

Today's theme from both our Gospel and first lesson is **Marriage and Fidelity**. How can we support Christian marriage? This is traditionally stewardship month. Stewardship is about management of what God has given us: time, talents, and treasures including the earth, and our health and relationships. All of life belongs to God. We speak of tithing or giving 10% of our income to God. The bottom line for stewardship is that it *is an act of hope, in response to God's promises. But most of all, stewardship is an act of love, in response to our belief that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* When we love God, we want to give ourselves to God: our heart, our soul and our strength. Because God loves us first, our love for God is always multiplied and returned. We could speak of tithing our time to God. If we did that, there would be plenty of time to pray, read God's Word, worship, serve others, and tithe. Of course, it's not our time. It's God's time that He has given us. Let's focus on the gift of marriage based on the Gospel. What happened in the Gospel? The paraphrase says: *Pharisees came up, intending to give Jesus a hard time. They asked, "Is it legal for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus said, "What did Moses command?" They answered, "Moses gave permission to fill out a certificate of dismissal and divorce her." Jesus said, "Moses wrote this command only as a concession to your hardhearted ways. In the original creation, God made male and female to be together. Because of this, a man leaves father and mother, and in marriage he becomes one flesh with a woman—no longer two individuals, but forming a new unity. Because God created this organic union of the two sexes, no one should desecrate his art by cutting them apart."* When they were back home, the disciples brought it up again. Jesus gave it to them straight: *"A man who divorces his wife so he can marry someone else commits adultery against her. And a woman who divorces her husband so she can marry someone else commits adultery."* Two becoming one is more than having a child together; it is more than becoming more like each other; it is also a joining of the spirits of each. That's pretty powerful.

There have been several major shifts within the last few decades that come to mind. First, a big increase in entitlement thinking is that I am owed certain things. When I don't get what I deserve I become a victim. Litigation has soared in our nation as an expression of claimed victimhood. Second, the essence of the marriage covenant which is life-long commitment for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health. Third, sexual

sin is glorified so much in the media that we begin to see sin as the norm. Just ask yourself this question about what you're seeing: Is this God's intention for sex or marriage?

First, entitlement thinking. We live in an age of 50% marital success. It has been found that when pastors do pre-marriage counseling, the success rate increases. Those who have been sexually abstinent also have a higher rate of marriage success. The culture around us is a "me-oriented" culture. The chief question is what I can get out of this. "This" may be a job, a marriage, a friendship, a vacation, healthcare, services in the community, entertainment, or material rewards. When it comes to what I get out of my marriage, you can stand in line at the grocery store and look at the features in various magazines on how to have a better sex life, how to hold on to your man, how to hold on to your woman. Where is God in all of this? In our first lesson from Genesis, God created all. We are all image bearers of God. The paraphrase of this is: *God said, "It's not good for the Man to be alone; I'll make him a helper, a companion." So, God formed from the dirt of the ground all the animals of the field and all the birds of the air. He brought them to the Man to see what he would name them. Whatever the Man called each living creature, that was its name. The Man named the cattle, named the birds of the air, named the wild animals; but he didn't find a suitable companion. God put the Man into a deep sleep. As he slept, he removed one of his ribs and replaced it with flesh. God then used the rib that he had taken from the Man to make Woman and presented her to the Man. The Man said, "Finally! Bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh! Name her Woman for she was made from Man." Therefore, a man leaves his father and mother and embraces his wife. They become one flesh. The two of them, the Man and his Wife, were naked, but they felt no shame.*

"One flesh" is expressed in part in the form of a child. And children are a blessing to a marriage as well as a huge responsibility to care for them, love them and point them to Jesus. It took me a lot of years to see that parenting is a vocation, not just a skill learned in courses or books in how to be a better parent. But if we love our kids and introduce them early to Jesus, we do them a service. When it comes to evangelism, you can see it starts in the family. It starts with your faith commitment and then begins with the baptism of that child as he or she becomes a part of the body of Christ, the Church. If we don't lead our children to Jesus, other people who influence them may lead them somewhere else. Who of us wants to enter heaven and not see those we love? After all, heaven and hell are an eternity. But the oneness of marriage is more than children. It has to do with building of a relationship between two people.

Covenant is a spiritual dimension. Paul wrote to the Corinthians (I, 6:15-20) *Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit. Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your body.* One doesn't sin against his own body but his own spirit as well. A couple becomes part of one another and that's why God points us at a one-person marriage. Sometimes marriage doesn't work out and that is what our Gospel is about. Jesus says about divorce: *"Because of your hardness of heart, he wrote this commandment for you."* As followers of Jesus, we are called to take marriage seriously. He says in the Gospel: *what God has joined together, let no one separate.* The consumer asks the question: what do I get out of this? Several people I've known have gone through divorce and told me that if they had to do it again, they would have stayed married. The process is painful, individuals feel exploited, families torn apart. Few want to look at forgiveness. If one person wrongs the other, or both wrong the relationship by not respecting the other and staying committed to the other, then there is a place for forgiveness since God has forgiven us and we don't deserve it. The one- out-of- two divorce rate, overall is different in the church. It is much lower. But if you have been through divorce, you know the pain first hand. Some are relieved that they are out of a relationship and will say things like: "We should have never gotten married in the first place." Paul wrote the Ephesian Christians speaking for God: (Ephesians 5:25) *Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.* That means you don't sin against your spouse. Marriage is a covenant.

Then, we are bombarded in the media with sexual sin. If you're not married and wanting to be sexually active, you sin against the spouse of your future and the children of your future from that marriage. If you mess with pornography, you sin against your family and the family to come. It gets worse. Pornography opens a door for demonic oppression. Avoid it. Sex was given by God so that a wife and husband could grow in love and that love be expressed in children and giving glory to God.

The world we live in would like the church to say, "Anything goes. No one cares. Have

a good time.” But Jesus speaking of cultural influence says (Matthew 7:13), "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.*"

In other words, “Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do.” We are stewards of marriage and it means with the love and forgiveness that God has given us, we need to follow His lead. His lead is seen in the self- sacrificial love of the cross. Marriage has other dimensions of love such as friendship, and attraction. But sacrificial love as described in 1 Cor.13 reminds us to be *patient, ... kind... not envy, ... not boast, ... not proud...not rude, ... not self-seeking, ... not easily angered, ... not keeping score of wrongs... not delighting in evil but rejoicing with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.* There is no room for abuse here. No room for sin.

Wedding vows can be written by the couple but all have one thing in common: life - long commitment. Yesterday, we had a wedding here and the couple, Courtney and Collin used this vow: *I promise before God and these friends to be your loving and faithful husband to share with you in wealth and in poverty in joy and in sorrow/in sickness and in health as long as we both shall live God help me.* Another vow is: *I take you to be my wife or husband, and these things I promise to you: I will be faithful to you and honest with you; I will respect, trust, help, and care for you; I will share my life with you; I will forgive you as we have been forgiven; and I will try with you better to understand ourselves, the world, and God, Through the best and the worst of what is to come as long as we live.* A third is: *I take you to be my wife or husband from this day forward, to join with and share all that is to come, and I promise to be faithful to you until death parts us.* Most of you probably used the traditional wedding vows that go: *I take thee to be my wedded husband or wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.* Regardless of what vow is said, that's what we are called to do. Be faithful to our commitments and covenant following the love of Jesus. The second lesson from Hebrews (2:1) says: “We must pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” Watch out for how much media influences your way of life, beliefs and attitudes. There are good things around us that influence us too, but the best is our Lord Jesus Christ. No one else loves us the way He does. Let's follow His Lead. Amen