Celebrating the Vocation of Marriage

Over the years I've had the chance to get to know so many married couples, from of course my parents growing up in a family as we all do, to people who were just getting married as I speak with them about their relationship and hopes for the future, to people like Ambrose and Leona, two parishioners I knew in Delano who at the time had been married an incredible 77 years. And in so many of them, what I'd see is love reveled in so many ways; from the sacrifices people make for one another, to the way people treat one another and their kids. Much like the love of the Trinity is meant to flow outward to humanity, the married couple reflects this in how they are a visible sign through their vocation of God's love.

It probably won't come as a shock, but Valentine's Day this upcoming Friday isn't too big of a deal for me. However, as a priest, I do celebrate love with couples as a witness to weddings. It's always an honor to celebrate this day with a couple, because a marriage is such a significant event not just for them, but for everyone who will know this couple. Through their choices, they can make one another, and other people from others in their family to the greater world, better.

I try to personalize each homily meeting with the couple and getting to know their story – how they met, what they hope for, what they love the most about each other, etc. And I also share in the homily some reflections on the meaning of marriage, and of the importance of the sacrament they are celebrating.

A few years back, I came across a great article on marriage where the author offered suggestions for couples to keep in mind. And while each homily I write will differ based on the couple's story and the readings, I try to incorporate these things into each wedding homily. I'd like to share them here too, because it's a great list for married couples to think about.

1. **Telling each other how you feel**. Sounds easy, but sometimes we bottle up emotions especially from each other. It's especially important to be honest about things you have concerns about - such as changes in behavior, concerns over an addiction, etc. Don't use the Minnesota version of "How are you doing" where we assume the answer is always "OK" - because often it's not OK.

2. **Form an** "**us.**" It's what we'll see symbolized when you join your hands at the exchange of the vows. It's what we heard in the Gospel. A theology of marriage is that the two become one through the bond. While you need time apart, couples do things together - from cleaning the house to going to activities. A good question to ask is "What do I need and desire in my life and in my relationship with you? And what do you need and desire in your life and relationship with me? In the Gospel you picked, Jesus gives us that commandment "love one another as I have loved you," and that takes a daily commitment. Talk as they say is cheap; words mean things and learning how to live out love to serve one another and truly love each other is something we need to grow in daily.

3. **Deal with conflict.** Every healthy marriage has conflict, because you have two intelligent, rational people coming upon problems and seeing them differently. And because we all think differently, there will be conflict. Resolution of it is important. The biggest problems, called "The Four Horseman of the Apocolypse" by marriage researcher and author John Gottman, are criticism (e.g., you are sloppy, you never do enough, etc"); contempt (being sarcastic or cynical); defensiveness (blaming the other person) and stonewalling (the silent treatment, refusing to talk about the issue and burying it). So don't be afraid to disagree.

4. **Pay attention to the Third Party in the marriage: God.** A wedding shouldn't take place in a Church because of the stained glass, or the fact that it looks architecturally nice. It's because we believe God is present in the marriage. Try to see how God is present always in your marriage. Make some time for prayer. Come to church together and have an active spiritual life, and look for was you can both be involved in a parish.

5. **Focus on the positive.** So often we can tear each other down in life; it's our favorite activity it seems if you go by social media. That can creep into a marriage too. Try to compliment each other, and cherish one another.

6. **Remember you don't have to wait for an anniversary or a birthday to do something nice.** Maybe you can surprise the other with something small like coffee in bed, or keeping the other company if they start work earlier than you do, or helping one another in with the groceries, etc. There are many little things that can be done that really help a marriage grow.

7. **Compromise.** If one party closes their ears to the needs of the others, it's a big problem. Every married couple knows there will be frustrations with the other. But rather than digging in one's heels, it's important to listen to where the other person is coming from.

8. **Remember you are a team.** A common wedding reading is from the book of Genesis, when Adam sees Eve for the first time. Adam has it all in the garden but he's missing one thing to be truly happy. When Eve, his equal, arrives, he cries out in joy "this one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." In our soul mate, our closest friend, we are lifted higher - but we are also called to mutually love and serve one another. It's important to work together on things from household chores to where we go on vacation to finances and have that mutual respect for one another.

9. **Seek a supportive community.** At every wedding, I say to the couple the people here with you are not just hear for the meal and cake but are people you should turn to rely on. As a priest, I get advice from other priests. I get help from parishioners who help me in my service to the parish. I get advice from friends and family. God knows we can't do it alone, and sometimes in a marriage it helps to get advice from someone else, whether it's your parents, others in the parish, or even going on a marriage retreat.

10. **Don't be afraid to say "I'm sorry."** So often pride gets in the way, and we can't admit we made a mistake. But we are all flawed; we ask for forgiveness at the start of each Mass, we need to do that in marriages and relationships too, as we all make mistakes.

Sometimes people think of the term "vocation" as applying to religious life of priests, deacons and sisters, but the sacrament of Marriage is just as important as Holy Orders. Both are sacraments of service and both can help the face of God be revealed in everyday life. Married life can be such a testament to the true meaning of love, found not just in a Valentine's card, but in the daily commitment a husband and wife make to one another. To all of our married couples, thank you for being a visible sign of God's presence in the world, and may the Holy Spirit continue to strengthen you and help your love to grow every day!

God bless,

Fr. Paul