

Building a cathedral

My colleague Rhonda Mayhood Lee [wrote this last week a Jesuit review](#).ⁱ

I have a daughter. Like every parent, I could tell you endless stories about her. How she started climbing before she could walk. How she has always loved to play hide and seek, although until recently, she was the worst hider ever. Like every child, my daughter is a gift. She was born 13 years into my marriage, when my husband and I were in our 40s, had resigned ourselves to the fact that we were not going to conceive a child and had decided not to adopt. But at first, her life was a hard gift to accept. That is because she is my husband's daughter with another woman.

Her title was *How I learned to raise the child from my husband's affair*. When Rhonda's life changed in an instant, and now included both a child and another woman, she was as challenged by it as any of us might be. Being a priest didn't buffer her from the greatest challenges of life, nor did it give her any superhuman powers of forgiveness. If anything, it was the weekly practice and devotion of the Eucharist that gave her the strength and the language of faith to put one foot in front of the other.

But by choosing to forgive, to devoting herself to the healing of the whole family and to making sure that the child grew to know that she was loved unconditionally as a child of God, Rhonda and her husband created something holy amidst great pain.

In their town-hall interviews, our Bishop candidates were each asked, "What do you find to be the hardest thing to preach about?" One candidate thought for a moment and said that he found the passages about divorce to be some of the most difficult. Jesus sounds pretty severe when he speaks of divorce, which seems to stand in contrast to the pastoral realities of what happens when a marriage relationship dissolves into something that is unhealthy.

Now, I'm not preaching about divorce specifically, but I want to want to pick up that thread to get to the Jesus' larger message.

Jesus seems to be saying that a marriage relationship is more than the piece of paper signed by the relevant authorities. (Just so you know where I'm going, I'm using marriage as an example of the wider meaning of the covenants that bind us all together.) Jesus says: The law says that a marriage can be dissolved, but I say that it can't. Not the way that you think. A marriage contract, yes, that can go, but the bonds of commitment and mutual respect (what we would call fidelity) may change over time and even take on a very different set of obligations, but will always entail connection grounded in a lifelong covenant. Even if the marriage itself is too painful to hold together, which I know well can happen.

We might hear this and assume that Jesus is adding a new layer of clarification to an existing law, but that just brings us back to the law itself. In this wider passage, Jesus is telling us to take all our relationships far more seriously than we already do.

Jesus isn't clarifying the law. He is describing an architecture of human relationship based on forgiveness and fidelity, in which no human being ceases to be deserving of our love and respect, in which no human being, no matter how much pain they've caused or how much they remind us of our vulnerability, can be regarded as disposable. Rhonda's story gives us an image of what that looks like in practice, how something holy and enduring can be built upon the ashes of a relationship that many of us might consider beyond redemption.

Imagine what a cathedral looks like. Architecturally, they can look like anything, but a cathedral is essentially a church that anchors a diocese, and is typically located in the center of cities. It's where the Bishop is based, and it can be the focus of a ministry that is typically broader and more public than most parish churches. But the main thing I want you to think about is how visible a cathedral is, how it can be a sign in the center of a city that points to a more eternal reality. Perhaps it's nestled between a banking tower and a government plaza, perhaps it's across the street from a public square. A cathedral offers a visible presence of God at the great crossroads of public and private life. A cathedral is built to be a catalyst for the transformation of the world.

I want you to join me in building a cathedral. I'm not asking you to reach for your wallets and go searching for a plot of land. This will involve no real estate transactions, no capital campaigns, and no construction managers. The materials of this cathedral are not stone or brick or marble or slate, and the workmen are not craftsmen or builders or artisans. No, we are each the workmen and women, and our task is to follow the plan that Jesus offers, detailing that architecture of human relationship based on fidelity and forgiveness. The materials are truth and forthrightness (as Jesus says, let your word be clearly yes, or no: no euphemism, no manipulation, for those are tools of destruction and sabotage). The materials for this cathedral are nonviolent and respectful speech, whether in person, whether behind the back, or on line. The materials are vision and eyesight that seek the face of God, rather than exploit the weakness of others. The materials for this cathedral are transformed hearts, and an aversion to any behavior that would diminish another human being.

Paul writes to the Corinthians that if there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, then you are not ready for the great gift that God has to offer. Jesus tell us that our quarrelsome actions convict us, but so do our spiteful words and our embittered thoughts. One of the things that is most heartbreaking about the moment in which we live is that we speak to one another and about one another in ways that are just awful. Civility and holiness are not the same thing, but they are both rooted in grace. Without civility, I cannot imagine the possibility of holiness. Consider what Jesus tells us:

You've heard it said that you shall not murder. But if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment, if you insult a brother or a sister, if you say, to them, "you fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire. You know not to commit adultery, but I say that if you even look lustfully at another then you have already committed the sin in your heart.

It sounds at first blush that Jesus is adding new dimensions of liability to the law. What I really think he is doing is deepening our sense of fidelity to one another, that we might see and regard every human being as a child and creation of God.

What you say, and how you see things is who you become: John O'Donahue writes that "it is a startling truth that how you see and what you see will determine how and who you will be."ⁱⁱ We probably thought it was the other way around. So if you look at another human being disdainfully, of with condescension, or with anger, or with lust, guess what? You are deciding and declaring something about yourself.

Do we as Christians have the courage to build something different in the midst of troubled times? Are we willing to commit ourselves to a more life-giving way of seeing, to a more holy and gracious way of speaking? Can we be brave enough to look at this broken world, and the tender places in our own lives, with compassion and forgiveness and grace?

Jesus wasn't adding amendments to the law as it was written. He was giving us the blueprints to a cathedral, a shining structure in which our relationships with God and with one another could be nurtured and celebrated. The gift we have been given is the cross. The cross calls us to a lifetime of humility, of forgiveness and grace, and gives our lives a greater meaning than anything the world can give. Our responsibility is to use that gift to build something holy, something enduring, something for all the world to see.

The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, The 6th Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, February 12, 2017, St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina

I invite you to follow me on twitter (@bernardjowens).

ⁱ Rhonda Mawhood Lee, *How I Learned to Love and Raise the Child from my Husband's Affair*, America: The Jesuit Review

ⁱⁱ John O'Donahue, *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, p. 62