

## THAT WE NOT BE ALONE

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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." (Genesis 2:18)*

When I was growing up one of the sacred rituals of childhood was Saturday morning cartoons on TV. The time was inviolable. The only interruptions would be the commercials, many of which I remember being overly long ads for record albums. It was the repetition of these record commercials that introduced me to the distinctive crooning of Bobby Vinton, a singing sensation of the 1960s. Vinton's original hits and cover versions included *Blue Velvet*, *Blue on Blue*, *Roses are Red*, and most memorable of all, *Mr. Lonely*. "Lonely, I'm Mr. Lonely" was the first line. I recall wondering how anyone could be lonely with *The Bugs Bunny/Road Runner Hour* for company.

In the late 1950s Bobby Vinton had been in the army, apparently stationed abroad and feeling particularly cut off from everyone who was familiar. Thus he began working on a ballad that expressed the ordeal of a lonely soldier. What follows is the first verse, and let me assure you I will read the lyrics, not sing them. Why? Because I cannot sing as well or as high as Bobby Vinton once could. Also, more importantly, preachers should never sing from the pulpit. From time to time I teach a preaching class over at General Seminary, and one of the cardinal rules I impart to the kids is never to sing any part of their sermons. "If you look down at your manuscript and see a note to yourself that says, 'sing this,' step away from the pulpit," I warn. "It's going to play much better in your head than it will sound in the ears of your long-suffering listeners." But I digress. Here's the first verse of Mr. Lonely; let the music be imagined rather than heard:

Lonely, I'm Mr. Lonely.  
I have nobody for my own.  
Now I'm so lonely, I'm Mr. Lonely.  
Wish I had someone to call on the phone.

And the third verse goes like this:

Letters, never a letter.  
I get no letters in the mail.  
I've been forgotten, yes, forgotten.  
Oh, how I wonder, how is it I failed?

At some point in the past week, while delving into today's Scripture readings and working toward a sermon, Bobby Vinton's song, *Mr. Lonely*, began running on a continuous loop in my mind. In the passage from Genesis, we go to the Garden of Eden and meet the first man, Adam. Actually, he isn't yet named Adam, but we all know what's coming, so let's drop the pretense and just call him Adam. Call him Mr. Lonely. Adam is lonely. Mind you now, the text is silent as to whether or not Adam sang of his plight, but God notices nonetheless that Adam is alone. *The Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone."* God did not intend for Adam to suffer in isolation, so the story goes that the creator of all things creates more things – living things: animals of the field, birds of the air, puppies, kittens, bunnies, road runners, even coyotes. Adam has the privilege of naming them all, yet no matter how cute or furry or cuddly, none is able to provide the companionship of an equal. Thus, the Lord God causes a deep sleep to fall over Adam. God removes one of Adam's ribs, and from it forms Eve, the first woman. Adam is delighted. "*This at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,*" he declares. This at last is someone to call his own.

So it is that God desired for Adam and Eve to enjoy deep communion with each other, and deep communion with God himself. God's intention was that they all be fully present with and for each other in the garden. How does it go? Not well, so the story goes. Adam and Eve eat the one thing God told them not to eat, then blame each other, and lose the life of paradise because of it. East of Eden is a tale of such family dysfunction, including murder and mayhem, that God comes to regret starting the whole human experiment. Indeed, the sad song plays on in a continuous loop, generation after generation.

It was playing on in Jesus' day. In today's reading from the Gospel of Mark (10:2-9), some Pharisees came to Jesus, and to test him they asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" The question was a trap. Anytime the Pharisees asked Jesus a public question, you can be sure they had ulterior motives. They were setting a trap. This brings me back to *The Bugs Bunny/Road Runner Hour*. Wile E. Coyote was forever setting elaborate traps to catch the speedy Road Runner. Most of the traps involved cases of TNT, catapults, or jet-propelled roller skates that the Coyote procured from a mythical mail-order company called the Acme Corporation. The devices never worked, and left the Coyote holding an exploding stick of dynamite, or squashed beneath a huge boulder. Or the Coyote would walk off the edge of a cliff, and proceed some distance out into mid-air without falling. Only when he looked down and realized that he had no ground beneath his feet would he wave goodbye, fall to the ground far below, and disappear into a little puff of dust. But the Coyote would always be back the next day with a new trap to ensnare the Road Runner.

So it is today: the Pharisees are back with a new trap in hopes of catching Jesus. The trap involved the question of divorce. Scholars of antiquity generally agree that in the time and place of Jesus, divorce was a fairly common practice. Also the laws governing divorce clearly favored men. Lots of men were obtaining frivolous divorces. Yet at the same time they were all horrified that King Herod had divorced his wife to marry Herodias, the wife of his half-brother. John the Baptist had lost his head when he dared to denounce the situation. So the Pharisees, in the interest of getting rid of Jesus, were hoping they might lure him into condemning divorce with equal vigor, perhaps even mentioning Herod and Herodias by name. Or, if Jesus went soft on divorce, they could charge him with trivializing the Jewish ideal of marriage. It was a scheme straight from the Acme Corporation of mail order traps.

Jesus didn't fall into the Pharisees' trap. He neither relaxed the law, nor denied the inability of the human heart to fulfill the law. His answer was in two parts. First he asked them what Moses commanded. 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." It's interesting to note that Jesus didn't criticize Moses for writing this particular commandment. Divorce happens not because Moses wrote a commandment allowing it, but because the human heart, hardened by sin, can get to a point in marriage where divorce is the lesser of two evils. Divorce is the result of sin, not the sin itself. Indeed, too many people, already burdened with the pain of a failed marriage, have had their guilt made even heavier to bear by the notion that further sin lies in their obtaining a divorce. Not so, according to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Next, Jesus appealed to the same reading we heard today in the Book of Genesis. The passage articulates the traditional view of God's original intention for marriage. The man and woman, each possessing an incomplete piece of what it means to be made in God's image, are joined together and become one flesh. In doing so they present to the other a portion of God's image that neither possesses alone. Marriage is a (minor) sacrament because men and women open a window for each other into a more complete image of God. That's the traditional take on how it was supposed to work in the Garden.

But here we are, outside the garden, unable to gain reentry. Why not? Well, at the heart of Christianity is this little thing called original sin. What the immensely unpopular and widely misunderstood doctrine of original sin tries to teach is simply this: we cannot not sin. All have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). All hearts grow hard and we find ourselves incapable of relating to each other free from sin. Thus, even in the marriage relationship all the good intentions,

all the moral effort, and all the force of human will cannot overcome the reality of our sinfulness. We live in a sin-filled, broken world where human hearts are hard, human relationships fail, and people are left by themselves, singing along with Bobby Vinton.

Let me tell you something: if I didn't know better, I'd suspect that today's readings about marriage and divorce came straight from the Acme Corporation of homiletical traps. Think about it. On any given Sunday at Grace Church we have people who may be going through a divorce right now, and what they don't need is more pain and guilt heaped upon pain and guilt. We have people who have suffered a divorce in the past. We have people whose parents' divorce still hurts. We have people who would want to marry, but have never met the right person and are losing hope. We have gay and lesbian spouses who do not recognize their love in any traditional interpretation of today's readings. At some point, in the midst of whatever pulpit gymnastics I can manage, I fear I will look down and see that I have no ground beneath my feet, or that a lit stick of dynamite is about to go off in my hand. It's a trap! We can admire Jesus, the Road Runner, who managed to avoid the Pharisees' snare. Was he merely being an artful dodger who speeds on his way unscathed?

I think not. Marriage, divorce, and original sin are all too much to bear in one day. Most likely, Jesus knew as he spoke with his disciples that it was too much for them to comprehend in one sitting. Therefore he did something to cut through the hurt and resulting adult cynicism associated with these readings. He took a child in his lap and said, "*Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.*" It's as if he were saying that the way back to Eden entails, in part, simplicity. Let's remember the simplicity of what God intended from the beginning. Let's dial things back before all the transgressions, all the commandments, all the hurt, and all the hardness of heart and reconnect with the simplicity of what God desires for us: that we not be alone, that everyone has the possibility of enjoying communion and connection with others and with God. It's not that God is trying to get everyone married. Again, God simply desires that we not be alone. To this end we offer the community of the church, flawed and fragile though it may be at times. Yet the promise of Jesus is that when two or three gather in his name, his Spirit is in the midst of us. His invitation to receive the kingdom of God as a little child and enter it is always before us.

Let me tell you about two people who received and entered the kingdom of God with childlike simplicity. The first was the longstanding rector whom I followed at the church I served before coming here. Bob was a saintly priest who as a young man had graduated from the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. He was a sailor, away from home and desperately lonely. Then one Sunday he attended the worship service offered aboard his ship. When the chaplain read the words from the Book of Common Prayer that Bob had heard on countless Sundays growing up, "I knew I was home," is how he described it. He knew he could be home wherever and whenever the church gathered. The experience sent his life in a new direction.

The second was a little boy named Charlie, also at the church I served before coming here. It was Maundy Thursday, about two minutes before the evening service was to begin. Attendance was thin. Just a sprinkling of people sat in the back pews. Then the doors of the narthex opened, and in burst Charlie, perhaps 7-years old at the time, literally pulling his mother and sister with him. Charlie blew past the usher, looked toward the front of the church, and announced to his mother loud enough for all to hear, "Hurry up! We can still get the good seats!" Throughout the service Charlie's face beamed from the front pew, as if he were occupying a luxury box at the Super Bowl.

Both Bob and Charlie, each in his own way, found communion and fellowship by entering the kingdom of God with the eagerness of a child. Jesus said, "*Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.*"