

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Genesis 2:18-24

Hebrews 2:9-11

Mark 10:2-16

THE BOOK OF GENESIS and today's Gospel reading from Mark are both about marriage. Years ago, a homily on these readings would speak about the presence of divorce in our culture. These days, however, some truths about marriage need to be stated about which we seldom reflect and which we need to remember.

The first truth is that marriage is unique; secondly that it is a vocation, and thirdly that it is a lighthouse.

First of all, marriage is a unique relationship. We are all involved in many relationships in our life, some strong, some weak; some temporary, some enduring. The Bible speaks of many relationships: leader and people; teacher and pupil; friend and friend; king and people; landlord and tenant; commander and army; doctor and patient; lawyer and client. Yet, out of this vast array of human relationships, the Book of Genesis singles out only one and traces it back to the very start of creation — the relationship of husband and wife. It is the only relationship that Scripture teaches us was uniquely created by God. It is older than Israel and more ancient than the Church.

Marriage is not the result of human convention, social arrangement or legislation as other relationships are. The marriage of man and woman is deeply inscribed by God in the very nature of human beings. Nothing can replace it or imitate it. It is the only human relationship that is designed and intended by God to be superior to all others, "for this reason a man leaves father and mother, clings to the wife and they become one." All other relationships come and go. Leaders come and go; friends come and go in our life; associates enter and leave our life. Some relationships happen to last, others don't.

Marriage is the only one where two people promise, in fact

vow to be faithful to each other no matter what happens until death. They do so not only to share their lives but also to give life. At the heart of marriage is not romance, emotion or feeling but a vow, a very powerful vow.

That vow, not its accompanying feelings, forms the foundation of a relationship and a family. What makes marriage unique, far different than any other human relationship we know and have, is the vow of fidelity to one person for life, to give life.

Marriage is not only a unique relationship; it is also a vocation in the Church. So often, people tend to think of marriage as a private relationship, like a young couple together on a park bench, forgetful of the world around them. The Church, however, sees marriage as something more than that. It is a vocation in and for the Church. That is why marriage is a very public relationship in which the Church has an interest, the State has an interest, and the respective families of the bride and groom have an interest. It is a public relationship in which two people promise to transmit the sacred gift of life, to raise children in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ, and to display, model, and express for each other Christ's sacrificial love.

They promise to each other the same kind of fidelity that God showed to Israel and Jesus to His Church. The Church has seen many ups and downs and through them all, the Lord has been faithful to the Church. Christ loves His Church no matter what. He is always present in the sacraments. No matter who the priest is or the size or fervor of the congregation, Christ is there.

A married couple promise to love each other like that. They are not promising fidelity to someone who is perfect, but to a fellow human being who is imperfect. A marriage vow shows its power precisely when we are faithful to a person who is flawed, limited, and vulnerable — because that is how the Lord is faithful to us.

Finally, marriage is a lighthouse. In a world of so many bro-

ken promises, so many broken contracts, it should stand as a lighthouse showing what is possible by the grace of God.

But what about divorce? We are all touched by divorce. It is a fact of our world and of our families. We always need to show special compassion and care for those who are divorced. A broken marriage is always a sign of our wounded world. It shows how much we need the healing grace of God, the wisdom of the Holy Spirit before entering relationships, how much we need the help of others to make a marriage survive or, after the tragedy of divorce, to find repair and renewal.

But we also need to hold up the truth that fidelity is possible, that marriage as God intended can happen. In a marriage of many years, every day may not be the "Fourth of July," but every day can be a day of fidelity. Fidelity in marriage (like fidelity in the priesthood) doesn't just drop out of heaven. It is forged and strengthened week by week, year by year here on earth. We are trying to live out the commitment of marriage and of priesthood not in a luxurious Eden or in a temptation-free Paradise. In fact, as we all recall, even Paradise wasn't free of temptation. The human race has long ago eaten of the forbidden fruit and Paradise is gone. Now, we have to struggle and work to be faithful. By trying to be faithful in an unfaithful world, we are showing that the grace of God can help us do something we can't do by ourselves, be faithful to our vocation. The grace of fidelity is an awesome grace.

We should pray for those working to remain faithful to their commitments in marriage, priesthood and religious life. They need the support of our prayer. Our world needs the witness of fidelity in vocation whether in priesthood or marriage.

Fidelity gives powerful light in an unfaithful world.