

The first wedding I celebrated as a priest was that of my younger brother – thirteen years ago in Northern Virginia. That was one wedding in which the priest was as nervous as the bride and groom! The wedding rehearsal was a bit chaotic, as I wasn't too sure what I was doing and then there was this wedding coordinator who, whenever I made a suggestion, would shout: "That's not how Monsignor does it!" I asked my brother who this woman was and he said, "I think Boris Yeltsin's mother."

In the end, it all worked out and they are happily married with three young children. Jesus Christ has always been central both prior to marriage and throughout their marriage as they have faithfully attended Mass. That's not to say everything is perfect, as my brother sent me an email concerning something my 3rd grade niece said. When I am with the family for vacations and what have you, I celebrate Mass with the entire family. A few weeks back, after taking the kids to Mass on a Sunday morning, my brother told his kids that their uncle Patrick may be in that evening to which my niece replied, "Oh no, not more church!"

Then there are those marriages that do not work out and end in divorce and have to hear these painful words that come from the lips of Jesus. As priests, we are often compelled to preach difficult issues. However, we are also obligated to teach and I would say in today's gospel we definitely have a teachable moment in which I hope to clarify the sting of Jesus' words.

Jesus states that Moses allowed divorce because of the *coldness of their hearts*. What he means by this is that God was not part of their marriages and that the men were simply discarding one wife for another. There were no laws governing divorce, so Moses was attempting to rein it in a bit and put some conditions out there before one could divorce.

What he proposed dealt only for the man, as the women had very little say. He wrote that one could only divorce the wife "for something indecent." There were two schools of thought that debated what Moses meant by "something indecent" with one saying he meant only adultery and the other argued a more liberal definition.

The liberals believed "something indecent" could pretty much be anything the husband decided: He could divorce if she served spoiled food; was caught talking to a stranger or speaking ill of the husband – one could divorce for the most trivial reasons and this was the prevailing practice at the time of Jesus.

In asking Jesus, they were trying to set him up with a trap. If he personally spoke against divorce there would be the risk of angering Herod, who had divorced and remarried. If he said something that would contradict the Law of Moses, he could be charged with heresy. What is he to do?

To me, it is like Jesus is in a poker game and they appear to have a much better hand, but then he pushes all the chips into the pile and calls them: "You go back to Moses, well I go back to the very beginning with God." Who has more authority on this issue, God or Moses?

He is pointing out that God has always been intrinsic to marriage from the very start – It was meant to be sacred. The first covenant that God made was that of marriage and the essence of this is always to be love. True love implies equality of between the man and the woman. He points out that from the rib came from Adam (who prior to this was not male, but simply represented humanity), so how can you say Adam, one side, has more value than his other half, Eve? (And it is through God, in marriage, that the two become one once again.)

By denying a man's right to divorce, Jesus places husband and wives on equal footing. You see, his harsh words were really an indictment of the males, who were discarding their wives as things and who had divorced God from it altogether. You see the context of his words concerned the dignity, equality and sacredness of every human being – especially in regard to the treatment of woman.

Are there marriages that God may have not called together? Of course, for God would not call someone to an abusive relationship or what have you. What of the children from such a marriage? They are always the will of God and are proof that God can bring life and love from anything. By their very existence, it was the will of God that they be born for a purpose, regardless of the situation of their parents.

From the rights of women, Jesus then turns to the rights of children. Children had no rights and were not really seen as fully human – more like pieces of property. Jesus turns this upside down and not only defends them, but shocks everyone that to be saved we must come to Jesus as children.

Parents, on this day of your children's baptism, you will bring your children to Jesus and it is your responsibility that you will continue do so throughout their lives. And it is my hope that when their time on this earth comes to an end, they will return to Jesus as children.