

October 4, 2009

Mark 10:2-16

A Lasting Marriage

107 million married persons in the United States are asking the question, "How can I make my marriage last?"

The answer is in the details.

A major status symbol in this consumer culture of ours is something that no amount of money can buy. You can't inherit it; you can't discover it; you can't even own it.

What is it? What is this remarkable commodity that draws gasps of astonishment and admiring glances when it is revealed?

It's a miracle marriage -- a long-lasting, loving marriage of two committed people.

It used to be only Golden Anniversary couples that got our attention, and even then it was as much for the sheer survival of the individuals as for the survival of the marriage.

Divorce statistics have skyrocketed as divorce proceedings have shifted from laborious and shocking to simple and mundane, the average life span of a marriage has dropped alarmingly.

I grew up listening to singer John Denver declare unending love for his first wife in "Annie's Song." Before his tragic death Denver went through two marriages and many relationships.

We have gone from "till death do us part" to "satisfaction guaranteed or your money back." Between 1960 and 1990, the American divorce rate more than doubled.

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From 1990 to 2009 the American Divorce rate has tripled.

Over forty percent of all American children can expect to experience the divorce of their parents.

In a culture that has made the shelf life of families as disposable and perishable as a fresh container of milk, any marriage without an expiration date of 10 years is, well, a miracle.

In this week's gospel lesson, Jesus focuses far more on the divinely created nature of marriage than on the awkward human machinery of divorce.

When we skip over this passage because its words sound harsh and unyielding to our ears, we also miss out on Jesus' resounding praise of marriage and its role in God's plan.

By constantly skipping past Jesus' tough-sounding words on divorce, we miss a perfect opportunity to look at the reasons why marriages can be such life-affirming, soul-nurturing relationships.

Until only recently, social scientists and marriage counselors focused primarily on why marriages fail, and so spent much of their time and energies studying divorced couples.

Researchers have now at last begun to ask why it is some marriages do work, do last, and do succeed.

The church needs to seriously examine what long-lasting Christian marriages seem to have in common and honor the spirit of love and joy alive in marriage.

When is the last time you left your spouse a love note? Taken a stroll in the moonlight? Scratched your mate's back? Given a 60-second hug? Sung a love song to your partner (well, scratch that idea)?

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Love -- and a lasting marriage -- is in the details. Just as car enthusiasts get joy out of "detailing" their '65 Mustangs with fastidious little touches, so marriage enthusiasts derive joy out of detailing their marriages.

But a word of caution: No amount of detailing will make a broken-down, parts-depleted '65 Mustang run better; some radical repair work may be needed.

But a good car, like a good marriage, will last longer if attention is given to the "details."

Neil Warren, who has studied what he calls the "love secrets" of 100 couples with model marriages, says that his most significant finding is also the most surprising.

Here's the most surprising thing he found in his study of marriage. Chemistry between two people is responsive to mental and emotional processes over which we have tremendous control.

That's right, you can make chemistry happen. If you don't feel the flutter in your heart for your spouse that you once did, if the magic is gone from your relationship, don't panic.

You can change that!

(Neil Clark Warren, *The Triumphant Marriage*

[Dallas: Word Books]

The phrase "The chemistry just isn't there anymore" should be banished from our vocabulary. Each of us can maximize chemistry to make new chemical reactions happen.

The chemistry wrong? Mix up some new chemicals. Stir up some different romance ingredients. Here are some simple rituals of renewal which can keep your marriage romantically potent:

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- * plant a tree together
- * give a gift in honor of your marriage
- * renew marriage vows
- * buy a wedding cake and invite friends over
- * exchange gifts of jewelry

But as important as it is to become a good chemist, it is equally important to become a bad mathematician.

In marriage, each partner must be willing to put in more than he or she takes out.

Psychiatrist Dr. Allen Fay, M.D. recalls that "A patient once said to him, "Marriage is a 50/50 proposition, isn't it?" He replied, "No, marriage is a 60/60 proposition.

Each person has to do a little more than what he thinks his share is"

(PQR: Prescription for a Quality Relationship [New York: Simon & Schuster]

Lasting marriages are not 50/50, tit-for-tat propositions.

In another survey of 351 couples married for over 15 years, the ones who were happiest claimed that "You have to be willing to put in more than you take out."

Sometimes one member of the couple needs to give 90 percent while the other gives only 10 percent (for example, during a serious illness, job loss, death in family, etc.)

A lasting marriage is one in which each partner "looks out for number two," not where each one is "looking out for number one."

When your bank account is nearly empty, every deposit or withdrawal is keenly felt. In relationships, every act of love or caring is like money in the relationship bank.

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Each argument or instance of uncaring is like a withdrawal from the account. To be happy, couples must have a reserve of love and caring to help them through the rainy days in their relationship.

How much caring is enough? Researcher Dr. John Gottman of the Gottman Institute in Seattle believes that a marriage can withstand conflict if the ratio of caring to conflict is 10 to one.

The difficulty for severely distressed couples, however, is that an upsurge in caring doesn't automatically erase months or years of anger or unkindness.

Commonly, one major argument for a couple can erase the effects of 10 to 20 positive interactions. ...

Fortunately, for the average, satisfied couple who wish to boost their overall happiness, daily gestures of gratuitous kindness are good medicine.

Finally, Paul's counsel to marriage mathematicians is to remember that "love ... keeps no record of wrongs" (1 Corinthians 13:4-5 NIV).

Among successful, long-lasting marriages, there is always an underlying given that both partners rely upon without hesitation: They must flex their muscles of trust and bend the knees of prayer.

* Flex the muscles of trust. Trust may not seem glamorous or sexy, but many marriages have found out too late that without trust, there is nothing.

Mistrust is a cancer that rots away relationships.

Faithfulness in a relationship is measured in more ways than monogamy; trust is the key component of faithfulness -- while mistrust always plays a part in unfaithfulness.

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*Bend the knees of prayer.

The connection between complete, genuine trust in one another and faithfulness is perhaps what underlies one final finding about lasting marriages that shouldn't be a surprise, but is.

Couples who pray together (compared to couples who don't) report having greater respect for their mate, agree on how to raise children, and are more playful.

Individual prayer correlates with marital happiness, too, but joint prayer correlates at a level twice as high.

Religion and spirituality play a more important role in marital happiness than most people realize.

In a Gallup survey, religious beliefs enhanced marital stability for people of all ages.

A fluke? Decades of research have demonstrated that people highly involved in their faith have the happiest marriages.

The words "married life" or "marital bliss" need not be oxymorons.

By paying attention to the details of chemistry, dropping an obsession with math, and being flexible to tone your trust-muscles and strengthen your prayer life, you will infuse your marriage with long-lasting life!

Amen.

