) take literally that you shouldn't divorce.

We need to ask ourselves why Jesus would have made that statement. If we understand that women in that time were seen as property, we can understand that Jesus' concern would be for the women being tossed aside by their husbands. They would become destitute and in danger living on the streets, having no other options other than prostitution or begging. Given Jesus' heart for the poor and outcasts, it's not surprising that he would try to protect them. Jesus was always on the side of the poor and downcast!

In my case I was in a physically and psychologically abusive marriage. Once I went to my priest expecting him to tell me I was a good Catholic woman – carrying my cross well. Instead this priest looked at me and exclaimed “Are you crazy! Is this the kind of marriage you want for your daughters. If you get out now it may not be too late to alter their choices. Stunned, but still frozen in fear I stayed, but kept his words in my heart.

Several years later I realized that my husband was becoming even more unstable. I had no doubt that my daughters and I were in danger. We sought out the guidance of a counselor. She confirmed that my fears of being in danger were right and she guided me as I made my plans to leave.

Without going into the gritty details I can tell you it was a frightening 14 months that followed. After he threatened to kill all of us I got a protective order from the court.

Was it holy to step away from the vow I had made before God? I think so. Would Jesus tell me I shouldn't have divorced him? I don't think he would.

This same counselor who guided me suggested that I needed a spiritual director. She knew the perfect guy who was getting ordained in a few months. She said I would love him. Well, she was right! While my divorce was in process, Don Caron was ordained to the priesthood and assigned to serve in the parish I was working in. It wasn't long before I was sitting with that counselor telling her ‘I really do love him!’

Nine years into our friendship the bishop of Atlanta told Don that he needed to act as if Melanie was dead. A decision had to be made. We had done counseling together before this, had many discussions with each other and others about what our decision would mean. To us personally, to our families and to our church family. We came across a book by Catholic psychologists James and Evelyn Whitehead. Something they said stood out for us. “When a vow gets in the

way of becoming who God created you to be, the vow has to go.” We are called first and foremost to become who God is calling us to be.

You see, in God’s love one’s dignity is always honored. Being in relationships where your dignity is denied is not holy.

This is also true in reference to other people. When we don’t keep our baptism promises and respect the dignity of others, we fail to live in God’s love. One specific area that Jesus speaks about in this gospel is when we hold anger, grudges, resentments or ill feelings toward others. He talks about us not coming to the altar when our brother or sister holds something against us, or we them. He said to first reconcile then return to the altar.

There was a priest in Atlanta who had spent some time ministering in Africa where the practice was centered on a special communal plant. This plant was potted and small enough to carry. It went from home to home in the village. This was done during the waiting period for the priest. You see there weren’t enough priests for each village to have their own. Due to the distances and the number of villages, the priest only arrived every six months to celebrate the Eucharist.

The sticking point was that the household receiving the plant couldn’t accept it unless they were reconciled with every other person in the community. This practice was taken so seriously that if the entire village wasn’t reconciled as one body, they couldn’t celebrate the Eucharist when the priest finally arrived. They would have to wait another six months while they worked out their issues.

Imagine what it would look like if every person coming to the altar had to be reconciled with everyone they knew before they could receive communion. Given the divisions within our country today, would anyone be able to receive?

However, I don’t believe we should take this literally either. While I certainly do believe in reconciliation and making amends to those we have hurt and failed to honor their dignity I believe there is something healing in taking communion. Not working toward healing is not living in God’s love.

As Paul states in the Epistle reading today - 3:3 For as long as there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations - in other words, when we act out of our own egos and not out of God’s love.

We can begin living in God’s love when we work at recognizing that we’re called by our Baptism promises to “Respect the dignity of every living person.”

Another priest that I know was a Franciscan. His family lived in the parish I worked in in the Catholic Church. His name was Fr. Jude, but I affectionately called him “Fr. What-a-Waste because he was so good looking!

When Fr. Jude came to visit his family he usually preached one or two services for our parish. On one occasion he shared that in their monastery that past year, a priest from Japan moved in. Every time they encountered this priest he would put his hands together like in prayer and bow to them. Awkwardly, they responded in same. However, after about six months, one priest said to him, “You don’t have to bow to me.” The young priest looked confused and then he responded: “I don’t bow to you – I bow to the Christ/God within you.”

I have found that by placing my focus on the fact that Christ dwells within all persons and that I am called to live the vow I made to respect the dignity of all persons, living in God’s love, enables me to do better at living in God’s love and being God’s love.

May you go through this week having received who you are and recognizing the Christ/God in all the people you encounter. Amen.