

Sunday October 3rd, 2021  
**27th Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**Parishioner Reflection**

*By: Mary Bastedo*

Our first reading from Genesis 2 describes God's creation of man and woman and their joy in beholding one another. Adam exclaims, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!" Adam and Eve are delighted to enter into a relationship of mutual communion and self-gift. They become one flesh. In the Gospel reading from Mark Jesus underlines the importance and seriousness of marriage: "So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together let no one separate." He teaches that marriage is meant to be life-long and that divorce was never part of God's original plan. Those listening find this shocking because Moses had allowed couples to divorce. Jesus explains that the only reason Moses permitted divorce was because of their "hardness of heart."

Hearing this, one could conclude that the key to Christian marriage is softness of heart. What might that look like? Softness of heart doesn't mean mushiness or weakness; rather it's an invitation to growth and maturity in many relational skills: openness to see and appreciate the unique beauty of the other, a capacity to listen to another's point of view without being defensive or judgemental, the humility to admit one's mistakes, a readiness to forgive and to ask forgiveness, a capacity for tenderness and expression of feeling. Christian marriage involves a mutual commitment to develop those qualities of the heart, which will bring fruitfulness, peace, joy, patience, compassion and all the gifts of the Spirit.

This journey of the heart is never easy. Our hearts can so quickly harden - when we are afraid, angry, exhausted, stubborn, seeking our own comfort, attached to being right or needing to be in control. Dialogue is so difficult; sharing life with others can be terrible. Hardness of heart dogs us. In a sense it is original sin - we keep bumping up against it.

Ultimately faithful Christian marriage is only possible through the Paschal Mystery; it is grounded in Christ's own passion, death and resurrection. The married couple draw strength from Jesus' words: "Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it," (Matthew 10:39) and "Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit." (John 12:24)

In the spiritual life there is a saying from the Benedictine tradition: “Always we begin again.” Always we fail and always there is an invitation to pick ourselves up again, to reach out for help, to allow ourselves to be embraced by God’s mercy. The Catholic Church teaches that faithful marriage is impossible without God’s grace. “Without God’s help man and woman cannot achieve the union of their lives for which God created them ‘in the beginning.’” (Catechism 1608) “The grace proper to the sacrament of Matrimony is intended to perfect the couple’s love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity.” (Catechism 1641)

Yet even with the best of intentions and effort, marriages fail. Recognizing the complexity and challenges of marriage and family life in today’s world, the Church convened two International Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015 to reflect on this topic. In the document that Pope Francis wrote following these Synods, called *Amoris Laetitia* (The Joy of Love), the Church recognized the pressures on marriages today, for example, the loss of social support, the rise of individualism, the fast, stressful pace of life and long hours of work. It also acknowledged that the Church’s stance about marriage has not always been helpful, for example, its’ “almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation,” and an “excessive idealization of marriage and family life.” (*Amoris Laetitia* 36) The Church also recognized its failure in not giving sufficient weight to the “consciences of the faithful, who often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.” (*Amoris Laetitia* 37)

*Amoris Laetitia* calls for greater compassion, inclusion and pastoral discernment towards those who have been divorced, some of whom have remarried. Even as we deeply treasure the Christian vision of marriage as a relationship of life-long fidelity and fruitfulness, all of us as Christians are called to reflect the merciful, welcoming face of God. We are called to be a community that is compassionate, welcoming and inclusive, encouraging one another to grow in holiness and in softness of heart in whatever vocational path we are called.