

## 27-OT-B-2021

OK... I see how it is... Let's let the married guy preach on that "divorce Gospel." But it's not a divorce Gospel - it's a Marriage Gospel.

As we heard in the first reading, shortly after God created humanity, God instituted marriage. From the beginning, God intended marriage to be a lifelong commitment, and his displeasure with divorce was always clear. The prophet Malachi said it right: "For I hate divorce, says the LORD, the God of Israel." (Malachi 2:16). I think it's safe to say that nobody loves divorce. Maybe a few lawyers.

Even so, corruption infiltrated the institution of marriage even in ancient Israel. Israel had difficulty keeping God's law, so the Mosaic Law made concessions for divorce and remarriage. The Israelites saw divorce as a way to dissolve a marriage and enable the spouses to remarry others.

And it wasn't just them. For most of human history, marriage and family have been a mess. After World War II there were some unusual decades when the Christian model of the family flourished in America. But then we surrendered to sexual ideologies that go back to Freud and Marx and other thinkers.

Going back even further, marriage and family were a mess during the lifetime of Jesus. That makes the teaching of Jesus on marriage and family all the more relevant to us today, because the attitudes toward marriage and family life back then were quite similar to people's attitudes today.

The difficulty in keeping the covenant of marriage is not new. But Jesus re-established the permanence of marriage among his followers. He raised Christian marriage to the level of a sacrament and taught that sacramental marriages cannot be dissolved through divorce.

The Church is certainly a countercultural voice when it talks about the proper and improper use of our sexual powers. And the more I teach like this, the more I turn off a lot of people in our highly secularized culture.

But the Church needs to continue to be clear, to be confident, and to be bold. Not aggressive. Not judgmental. But always proposing this form of human sexuality that has roots in the Bible itself, and also in our great philosophical tradition that was taken for granted by most of western civilization up until very recent years. I think we should declare that with confidence. Always proposing it with love, never imposing it or never coming across in a judgmental way.

Ever since Saint Paul, it's been true that the Church assimilates what it can from the culture, and it resists what it must from the culture. The Holy Spirit leads the Church to know when to assimilate and when to resist.

The Church is meant to radiate the style and the substance of Jesus. The Church holds to the teachings of Jesus and doesn't advocate or approve of behavior that does not follow what God had in mind from the beginning. The Catholic form of marriage ensures that God isn't left out of the picture. Catholic teaching remains faithful to Jesus' teaching. The Church right now has hunkered down in the midst of a culture that has turned very dysfunctional, and the Church is holding to its teaching.

You know, it's easy to preach on this Gospel at a Mass when the church has a couple celebrating 60 years together, like we had a couple of weeks ago, and we will have again next month. It's easy to speak about the covenant of marriage when you look into the eyes of partners who know the size of each other's secret regret and the shape of their private dreams. It's easy to preach these passages with conviction when you are speaking to people who have walked together, facing the same direction, staring down their demons and holding tight to their blessings. They don't flinch when a preacher tosses out words like "sacrament", and "covenant" and "commitment". These are couples who have struggled and fallen but have stood back up to face more trials and temptations. But whatever the reasons, for these men and women, two really did become one. And these readings fall upon them like a holy blessing.

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It's also easy to preach about marriage at the beginning of it all, when two people, armed with more hope than experience, stand eagerly before the altar - and in the midst of flowers and lace, they offer up their pledge to each other and to God. In that moment, their world is filled with possibilities.

But there are other times - and other listeners. Sometimes, words about marriage and commitment feel like assault weapons aimed directly at the wounded. Sometimes, these words are heard by broken people grasping the broken and tattered edges of their lives. Sometimes these words fall, not as a blessing, but as a burden that can be carried no more.

It's tempting for us to see those who are hurting and say, "These teachings are just too hard; too unrealistic; too outdated. Who can live this kind of marriage?" Challenges to marriage are complex and support in our society is thin. Times *have* changed. Statistics show that even promises made in Church can fail. Wouldn't it be more "pastoral" to simply water down Jesus' truth and embrace the latest statistics? Isn't it more honest to lower the bar than to raise our expectations?

I'm not here to water down Jesus' truth. Did you notice that after the scene with the Pharisees - while he was alone with his disciples - he had a chance to soften or change what he said about marriage? He didn't water down the truth.

Yes, marriage and family are messy. But the institution of marriage is not merely a human institution, it's an institution which God himself has ordained from the dawn of creation. Amen?

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- Deacon Jack Schaefer