

A young couple decided to wed. As the big day approached, they grew apprehensive. Each had a problem they had never before shared with anyone, not even each other. The groom-to-be, overcoming his fear, decided to ask his father for advice. "Dad," he said, "I am deeply concerned about the success of my marriage. I love my fiancée very much, but you see, I have very smelly feet, and I'm afraid that my future wife will be put off by them." "No problem," said his dad. "All you have to do is wash your feet as often as possible and always wear socks, even to bed." Well, to him this seemed a workable solution. The bride-to-be, overcoming her fear, decided to take her problem up with her mom. "Mom," she said, "When I wake up in the morning my breath is truly awful." "Honey," her mother consoled, "everyone has bad breath in the morning." "No, you don't understand. My morning breath is so bad, I'm afraid that my new husband will not want to sleep in the same room with me." Her mother said simply, "Try this. In the morning, get straight out of bed and head for the bathroom and brush your teeth. The key is not to say a word until you've brushed your teeth. Not a word," her mother affirmed. Well, she thought it was certainly worth a try. The loving couple was finally married in a beautiful ceremony. Not forgetting the advice each had received, he with his perpetual socks and she with her morning silence, they managed quite well. That is, until about six months later. Shortly before dawn, the husband woke with a start to find that one of his socks had come off. Fearful of the consequences, he frantically searched the bed. This, of course, woke his bride, who without thinking, immediately asked, "What on earth are you doing?" "Oh, no!" he gasped in shock, "You've swallowed my sock!" (1)

It is strange to be in Iowa during a presidential campaign. One sees advertisements everywhere. Every other TV ad presents yet another smiling face, another pithy slogan, and some idealistic scene. Each potential candidate appeals to some value that resonates with our culture: freedom, honesty, justice, taxation, and American history. This one will restore this; that candidate will fight for something else. Whether any of them can really change things is another question.

But can humans live without ideals? We all have pictures in our heads about the way things should be, and the scriptures this week underscore an ideal I've heard again and again in my decades of preparing people for marriage: every couple wants their marriage to be total, permanent, exclusive, and filled with love. Every couple expects its marriage to endure.

Of course, it's in the very nature of love to give oneself to the beloved. And if we are going to do that, we cannot do that only in part. We don't truly love with only part of ourselves, or only for a part of our years, or only under certain conditions. The values of marriage which we believers have upheld, in Christ, are the values that speak to the truths of human love.

With the World Meeting on the Family in Philadelphia last week, and the upcoming Synod next month, these ideals will be articulated with particular strength. They are important not only for what we think marriage is about, but also for the reality of our families. Children need the faithfulness of their parents. Children need the stable and abiding love of their mothers and fathers. If this love is missing, if they cannot sense this love, it takes many years to find a stable base, to overcome the self-questioning: what happened with mommy and daddy? Was it my fault?

Of course, we have this ideal about marriage because we have this ideal about God. God loves us totally and completely, unconditionally, and shows this love in Jesus Christ. Breakups, divorce, infidelity—these have nothing to do with the love that God shows us. How can they be part of our lives?

Yet they are, aren't they? Marriages break up despite the best intentions of the parties when they marry. People grow apart. Things happen that destroy the relationship. And this is a burden not only for the couple, not only for the family, but for society itself. We all carry the scars of vows that were not able to be fulfilled. When faithfulness is broken, we are all broken. What then should we do? Two things.

First, we have to support those people who have suffered the breakdown of their marriage. Beyond any fault, beyond any shame, we have to be with people in their trauma, if only to accompany them. Divorce is a great experience of separation, almost one of abandonment. Divorced people should not feel further abandoned. We can treat divorce better as a wound than as a moral flaw. When Aldous Huxley wrote his famous novel about the future, *Brave New World*, he predicted that some day marriage licenses would be sold just like dog licenses--good for only twelve months. Furthermore, you would be able to use them for a different "pet"--I mean, spouse--each time, if that's what you want. And you could purchase as many as makes you happy!

Fortunately we are not at that state yet, but who can doubt that traditional marriages are facing difficulties. Marriages are coming apart at an alarming rate. Sometimes there are some very understandable reasons why a marriage comes apart. And few of us are in a position to point fingers. Nearly every family has been touched in some way by this epidemic, both inside and outside the church.

Actually, not all Pharisees took such a relaxed view of marriage. Rabbi Shammai, one of the important rabbis of the day, allowed divorce only if the wife was guilty of sexual immorality. A better known rabbi however, Rabbi Hillel, allowed a husband to divorce his wife for almost any reason. In that day of overt sexism, of course, neither rabbi could have imagined women divorcing their husband.

In Mark 10 some Pharisees approached Jesus to test him to see what he believed about divorce and remarriage. Now, it's important to see that the Pharisees didn't really care what Jesus thought about marriage. This was a test. They wanted him to give a self-incriminating response that would arouse opposition against him. Maybe, they thought, he would contradict the commands of Moses in Deuteronomy. Perhaps they expected Jesus to take sides among the rabbinic schools in this dispute, thereby splitting the ranks of his followers. Or maybe in his response, he would offend Herod Antipas as John the Baptist did and be arrested and executed, since he was under Herod's jurisdiction.

Jesus, however, did none of the above. He skipped right over Moses' teaching to the first book of the Bible, the book of Genesis. He wanted to educate the Pharisees as to God's ideal for marriage. Moses wrote the law in Deuteronomy allowing divorce, Jesus said, in view of the hardheartedness of the people in refusing to accept God's ideal of love, commitment and forgiveness. Jesus then contrasts their view of marriage with God's view from the beginning of creation. Now you, too, may ask what is God's view?

According to Genesis 2:21-24, God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of Adam's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of Adam, and he brought her to Adam. And Adam said, "Wow!" or something like that. Then he added, "This is now bone of my bones and

flesh of my flesh; she shall be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man."

Secondly, we have to, as believers, rally around those elements of society that support faithfulness, and put aside those elements which do not. So much of our public media presumes unfaithfulness, casual attitudes toward sex, a personal freedom at any cost. We see this on TV, in movies, and in the books we read. All of this creates an environment in which the ideals we hold, and the values of God, become obscured. Without being prudish or prigs, we have to speak up and say what our values are, because this speaks the truth of our own natures and the truth of God.

The Letter to the Hebrews talks about the way God has united himself to us in Jesus who becomes our mediator, one among us. Christ took on the brokenness of our lives that we might overcome brokenness in his Kingdom. When we live our ideals, and live the pattern of love God gave us, the Kingdom becomes clearer, more accessible, more fully present in our lives. With Christ, we treasure every vow we make, especially those that reflect his life and love.