

In 1487, a treatise on witchcraft called *Malleus Maleficarum* was released from the University of Cologne. It was written and published by two Dominican clergymen and it endorsed the detection and extermination of witches. To support such a dramatic action, the writer of the document developed a detailed legal and theological theories.

They used as part of their theological justification the passage we have today from Genesis. In a section that outlines women as the “weaker sex” when it comes to intellect, and hence more susceptible to fall prey to the devil’s temptations, they offer the following description of women:

“But the natural reason is that she is more carnal than a man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations. And it should be noted that there was a defect in the formation of the first woman, since she was formed from a bent rib, that is, a rib of the breast, which is bent as it were in a contrary direction to a man. And since through this defect she is an imperfect animal, she always deceives.”¹

The thing about this document, it was used to persecute women who were identified as witches, which tended to be women who were smarter than average, or wittier than average, or more smart alecky, or more creative, or more thoughtful than average. Like most of the women here, really. And after the Bible, the *Malleus Maleficarum* was next the bestselling writing for 200 years.

Generally, I like to start off my sermons with something funny, but this is definitely not funny.

And that particular interpretation of today’s reading is wrong on many levels.

And, actually, where the funny is in this is a delightful story from scripture.

At this point in the early pages of Genesis, we have had the first, majestic, poetic and elegant description of creation. In that telling, God worked each day, breathing life into a formless void, and

1. ¹ James Sprenger and Henry Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, Section 1, Question VI (1486 CE) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/pag/mml/>.

then each day, speaking another aspect of creation into existence. After each effort, God looked at what had been created and claimed it as good. Our passage today, though, comes from the second creation story, a very different account which adds to the richness of our picture of God.

In this story, God is not a majestic, far-off, transcendent power, breathing and speaking life. In this story, God is in the world, walking around, experimenting with creation, capable of being surprised, getting into the dirt in the act of making life. God forms man, *adam*, from the dust of the ground, *adamah*. This first human, and human is a good descriptor, because it comes from the Latin word that also forms the root of hummus, which means earth, is from the very ground and soil which is itself the substance of the world.

God looks at this human and sees a problem while at the same time identifying a possible solution, saying, “It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a helper as his partner.

God then proceeds to fashion from the ground every animal of the field and every bird of the air. Then God brings them to the human to name. Naming in ancient times was a critical act, and in this way, the human participates with God in creation. Names are given, but among all that animal and bird life that is created, no helper-partner is found.

Just picture God making an animal and bringing it to Adam. Adam says, “I call that cow, but I don’t think that’s my partner.

So God makes another animal and brings it to Adam, and Adam says, “I call that giraffe, but no, not my partner.”

So God makes a bird, and Adam says, “I call that a robin, but definitely not my partner.”

God tries again and some may like to imagine that Adam says, “I call that dog.” Then Adam thinks for a long time, but ends up saying, “No, not my partner.”

Finally, seeing this route is not providing the solution to the problem, God puts Adam into a deep sleep, takes a rib, or really, his side, and that portion he uses to fashion woman. God brings her to Adam and Adam recognizes, at last, his helper-partner.

The original text uses a phrase for this helper-partner and that phrase is used nowhere else in the Old Testament beyond the two uses in our passage. But the two words used which comprise the phrase *are* used in other places.

Helper is an accurate translation, but the word in the original language has a stronger sense than that. When we think of a helper, we think more of an assistant, someone who has less knowledge, less skills or less experience. A child might help their parent in the kitchen or out in the yard. But the word here that gets translated “helper” in the many other uses in the Old Testament is used to describe the ways God helps humans.

“The God of my father was my help, and delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh.” Ex 18.4

“There is none like God... who rides through the heavens to your help, majestic through the skies.” Dt 33:26

“Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and shield.”

In all these instances, God provides help that is vital to a humanity in great need. It’s a help without which humankind would be unprotected and vulnerable.

The other word in the helper-partner phrase literally means, “as in front of him.” It’s a word that can mean equal to and sometimes has the meaning of something that outweighs or even surpasses.

The two in this creation story are particularly made for each other, made to supply what the other needs. These humans are made to live in relationship with one another and one feels joy in Adam’s words as he says, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...”

God's intention is clearly that humans are better together, whether that relationship is one of marriage, family or friendship.

But in Genesis, we quickly hear relationships break down. The relationship the two have with one another, and the relationship that together they have with God. In the very next verses, we hear about how they disobey God and breach the boundaries God has set for them. There was one thing God had told them not to do, and that's the thing, that in the freedom of their own will, they chose to do. And then when caught, they quickly moved to deflect responsibility, as the man said, "She made me do it," and the woman said, "the serpent made me do it."

God intends us to be in relationship with one another, but in a broken and sinful world, and in the ways we experience that brokenness and sinfulness in our own lives, relationships break down. We hurt others, we are hurt by others.

That's what Jesus addresses in our gospel lesson.

This passage on divorce can be hard for us to hear. I imagine most of us, if not all of us, have been touched by divorce in some way or another. Many of you know that I was divorced when I was younger. At 29, I went through divorce and experienced all the anxiety, grief and guilt that go along with the breakdown of a relationship that is supposed to be lifelong. I also grew up in a family tested by divorce. Not only did I experience the trauma of my parents' divorce when I was just seven, their divorce and my mother's subsequent remarriage meant that my mother was excommunicated from the Catholic church. She never returned to the church on her own after that, and we kids went to church by ourselves, except when we snuck off to the Casey's equivalent for an hour, instead of going to church.

The Pharisees are testing Jesus again. This time their question is, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

Which is kind of an odd question, because they knew, Jesus knew, and the crowd knew that it was indeed lawful. The particulars of that law are laid out in Deuteronomy 24 which says that if a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, he may give her a certificate of divorce and send her out of his house.

Women were the property of their fathers until they married, when they became the property of their husbands. Divorce meant that the woman was adrift in a patriarchal society, stripped of most of her rights, with few options left to her beyond begging or prostitution.

Inside the house, after the disciples asked him further about the matter, Jesus goes on to say that a man who divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery against her, and likewise, a woman who divorces her husband and marries another commits adultery.

Jesus comments here are radical in two ways. First, he presents a level of equality that would have been unheard of at the time. Among Jews, only men could seek a certificate of divorce. Jesus' presumes equality of access and equality of consequence, for men and for women. Second, in combination with his response to the Pharisees, he is demanding a radical purity of heart from those who would marry.

Jesus' words are challenging, and they are deeply rooted in specific cultural circumstances of the day. But I believe these words of Jesus have importance for us today.

Because it is as true now as it was then that God intends us for relationship with others and that God calls us into those relationships. It's also true that God's intention for our relationships is that they would lift up and care for the most vulnerable among us. I don't think we would want it any other way. I don't think we would want a God who would qualify our human relationships, saying, in effect, "...sure, give it your best shot, but it's fine if you fail each other." I don't think we want a God who thinks we

need “starter” marriages. I don’t think we want a God who leaves us alone in the midst of our inability to love and care for each other in the way we wish we could, in the way we know we are called to.

We don’t want... and we don’t have a God who offers such equivocating, waffling, pussyfooting, half-hearted intentions. Am I right?

Instead we have a God who has created us for relationship, all of us, with God and with each other—in marriage, through families, through friendships. Amen?

We have a God who opens our hearts to those relationships, again and again. Amen?

We have a God who has shown us through God’s own unconditional, unequivocal, unmerited love for us, a way into loving others with forgiveness, acceptance and tolerance. A way that is greater than our own limited ability to love, a way that sees beyond our own needs, worries and fears. Amen?

But perhaps most importantly, as we hear these words in the midst of whatever struggles we have faced or are facing in our relationships, we have a God, who in Jesus Christ redeems us. We have a God who, when we fail, fall short and run right up against our own weaknesses, offers us boundless, amazing and unending grace. A grace that allows us to love again, try again, reach out again—even when such a thing seems, at the time, utterly impossible. Amen?

God calls us into relationship. God’s love for us shows us how to love in those relationships. And God’s grace restores us when we fail in those relationships—which, to varying degrees, we will inevitably do.

We are made for one another. Thanks be to God.