

## **“Marriage and Exceptions”**

Homily of October 8, 2006

by Fr. Brian Joyce

---

You know, the first reading is from Genesis, about Adam and Eve. It's about the Garden of Eden. It's about the apple. It's about the rib. It's about Eve arriving. It's a very beautiful, simple story to convey to us profound religious truths. I love the African American spiritual, “Dem bones gonna rise again” because it tells the story again with the same spirit that I think this part of Genesis was written. It explains how God found out that they had eaten the apple. It says, “The Lord God, he came snoopin’ around. He spied the peelins on the ground.” And it ends up saying, “Poor Adam’s left holdin’ the sack. He’s wishin’ that he had his old rib back.” But the teaching there is “What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” Marriage is permanent and divorce is not allowed.

I want you to imagine yourself in three or four different scenarios, and how do you feel when you hear that. A couple about to be married, their wedding day, and they hear the “Two shall become one flesh. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” ...How do you feel if, instead of that, you are a couple celebrating your fortieth or fiftieth wedding anniversary? You’ve had your ups and downs. You’ve been through it all, but you’ve stayed with each other through it all and you really have become one. And you hear the “Two shall become one flesh. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” ...Another scenario: You’re going through a divorce and you hear the “Two shall become one flesh. What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” Or you’re in your second or, perhaps, third marriage and you hear “What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.”

This week, a group of us gathered on Tuesday morning to discuss the Scripture and one of those with us was Father Basil DePinto, chaplain at Highland Hospital and assistant priest at Corpus Christi in Piedmont. He shared with us how his parents were divorced a year after he was born. They went their separate ways. They met other partners. Each of them remarried and remained married for over fifty years. “What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” What is clearly gospel value, a goal, an ideal, a standard and a building block of our society cuts both ways. It presents commitment and also enormous practical problems. And that’s nothing new, nothing new.

The New Testament talks about marriage and permanence five times. Five times it talks about permanence in marriage, and none of the five statements agree with each other. Clearly, for the early Church and the early believers of Jesus, it was an important issue, but it presented practical problems for faithful followers of Jesus, and for practicing Christians. Just watch what

happened. Mark says, “No divorce. No exceptions.” And then he adds a footnote that only fitted under current Roman law, which Jesus had never heard of. That’s OK. Matthew says, “No divorce, but there can be exceptions.” Paul says, “Marriage is lifelong, permanent, a sacrament and an ideal, but if the couple do not share the same faith and have no peace, then they can separate and they should not feel bound together.”

It’s clear that, in living Christian life and in following the values of Jesus, along the way, we have to make carefully limited and practical exceptions that are necessary and also treacherous. Marriage is just one of the examples, probably one of the earliest examples because it shows up in the Gospel itself. But there are other necessary and treacherous exceptions.

Commandments: Thou shalt not kill. Period! By the year 300 St. Augustine had worked out, with the Christian community, there were some reasonable exceptions, self-defense and what, in those days, they called “a just war.” (What today might be called a “Holocaust.” But, in those days of the bow and arrow, it was a “just war.”)

Thou shalt not steal. By the Middle Ages, teachers of the Church such as Thomas Aquinas were saying if a man and his family are starving and a neighbor has more than he needs, he can share that for himself because the earth belongs to all of us together, a careful exception for a starving family.

Thou shalt not lie. And you have a Nazi squad come to your home Where you are protecting Jewish refugees during the Second World War and they ask, “Are there any Jews here?” And you answer, “No. There are not.” The Catholic Catechism, as recently as a few years ago, defined lying as “holding back the truth from someone who has the right to it.” But if you are speaking to someone who does not have the right to that truth, it is not a lie to hold it back.

Carefully crafted, limited, practical exceptions are necessary and they are also treacherous. They’re treacherous because the problem is when do these necessary, justified exceptions become selfish excuses and outright betrayal of gospel values? For example, where’s the dividing line when we move from self-defense and just war to wholesale slaughter of people, to permission to invade whenever it suits ourselves or our nation’s interests? When do we cross the line from sharing food to survive to a pattern and permission for exploitation and extortion and greed? It’s treacherous. When do we move from stretching the truth to save a life to stretching our lives into dishonesty for our convenience or for our comfort? St. Thomas Aquinas, who’s probably the most significant teacher and theologian in the two thousand year history of the Church, said “When you’re faced with a moral dilemma and you’re not sure what to do,” (Are you ready for his solution?) “find someone who is holy and good, and watch what they do.” That’s the solution he gave us.

“Find someone who is holy and good, and watch what they do.” What that means for our choices and our decisions is that we need a firm foundation, a starting point, a habit, a pattern of our

lives that is made up of three important ingredients. The first is integrity, being completely honest with ourselves and with others. It means consistency and courage, and it ain't easy! Number one, we need integrity. Number two, compassion, that we have to recognize and empathize with those who struggle with dilemmas, who are good people who have to deal with hard things. We have to be a people of integrity, a people of compassion. And finally, a people of forgiveness, recognizing that sometimes we get it wrong and sometimes we do wrong. And when that happens, we have to admit it. We have to ask forgiveness or give forgiveness. We have to let go and we have to move on. So, there it is. The foundation for all of this has got to be integrity and compassion and forgiveness.

So, I am going to suggest we pray about this. I am going to ask you to maybe just put your hands in your lap or on your knees, bow your heads and close your eyes. Pray for a blessing for all of us.

May you be strong in courage and confidence.

May you be wise in choices and decisions.

May you be caring in all relationships and compassionate to those in need.

May you meet life's adventures with a clear mind and a bold heart.

May your integrity be a gift to the world.

And may the Spirit of God be always with you.

May your integrity be a gift to the world.

And may the Spirit of God be with you always. Amen.