

It's ironic that this Gospel comes up on the weekend Elizabeth Taylor is walking down the aisle for the eighth time. When Zsa Zsa Gabor got married for the eighth time in 1986, she placed the wedding band on the finger of her new husband, Prince Frederick von Anhalt. And she said, "I give you this ring which has no beginning. . . and I really don't know when the end is coming." "Anhalt," incidentally, is a German word meaning "stop".

The Catholic Church teaches that marriage is permanent. That teaching brings joy and affirmation to good marriages, but it can also bring guilt and confusion to the divorced. Divorce is never easy. Some initiate divorce literally to preserve their sanity or their life. Others are divorced against their will. They'd prefer to stay married but suddenly find themselves rejected by their spouse and--seemingly--by the Church ~~all at once~~. The Church's challenge is to balance the value of marriage with compassion for those hurt by divorce.

Marriage is ~~such~~ a big deal for us largely because of this Gospel. In Mark, Jesus' condemnation of divorce is undiluted. By the time we turn to Matthew or 1 Corinthians the teaching lightens up a bit. But here Jesus talks in absolutes: "Let no one separate what God has joined."

The Pharisees were trying to trick Jesus again. They knew that in Deuteronomy, Moses allowed divorce. They knew Jesus didn't like it. They knew that Herod had divorce up and down his family tree. They taunted Jesus: "Moses allowed divorce." But never play Bible trivia with Jesus. He quotes a passage from Genesis that says the two become one flesh, and one flesh cannot be divided.

It's a controversial statement. We want to ask Jesus, "Are you sure about that? Aren't there some occasions when divorce is not only permitted but also smart?" And that's what the disciples did. When they get home they ask him, "Are you sure about that?" It makes me wonder if some of them were divorced.

We believe there's a key sentence for understanding this teaching. Jesus says, "Let no one separate what God has joined." You might say there are two kinds of marriages: those God has joined and those God has not. On the wedding day, we assume the best, but later years may reveal the worst. This is why some people can receive an annulment after they divorce. In hindsight we say we did what we thought was right, but now it's clear that this couple was not joined by God. Can every divorced couple get an annulment? No. Sometimes we figure out the marriage was joined by God. Can divorced people go to communion? Of course they can. But if they remarry outside the Church we ask them to abstain. That's why we offer annulments: They proclaim that the first marriage is no longer binding, and the parties are free to marry in the Church.

If you or anyone you know is not receiving communion in our Church, please call. We'll do everything to help. Christian marriage contributes to our Church and to society. We'll do all we can to affirm it where it does exist and annul it where it ~~did~~ not.