

Admittedly, I like spending time alone. A great evening for me is hanging out with Emmett, watching some sports or editing some photos, or getting away for a few hours with my camera gear. I also often drive alone, leaving Emmett with a friend and his doggo buddies while I try to get out into nature for an overnight or a little longer vacation. It's great to be in the middle of nowhere and hear nothing but the crashing waves of Lake Superior or crickets chirping or just have the silence as you gaze upon the stars or try to find a perched eagle or owl and wait for him to take flight.

I could easily see myself living in a cabin in the woods, assuming of course it had WiFi and access to all the sports channels. But at the same time, as much as I like being alone, I also really enjoy the presence of other people. I wouldn't want to be in the cabin away from everyone forever.

I love getting together with a friend, and even arguing politics as one of my closest friends is my polar opposite. I accept I am right, he is wrong.

I love offering Mass and seeing peoples reactions, from the person who may be falling asleep during the homily to the mom smiling at her child as a song is played.

I love seeing the faces on people at a ballgame on TV or even better in real life, as there are no longer the ridiculous cardboard cutouts or piped in music but fans back in the stands.

I love having our festival back and seeing some smiling faces win a game of Bingo or light up when they see a friend in the parish.

And I really love seeing family, as we were pretty limited at the height of the pandemic not really seeing one another much, but being in the same room again and breaking bread, what a wonderful thing that is.

God in His wisdom is right; it is not good for man to be alone. We as human beings though, we can kind of screw this up cant we? We can become angry, polarized and divided to an unhealthy point. But what if we began to see past this, and began not with looking at race, religion, vaccination status, last name, ethnicity or political ideology, but saw one another first and foremost as human beings, created in Gods image? What might we be able to do? The answer is to find love in our relationships, and to teach others what that looks like in action as a way of life.

In the 1970s and 1980s, Northern Ireland was regularly in the news as a hotbed of violence between Protestants and Catholics. I remember as a kid Don Shelby and WCCO even did a story looking at what was going on over there. You had people from both sides going to church and professing faith in Christ, but not understanding that God loved all people, and wants us to live in peace, not by hate.

In the midst of this, there was a young man named Ian; the person telling the story, written at the height of the Troubles, says that's not his real name as you have to be careful in revealing names in Northern Ireland because there had been more than 2400 sectarian murders since the flare-up of the ancient troubles there between Catholics and Protestants. So there's no sense in taking risks.

And, Ian has had misery enough for his 24 years of life.

He came from good Protestant stock, the sort that goes to church twice every Sunday as regular as clockwork. His father, a welder in the Belfast shipyards, steady as they come. Mother kept a clean and tidy house, baked

the best bread in the neighborhood and ruled the family with the sharp edge of her tongue. He had two elder brothers, both unemployed laborers.

Ian did well at school and was now earning good money as a craftsman in a production plant. Quiet, serious, fond of walking through the countryside during the green evenings and golden weekends of summer, he liked few things better than a book by the roaring fire during the long loneliness of winter. He never had much to do with girlfriends, though men tend to marry late in Ireland.

It was on his 22nd birthday, he was walking home from work when a terrorist hurled a bomb from a speeding car...and left Ian babbling in the nightmare of sudden blindness.

He was rushed to a hospital, operated on immediately for internal injuries and broken bones. But sadly both eyes were destroyed.

The other wounds healed in their own time, though their scars would disfigure his flesh the rest of his days. But the scars on his mind, though invisible, were even more obvious.

He hardly spoke a word, hardly ate or drank, hardly slept. He simply lay in bed, brooding and sightless. Nearly four months.

There was one nurse who seemed to be able to draw some small spark of human response from him. The storyteller says lets call her Bridget - a fine Irish name. Good Catholic stock, the sort that goes to Mass first thing every Sunday morning.

Her father, a carpenter, mostly worked away from home, over in England. A decent man, he loved his family spent weekends with them whenever he could afford the fare. And they loved him as only an absent father can be loved.

Her mother kept a clean but untidy house, cooked the best stew in the neighborhood and ruled the family with a quick hand a soft heart.

Six brothers, four sisters - with the youngest of them all, Mary, 11, her father's darling.

Bridget did well at school, had trained as a nurse at a famous London hospital, and now, at the age of 21, was a staff nurse in Belfast's biggest hospital.

Lively, though fundamentally serious, a singer with a sweet and gentle voice and a way of her own with folk songs. She never had much to do with boyfriends - though it wasn't from any lack of young men who'd set their caps at her.

But now her heart was moved by Ian, for there was something of the little-boy-lost about him that brought tears to her eyes. True, he couldn't see the tears, yet she was afraid that her voice would betray her emotions.

In a way, she was right about her voice, because it was the lilt and the laughter of it that dragged him back from the depths of depression and self-pity, the warmth and gentleness and strength of her words, the blessed assurance with which she spoke to him of the love of Jesus Christ.

And so, as the long dark of his days turned to weeks and months, he would listen for her footsteps and turn his sightless face toward her coming like a flower bending for the sun.

At the end of his four months in the hospital he was pronounced incurably blind, but what he now knew as their love gave him the courage to accept his affliction. Because, despite everything against them - religion, politics and the opposition of their families - they were in love and wandering in that young and singing landscape.

He was discharged and began the weary months of rehabilitation: how to wash and shave and dress without help, how to move around the house without cracking his shins on every chair, how to walk through the streets with a white stick, how to read Braille, how to survive the crushing piety he could sense in the very air he breathed. Their love gave him the hope to go on living and trying.

Not that they were able to spend much of their lives together: an occasional evening, perhaps an afternoon when her duties allowed. But they lived for those brief encounters and knew the beginnings of deep peace and joys.

Their families were appalled. Thinking of getting married? The very law of God forbid it, surely.

“What fellowship hath the children of light with the children of darkness?” thundered Ian’s father. “You’ll not be marrying her whilst I’m drawing breath.”

“The Roman Catholic Church,” stated her priest “discourages mixed marriages, so you can be putting the idea from you!”

So, by all manner of pressures - constant arguments, threats, promises, and even downright lies - they were driven apart. And eventually, the quarreled, said hurtful things in their black misery, and one evening, with the rain drizzling and their hearts cold, she walked away from him on the weeping street.

He withdrew into his perpetual night. Days and weeks of bitterness. “You’ll not be regretting it in the long run,” he was told. “You’d have been inviting trouble by yoking with an unbeliever!”

She withdrew into her work, too sick at heart to remember. Weeks and months of numbed agony. "You'll live to praise the Almighty," she was told. "You'd have been asking for hell on earth marrying a Protestant!"

The months drained into a year. And the bombings continued, to the grief of Ireland.

Then, one evening, as Ian sat alone in the house, there was a frantic hammering at the door. "Ian, come you quick!"

By the voice, hysterical, choked with tears, he recognized young Mary, Bridget's sister. "A bombing! She's trapped and half-dead so she is! Screaming after you. Come you, Ian! In the name of God, please come!"

Without even shutting the door behind him, he took her hand. And she led and stumbled and cried with him through the merciless streets.

The bomb had devastated a little restaurant where Bridget had been eating supper with three other nurses. The others had managed to scramble out

from under the shifting rubble. But she was trapped by the legs. And the fire was spreading, licking towards her.

They could hear her screaming, but couldn't yet reach the pit where she lay. Firemen, soldiers, lights and special equipment were on the way.

Ian moved into the chaos. "You can't go in there!" shouted the official in charge.

"She's my girl," said Ian.

"don't be a raving lunatic!" shouted the officer. "You'll not be seeing your hand in front of your face in the darkness!"

"What difference does darkness make to a blind man?" asked Ian.

And he turned toward the sound of her voice, and moved through that black inferno with all the skills and instincts of the blind, all the urgency of love.

"I'm coming Bridget, I'm coming!"

“Ian,” she whispered. “Ian..” and lapsed into unconsciousness like a tired child.

And with her blood soaking into his clothes, the fire reaching them, he held her until their rescuers chopped a way through. What he didn't see, being blind, was that the side of her lovely face had been seared by fire.

In time, a long time, she recovered. Despite cosmetic surgery, though, her face would always be scarred. “But,” she said, “the only man I love will never have the seeing of it, so what difference does it make to me?” And they took up their love from where they had never really left it.

True, says says the storyteller, both families fought it every step of the way. One dramatic confrontation almost led to a fistfight: shouted abuse, insults, desperate threats. But in the middle of it, Bridget took Ian's hand. And together they walked out of that place of hatred.

Yes, they would marry. All the conventional wisdom would warn of failure. But, asks George Target, the man sharing the story, do you know a more excellent way than love? And what other healing is there?

A true story, what Ian and Bridget did was to teach others what God intends; that it is not good for us to be alone. And while each had family and friends, they were in a very divided place with hate all around them. Through their relationship, they do what Christ does. Christ who makes Himself lower than the angels; Christ who submits himself to death, experiencing death for all humanity. God accepts the way of suffering, and in so doing calls all of us brothers and sisters.

Adam is restless; he is searching for something more. And this is why he finds such joy in Eve, his equal. This one at last is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. Whereas the other animals Adam names and has dominion over in the garden, it's only in Eve that he finds his equal, his partner. We can read this and be reminded that our friendships and relationships mean so much. But we also need to read this and think about our relationships, specifically with one another, and in a special way for those who are called to the vocation of marriage.

With one another, think about what the author of Hebrews says about how Jesus saves us, and how Jesus is not ashamed to call us "brothers."

There's no asterisk there. There's no explaining who is a brother and who isn't. Paul will also write we are all one in Christ Jesus. And in our lives, we won't be everyone's friend; there will be people we dislike. But we need to ask ourselves if we've become bitter or angry; if we've let hate creep in; if we've determined who God should love or exclude from salvation, or if we've closed ourselves off from others who could be true friends. We are meant to be in community, and when we strive to listen and work together, to build up rather than tear down, we can truly find our lives so deeply enriched.

Showing us how to do this in a special way are married couples like Bridget and Ian. Marriage is where we are told by our Lord that the "two become one flesh." A marriage is a sign to the world of how things ought to be.

Of course, due to the effects of original sin, sometimes that doesn't happen. While Jesus speaks against divorce, we also know that sometimes a marriage has to end. Even Jesus could not force Judas to stay with the family; sometimes in a marriage there is hardness of heart; unfaithfulness, or abuse, or pressure to marry. It's why we have annulments. But marriages also do so much to enrich our world. Ian and Bridget hopefully

made their families think how hypocritical they were in professing a belief in Christ while being filled with hate. And a good marriage is one that teaches the world how to love. That takes growth; for as a priest I am trying to grow, not just physically due to a love for chicken dinners and doughnuts, but spiritually - I learn from my mistakes, pray, and try to grow as a man. So with that, just a few thoughts for how couples can continue to grow closer together.

First and foremost, realize that a marriage takes three. Sometimes we can think of God as the fire extinguisher behind the “break glass in case of emergency” sign. But God is with us every step of the way. Make time for prayer. Come to Mass. If you have kids, tell them about who God is. You don’t have to spend an hour a day in prayer, but even something as simple as a prayer before bed, or praying for loved ones can do so much. We all will get nervous about life and stressed out, but the one constant for us is God.

Second, talk to one another. Sometimes we can get stuck in a rut, or bottle up emotions. But that’s not too healthy. Rather it’s so important to realize that you are there for one another, and that means talking about the good

and the bad, not being afraid to have a disagreement, and most of all opening your hearts to one another. As you do this though, try to stay positive and don't forget to compliment the other, and if you have a disagreement, avoid the need to be proven right, or resist the urge to make someone feel guilty or give snide comments out of anger. We have those moments in relationships, which is why it's also so very important to say "I'm sorry" when we screw up. But just as God is there for you, it's important you know the other person is going to be there for you too in your marriage. We can all be stubborn sometimes and we sometimes have to own up to the fact that maybe we are wrong and need to do less talking or telling someone what to do and more listening.

Third, look to the cross and sacrifice. When a couple gets married, things change. It's not that you can't have time alone or go hunting or golfing or do hobbies. But as Paul says in Galatians 2:19-20, "I have been crucified with Christ, so that it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me." Like Ian sacrificing for Bridget, this is also done when we serve one another. We have a cross in every church and a couple gets married in front of a crucifix. This is because the couple looks to the Cross as a sign of what it means to live for one another. In giving of himself on the Cross, Jesus held

nothing back out of love for you and me. That is the kind of love your marriage needs to personify - going the distance for one another, making one another better. People will look to you and the sacrifices you make and it will do so much to help them know what true love is. Love is a two way street, and loving as Jesus loved is tough. While there are highs in a marriage, there are challenges too. You may have to be there for one another through a job loss; deal with an illness; sacrifice the vacation because you have an unexpected bill or need a garage door more than a trip to Disneyworld. or the day may come where one is in a nursing home and the other sits at their side every day. In so many ways, it's important to think of the needs of the other, whether you are there after a bad day at work, pick up on the non-verbal message that tells you you need to be by the other person's side, or just do something spontaneously nice like bringing flowers home or making a favorite dinner for the other person. All of these are ways we show our love.

Fourth, challenge one another. Most of the time, things will be great. But as life goes on, a couple might find that there are things that they can do to help the other person. Maybe one of you is getting stressed out and working too many hours. Maybe one of you will be bottling up emotions too

much. Or maybe there's a lifestyle decision you can do differently. Priests often have what's called a spiritual director to help us grow, and in a marriage that person can be your spouse. Don't ever be afraid to say what needs to be said, and be humble too. It could be that something comes up and one of you is wrong about it or misunderstands. But to help one another grow, our loved ones need to challenge us. With that though, it's important again to not become a negative person.

Fifth, have balance. Fr. Arnie Weber, longtime pastor at my first parish who's presence still hung over the church, had sayings I was told, among them apparently in every wedding homily he'd say your priorities are God, one another, kids, then work. The point is sometimes we can not only forget about God, but busyness can take over, and a person becomes a workaholic or prioritizes sports and academics and school stuff. Nothing wrong with these things, but it's quite alright to have a family game night, stay in, or go out in a date 20 years after you've been married. God took a day off, so can you as a couple or a family.

Sixth, never forget, you are a team. That's so important to remember.

Sometimes we can get self-centered as humans; it's in our nature. Mom

has to say to us share your toys with your sister sometimes when we are 5, but that part of people never really goes away. When we become selfish, it can be a problem. Something as simple as not asking the other person where they'd like to go on a day trip or for dinner can become a way of life where we lose sight of the other person. Remember you have a partnership, and it's 50/50. Talk things through, and realize you both will always have to give a little. Never lose sight of trying to think about the other person.

Seventh, challenge yourself. Ask yourself how am I doing? Am I loving my spouse, my kids as much as I should? How am I living out the vows I professed on my wedding day? Am I becoming expectant? Am I becoming too controlling with what i want done or money or have to have things done my way? Do I talk about what's in my heart? Am I a good parent? Are there things in my life that are causing me to be too ornery or crabby with my spouse? We need to forgive ourselves and recognize we're human, but also that we are always growing as people too in our vocation.

We must never forget, each one of us is to be a sign to others of God, for we are his voice, his hands, his face. And as I said last week, we are all coworkers in His vineyard striving to bring in the harvest.

In heaven, there isn't a Catholic and Protestant neighborhood, as there are still to this day in parts of Belfast that are heavily Catholic and Protestant, and you'll still apparently find some fencing and gates, structures of the curious term "peace walls" that were erected by the British government to keep people apart who were Catholic and Protestant to keep the peace. On our part, may we strive to see this truth, and tear down what divides us and open up our eyes and hearts to the love of God while trying to see it in one another, living in community and recognizing that together, in our marriages, our families and our world, it is in one another that we can find such joy and happiness as we journey together as the people of God to the heavenly kingdom.