

Though my mom and dad had things they'd like to do, growing up, what I remember is how their marriage centered so much around God, and our family, and how they both tried to help me to appreciate what that word "love" really meant as a way of life.

No matter what, we were at Mass every weekend. I can't remember an evening going by without praying with my mom or dad before going to bed. And mom who was fond of saying "never do half a job" would never do half a job herself, whether she was cleaning, helping me with homework, or working hard at her job. Dad was the same. And looking back, I'd also see them work on their marriage too - they were, and still are, always there for one another.

The point is from an early age, I learned from them that love means truly putting all the chips in the center of the table; it means being seized by God, and surrendering to Him, and carrying out that love through actions. When we do, what we find is true happiness and peace in our lives, no matter what life brings us, because we are centered in God and know that He will ultimately lead us through life.

As we all know, life can be quite hard at times. My parents have worked so hard, but like all of us had plenty of challenges, as have so many couples.

In Wisconsin, there once lived a couple by the name of Sandra and Ray Knudson. They met in 1981. And their challenges would be too much for many, but due to their deep faith, they knew they were called to one another.

In the summer of 1981, Sandra was at Christian Outreach Center in Hillsboro, Missouri, which was hosting various camps, including a singles camp. The camp she was a part of consisted of fun activities, study of the Bible, and also meeting Christian singles. As the week progressed, she found herself spending quite a bit of time with a young man from Wisconsin. Another camper warned her though, "It looks like something neurological is going on with Ray. I would be careful about getting too involved." She, Ray and God had other plans though.

Ray's last words to Sandra before heading back to Wisconsin were "We'll see what God will do." As the weeks went on, letters and phone calls

became more numerous. She soon realized that even if there were a neurological problem, it could not keep her from falling in love with Ray.

Ray's deep commitment to God, his zest for life, and his childlike ways won Sandra's heart. His lighthearted, fun-loving spirit was wonderful to Sandra, and somehow she writes, she knew life with Ray Knudsen would be a real adventure.

She often thinks back to a poem by Robert Frost entitled "The Road Not Taken." The last lines of the poem state ***"Two roads diverged in a wood and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."***

The road Sandra chose to walk with Ray definitely made all the difference in her life. She says that road totally reshaped her and actually served to catapult her into God's destiny for her life.

Four years after they were married, Ray was diagnosed with a rare form of cerebral degeneration with ataxia. Always optimistic, Ray took the diagnosis very casually. Sandra was the one who struggled with worry.

Her life with Ray was not a typical “happily ever after” story. In most respects, she says, it was just the opposite. It seemed like it was just one hurdle after another. They were not delivered out of the fires, but rather given the grace to walk through them. With God’s help, the adversities shaped them into stronger, more determined individuals. They found out that faith in God and a good attitude far outweigh anything the world can throw at you. God stayed their main focus no matter what storm clouds loomed over them. Sandra says that God proved Himself faithful over and over and over again as they cried out to him day by day.

Through the years, Ray’s example of faith, his surrender and trust began to rub off on Sandra. She doesn’t know if she ever achieved Ray’s level of acceptance and trust, but she did grow to understand that God was in control - no matter what - and he had their backs.

As the years progressed, so too did the disease. Initially it was weakness in his legs, trouble walking in a straight line, and excessive dizziness. At the onset, he used one cane, then two canes, then crutches, a walker and finally a wheelchair. But walking was not the only thing taken from him. He

also lost strength and usage of his hands to the point that he could not take care of basic daily needs of his personal hygiene. He had some hearing loss. Then swallowing became difficult as he lost muscle tone throughout his whole body. Choking episodes at the dinner table were regular events.

Every loss she says was devastating, but probably the most difficult was losing his voice. The words Ray could pronounce came out garbled and hard to decipher. Ray loved to talk, so being stripped of the ability to communicate was quite a blow. The verbal exchanges they had were very limited.

Through all of this, the grace of God she says continued to lift them both above their circumstances. One of their wedding gifts said it best. It was a photograph of a serene wooded pathway. Inscribed at the bottom were the words: ***“The will of God will not take you where the grace of God will not keep you.”***

Now she is able to look back and see why Ray was a victor even in the midst of disability. Although he had days when darkness and despair tried to engulf him, he would not allow himself to stay there. Sometimes he knew

that having pity parties would just make matters worse. Ray's joy seemed to bubble out of him when you least expected it, she says. His smile and laughter lifted u people around him. It made the decision to think about others more than he thought about himself.

Sandra writes Ray never shook his fist at God and wondered why his life had been so hard. He offered praise and worship to Jesus Christ with the giving of thanks on a continual basis. His profound love for His Creator was seen by all who knew him, and it never diminished. The last words out of his mouth were the song: "Oh, How I Love Jesus."

As Sandra cared for him and watched the disease ravage his body, she marveled how the spirit of him soared even while his physical body was deteriorating. He was the one who lifted up Sandra many times. His joy, love, laughter and prayers carried her through some very dark days.

Somehow, Sandra notes, God planted in both of them the tools they needed to be over-comers in the midst of adversity. Words cannot completely depict how hard some of their days were. But another reality

she says is also true - mere words cannot begin to express the love, strength, peace and even joy that God richly poured upon them.

As she looks back now, she says she would not have changed their situation. James 1:2-4 says, "Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing."

Through all of the storms, God was in their midst. Was it ever easy? No, she says. Was it worth it? A resounding yes. And was her life with Ray an adventure? Without a doubt she says, an adventure only seen with spiritual eyes.

What they had, and what I've seen in so many wonderful marriages from my parents to the people I've met as a priest, is this great commitment to God and one another. And this week's Gospel, where Jesus emphasizes the importance of what Moses says in our first reading, is a reminder to us

to take seriously our relationship with God and one another, not as just a half-hearted thing but as a way of life if we profess to be a Christian.

Jesus in our Gospel this week is asked a question, “which is the first of all the commandments?” And he cites Deuteronomy 6, “Hear, O Isreal! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone...Therefore you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today.” That the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, is a fundamental part of Jewish belief, as well as our Christian faith, because God’s love for us is so deep. It’s what caused Ray to have that complete trust that no matter what he was going through, God was with him. It’s what caused Sandra and Ray to hear God calling them to marriage. Our call is the same call given to Israel which is to hear that voice in our lives and respond to it. Jesus in re-iterating this commandment tells us that happens by loving God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength. And all of us would say we love God, but when you hear those words the challenge for us is to live them out. And there are concrete ways we can do just that.

With respect to the heart, where is your heart? Are you focused on loving God and is your heart with him, or is it in other things in your life? Does your heart rest with God and do you let Him into your heart but opening up your heart to Him with your sins and struggles and your anxieties? Is your heart on your job, your possessions, your schedule, or is it with God?

With respect to the soul, much like we keep the body in shape through exercise, we keep the soul fit through growing in the faith. The soul is the spiritual side of ourselves. Sandra and Ray were people of prayer and faith. How do you show your love for God in your soul? Are you able to hit the “pause” button from life and really get something out of Mass, even if you’ve lost the battle of getting everyone in the car and have to come in a bit late, or have so much on your mind? Are you able to find a little time for God during the week, and invite God into your hearts?

With respect to the mind, our faith is a thinking faith. Sandra and Ray met at a singles camp that had prayer and also Bible studies; they prayed, but also tried to grow in their understanding of the faith. We strive to learn our faith the course of a lifetime, so ask yourself how you’ve thought about your faith over the years. Do you know what we believe and why? Do we think

about our faith, and try to appreciate what the bishops teach on faith and morals, or just tune out what we might not want to hear? Have you thought about reading a spiritual book, or maybe even part of the catechism?

With respect to strength, a question can be how do we stand up for the faith and help others to see the truth? When a loved one is making a bad moral decision, do we help them try to see the right path? When a family member says "I'm not going to Mass," do we ignore it or talk about it with them about why it's so important? When someone starts bashing the Church, or misrepresenting what the marriage amendment is about, do we say something? Do we show a willingness to do the right thing such as not engaging in bad actions like gossiping or putting down others? Do we show the daily strength faith loving God requires in actions too, taking a page from Sandra and Ray's relationship and what Jesus did at the Last Supper?

And finally, let's not forget the second part of the same commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. It starts with loved ones - can you love like Ray and Sandra? How are you treating your family members? Are you serving them or expect them to serve you? How do you treat others at school or at

work? How do we treat people we don't like based on personality, or politics? And, as the commandment also asks, how do you love yourself? Can you forgive yourself, and do you give yourself time to rest and accept the fact that you are not perfect?

Indeed, while not all of us might be spiritually blind as Bartimaeus is in last week's Gospel, I think most all of us have less than perfect spiritual vision. We have a hard time seeing the road less travelled which is the road God wants us to take. As I said last week, it requires constant work. As you don't simply say to a loved one "I love you" once a week and then say you'll see them in a week, but come to know them inside out and everything about them, so it is with our faith. God's love for us is so deep, so let us in turn strive to return that love by truly loving God with our whole mind, our whole heart, and all our strength. The love of God helped Sandra and Ray through so many challenges, and it does the same for us too - hopefully on our part when we say or sing of how much we love our Lord and offer peace to one another, we truly make it a way of life.