

## A SACRAMENTAL MARRIAGE

(02/12/12)

Scripture Lessons: Ephesians 4:31-5:2; 5:21-33  
1 Corinthians 13:1-13  
Mark 10:1-12

*“Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” (Ephesians 4:31-5:2)*

A couple of weeks ago at coffee hour Barbara Crane reminded me that Valentine’s Day was coming up. I thought it was very sensitive of her to be solicitous regarding the survival of my marriage, to remind me not to forget the day and discover my oversight the following evening when I returned home to find that the locks on the doors had been changed. I thanked her for the reminder but assured her that Darlene has already started leaving little hints around the house – little notes tacked up on the refrigerator and tucked in the pockets of my sport coat, and little slips of paper with just the date “February 14” mysteriously appearing in my lunch bag. I might not be the most sensitive guy in the world, but I get it.

Barbara said that was not her concern, at least not her primary concern. She said I should preach about love on the Sunday before Valentine’s Day. That also served as a healthy reminder. It is not uncommon for a holiday to pass, especially a holiday that is not specifically religious, only to have people ask me why I didn’t preach about it. So I guess I should say something about love this morning.

Since I addressed the topic of love only a few months ago when we lit the Advent candle of love, when we reflected on the dimension of God’s love for us that was expressed in the incarnation, when we called to mind Jesus’ directive to his disciples that they should love one another as he loved them, I don’t know if I have anything more to say about love, at least right now. So I thought that this morning I might share a few thoughts about marriage. Marriage, after all, should be about, should be built upon, and should foster the growth of love.

Marital love is actually quite difficult to experience, achieve, or sustain for many couples, both heterosexual and homosexual. As you know, approximately 50% of first marriages end in divorce. Of the marriages that do not end in divorce, many are not what we would call loving. It is not uncommon for young people to express skepticism about the possibility of establishing and maintaining a loving marriage for they have experienced few really good role models. Surprisingly, however, 95% of them still want to get married; they think they can beat the odds.

By the way, the rate of divorce for second marriages is approximately 65%, which is higher than the rate in first marriages. I find this surprising since when a person takes a second or third shot at marriage the person is presumably older and hopefully a little wiser. You would think the person would have more maturity, would know themselves better, be a better judge of character in relation to a prospective spouse, and be more realistic about the expectations that one brings to a marital relationship. However, this is apparently not the case.

This leads me to reflect on one particular issue that can cause a marriage to fail. It is only one issue, to be sure, but in my practice as a marriage and family therapist I find it is not uncommon. It has multiple causes usually arising in early childhood, but the end result is basically a characterological deficiency. One or both of the partners are unable to enter into the kind of committed love relationship that is the foundation of marriage. If either partner is unable to love, one could say that the marriage, at least from a spiritual point of view, actually never took place.

I came to this realization many years ago while I served as the Executive Director of the Interfaith Counseling Center of Greater Providence. Msgr. Dan O'Grady, who served on our Board of Directors and was the director of the Roman Catholic Marriage Tribunal of Providence, asked me if I would like to serve as a psychological consultant to the Tribunal, doing psychological assessments of people seeking an annulment of their marriage by the Roman Catholic Church. I said I would be happy to. I have always liked helping Roman Catholics.

Through my involvement in the work of the Tribunal I came to understand the process of annulment in a way that few Catholics and virtually no Protestants understand it. I think it is a profound concept, one that is applicable to Protestant as well as Catholic marriages. It provides us with a way of understanding marriage that can be helpful to some people who are struggling with a decision to divorce.

Some people view annulment as a cheap way out of an untenable position. The Roman Church, drawing from the scripture passage we heard this morning, forbids divorce except on the grounds of adultery. However, as we know, a woman could be married to a man who abuses her but has never actually cheated on her. Should she be barred from receiving communion because she divorces him and remarries? I believe that such a position is untenable from a Christian point of view. By this I mean that you could not possibly convince me that Jesus would want this woman to remain in such a relationship or that he would not want her to remarry and build a truly loving marriage and family life for her children.

Some people feel that the Roman Church, realizing that it painted itself into a corner with the "no divorce" standard, invented a sneaky way out by declaring that the marriage never actually took place. If the marriage never actually took place, then the woman could not divorce her husband in the eyes of the church.

The Catholic understanding of annulment is more psychologically and theologically profound than this. The Church is saying that you can have two people who decide to get married, who have completed the pre-Cana program of premarital instruction, and whose wedding ceremony takes place in a sanctified place (a Roman Catholic church) presided over by a priest, but it is still not a marriage. It is a legal marriage when the priest signs the marriage license, but it is not a sacramental marriage. It is not a sacramental marriage if one or both of the partners was incapable of entering into a truly loving and respectful marriage relationship.

I believe I am correct in my understanding of the Roman Catholic teaching that the two people do not become married during the wedding ceremony. Their marriage, if indeed there is a marriage, is created by the love that they share with each other. The friends and family who are present in the church to witness the ceremony are doing just that – witnessing to the public declaration of a marriage relationship. This is why the priest who is the celebrant does not declare that the man and the woman are now husband and wife, as we commonly do in a Protestant wedding ceremony. This means, of course, that you can have two people who have a wedding ceremony but are not really married. It also means that you can have two people who are really married but have not had a wedding ceremony.

As you know, we Protestants have only two sacraments: baptism and communion. The Roman Catholic Church recognizes seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, communion (the Eucharist), marriage, ordination, confession (the Sacrament of Reconciliation), and last rites (the Sacrament of the Sick). By designating marriage as a sacrament, the Roman Church is declaring that there is a spiritual dimension to marriage, at least when it is a true marriage.

I don't want to get into a debate about the nature and the number of sacraments. I'm not sure that Jesus' presence at a wedding in Cana is sufficient justification for calling marriage a sacrament. Yet I totally agree with my Roman Catholic brothers and sisters: there is a sacramental, a spiritual dimension to marriage. I also agree with them that this can be different from and is definitely more important than the legal dimension of marriage.

I witness to this in the Words of Introduction that I sometimes use in a wedding ceremony when I say,

*In many branches of the Christian Church marriage is marked off as a sacrament, and in those where it is not an official sacrament it is nonetheless sacramental in nature. A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality. This wedding ceremony is an outward sign of an inward spiritual reality, the love that these two people feel for each other, the love that binds them together and shapes one destiny of their lives.*

I note that Jesus blessed the wedding he attended in Cana and that Paul regarded marriage as a container within which two people could grow into fullness of life.

In their concept of annulment the Roman Church is simply saying that not everyone is able to enter into the kind of relationship that they would regard as a sacramental marriage. For example, if the husband is an active alcoholic his first love will be the bottle. His wife and children will be a distant second or third. If he is afraid of intimacy, if he is unable to make a commitment, if he is controlling and abusive, then the relationship may legally be a marriage but it is not a marriage in the eyes of God. It does not achieve the true function of marriage; it does not provide a container within which two individuals and their children can grow into fullness of life. I absolutely agree with their stance on this.

So what are the conditions that are non-negotiable and fundamental to the creation of a true or sacramental marriage? I would list at least the following: the ability to feel and express a healthy, mature, empathic love; the ability to enter into and maintain a committed relationship; the willing assumption of a fair share of the responsibilities of running a household; and both the desire and the ability to place your spouse's happiness, well being, and fulfillment in the center of your life.

A true or sacramental marriage is egalitarian, a marriage where both partners have equal power over decision-making and finances (at least in a Christian culture). It requires that you treat your partner with respect. Paul tells us that it will be kind and tenderhearted. Although there is plenty of room for a good solid fight in a Christian marriage, there is absolutely no room for physical, verbal, emotional, sexual, or spiritual abuse. There should also be a readiness to forgive our partner when she or he falls short of these standards and then hopefully repents.

If you don't have this in your marriage, you might have a legal marriage but you don't have a sacramental marriage. Your marriage might be beneficial to one or both of you from a financial standpoint, but it will not be beneficial to either of you from a spiritual standpoint. You will not have created a container within which both of you can grow into fullness of life. And I am not convinced that prolonging such a relationship is ultimately a good experience or example for your children.

Some people because of the deprivations, losses, abuse or other traumas that they suffered in early childhood are constitutionally incapable of entering into such a relationship. You might feel sorry for such a person, but you wouldn't want to marry him/her. No matter how hard you try, you can't make it work. You can make it last, but you can't make it work.

However, the decision to grant an annulment is actually more complex than simply evaluating the mental status of both partners at the time of the wedding. Some people, actually many people, probably most people enter into marriage psychologically wounded in some way. They may even enter into the marriage for the wrong reasons, e.g., to get away from a sexually abusive father. Once they are in the marriage a miraculous healing can take place.

I know people who have been healed through the love they discovered and then helped build in their marriage. I know people who were addicts at the time of their wedding who found sobriety and recovery through the help and support of their spouse and went on to be a loving husband or wife. The difficult question for the spouse is this: do I hang on in the hope that something will grow and develop in my partner, or do I let go, cut my losses, and get on with my life? This is a difficult decision to make.

I think Jesus is telling us that if you have a sacramental marriage, don't throw it away. Don't throw it away because you find a colleague who knows more about Jungian psychology than your wife. Don't throw it away because you find someone who loves ballroom dancing, an activity that in terms of enjoyment your husband ranks just below doing the income tax. If you have married the right person, what you need to do is continually work for the deeper kind of love that Paul describes.

Whether or not we Protestants regard marriage as a sacrament, I think we would all agree that there is a spiritual dimension to marriage. I think we would also agree that this is what makes it a marriage in the eyes of God. If you don't have this, and if you haven't been able to create it by working on your relationship, then you might have a legal marriage but you don't have a sacramental marriage. This means that if you file for a divorce you are, of course, initiating the dissolution of a legal contract, but you are not dissolving a marriage. You can't dissolve the marriage because the relationship is not a marriage and probably never was.

If your spouse has passed away, and if when you think back on your years together you realize you had the kind of love that the apostle Paul talks about in his letter to the Ephesians and in the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, then you have something worth celebrating and treasuring in your heart. You had a true marriage, a loving marriage, a spiritual marriage, a sacramental marriage.

If you are presently married, and if you have the kind of love that the apostle Paul talks about, then whether you exchange presents or not, whether you go out to dinner this coming Tuesday or not, you can not only really celebrate Valentine's Day, you can also celebrate the creation, maintenance, and nurture of a truly loving, a truly spiritual or sacramental marriage. By the way, that's no small accomplishment. It says something about you and it says something about your spouse. Many, many people have never experienced this.

If you look at your marriage and, in all honesty, you feel you don't have this kind of love, if you don't have the kind of marriage that we would call a spiritual or a sacramental marriage, whether the impediment is in you or in your partner or in both of you, you might need to think about it.

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Paul D. Sanderson  
The First Community Church of Southborough  
February 12, 2012*