

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible; light a candle beside it. Place family photos nearby.

LEADER: Life-giving God, who live three in one love, you call us beyond our present reach and beyond our present fears.

ALL: You call us beyond defining ourselves by status or the roles we fill.

LEADER: You call us to define ourselves by the loving community we build among us.

ALL: We come to hear and live your Word. Amen.

Marriage is a life work, a promise and a process couples live out over time. With the gift of life comes the capacity to develop into full human beings. With marriage, relationships ideally grow deep and sustaining as partners share daily and intimate life together. In moments of ecstasy and anguish, agreeing and arguing, couples weave ties that bind.

Today more partners than not expect equality and mutuality in marriage. They share the chores that keep a household going and the responsibilities for raising children. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Love in the Family, Pope Francis affirms the growing equality and reciprocity between men

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and women in their marriages today (#54). Some couples favor traditional homemaker and breadwinner roles.

Today young people with college educations and high-earning jobs are marrying later, men at 29 and women at 27. Travel offers too many adventures to settle down, they need more education, or they want to pay down loans. These young people who try out their dreams and test relationships stay married more successfully, divorcing less, than those in the past who married younger. Cohabitation is common, often as a step to marriage. Where the economy lags and young men lack job opportunity, they can't even think about marriage.

What about divorce? This is the question in Sunday's gospel and a question that the Synod on the Family engaged.



Marriages fall apart. A spouse needs to escape violence or subjugation. Spouses aren't mature enough to make commitments. In *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), Pope Francis summarizes the Synod's thinking and speaks to the complexities married couples face today.

Where legalists draw sharp unyielding lines, Pope Francis speaks pastorally about making room for grace and respecting people's consciences. The Church that is a field hospital doesn't cut off divorced and remarried couples from communion and the companionship of parish life.

● What do you value about marriage? What's hardest?

GOSPEL

In marriage, two become one.

Take parts; proclaim the gospel.

NARRATOR: Some Pharisees came up to Jesus and asked him a question as a test.

PHARISEE 1: Tell us, does the Law allow a husband to divorce his wife?

JESUS: What law did Moses give you?

PHARISEE 2: Moses gave permission for a husband to write a divorce notice and send his wife away.

JESUS: Moses wrote this law for you because you are so hard to teach. But from the beginning of



creation, God made them male and female, and for this reason men and women leave their fathers and mothers and the two become one. They are no longer two but one. Let no one separate what God has joined.

NARRATOR: Back in the house later, Jesus' disciples asked him about this matter.

JESUS: A man who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery against his wife. In the same way, a woman who divorces her husband and marries another man commits adultery.

Mark 10.2-12

What is the challenge of marriage for Christians?

The Pharisees ask Jesus a legal question—does the law of Moses allow a husband to divorce his wife? The Pharisees are following a familiar teaching method—asking a question and arguing how the law applies. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees draw on accumulated oral precedents and not only on the written law in the first five books of the bible, the Torah.

In our time the Pharisees' question may seem one-sided and outdated. Their question addresses only what the law allows a husband to do. It does not give a wife the equal rights we expect in our country.

Jesus sidesteps this legal controversy hotly debated among rabbis of his time. Rather than look at what is permissible, Jesus focuses on what is ideal. He puts the Pharisees' question in the context of the creation stories that begin the book of Genesis. In this context men and women are equal.

Genesis 1 asserts that the Creator makes humankind in the divine image and gifts them with sexuality, "male and female God created them" (1.26-27). The creation story in Genesis 2 describes men and women made of the same bone and made for becoming one. "Therefore a man leaves his father and mother

and clings to his wife and they become one flesh" (2.24).

The law that allows divorce appears in Deuteronomy 24.1-4. It assumes a husband owns his wife and can send her out of his house. A woman's sexuality belongs to her husband who expects virginity before marriage, fidelity during marriage, and no remarriage in the case of divorce. To repudiate a wife puts her outside the family social structure, in effect impoverishing her.

Among the rabbis who discuss divorce in Jesus' time, some allow sending a wife away only in the case of her infidelity. Others allow divorce for trivial reasons, for example, finding a more comely woman. In taking the controversy back to the creation stories, Jesus insists God's purpose for men and women is union, to become one flesh.

- What pains and problems do divorces create for men today? For women?
- What message for today do you hear in Jesus' teaching?

Marriage is the most common way Christians live out their discipleship. In marriage spouses promise to love each other faithfully and open their lives to each other's family and friends. Marriage puts the future in their hands in the obligation to welcome children into their lives.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church describes marriage as a sacrament “at the service of communion.” It builds bonds of blood and networks of love and friendship—the social weave that holds us together. This is the ongoing vocation of marriage.

We humans are social beings. We thrive through interacting and forming relationships. In countless daily ways spouses build their union and at the same time must affirm and develop their separate wholeness. Each must trust the other to bring the wholeheartedness Jesus asks of his disciples to their relationship.

Lighting one unity candle from two candles in a marriage ceremony doesn’t extinguish a couple’s separate selves. When a wife and husband don’t treat one another as equals with mutual respect, then the generosity of one can sour into destructive self-sacrifice.

Marriage requires learning, listening, forgiving one another, reconciling. Our society and Church depend on families and the circles of relationships marriages generate as the building blocks of wider communities.

● **How has marriage widened your circle?**



● **What is one thing you have learned about yourself through marriage?**

● **How does your commitment as a Christian affect your marriage in practical ways?**

Many couples grow together creatively, faithfully, forgiving each other, supporting generous family and civic commitments, enjoying each other. Professor Stephanie Coontz studies and writes about families. Her book *The Way We Never Were* challenges the nostalgic myth that in the Fifties most people lived in stable, nuclear families with a breadwinner husband and child-caring wife. Some did; some do now. She followed with a second book *The Way We*

Really Are that describes how creatively people form and extend their ties to sustain one another.

The Catholic Church values marriage as a way to follow Jesus. It celebrates and blesses marriage as a sacrament that makes Jesus’ love for us visible in a relationship with a spouse. Marriage vows express a lifelong commitment between two people, which the Church values as indissoluble.

“It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations,” Pope Francis writes (#304). Conscience is our tool for discerning what is right in the concrete.

For Francis, mercy is the beating heart of the gospel (#309). He cautions, “At times we find it hard to make room for God’s unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. It’s the worst way of watering down the gospel” (#311).

Pope Francis holds up the couple that loves and begets life as a true living icon...capable of revealing God the Creator and Savior (#11). The dialogue that makes marriages work requires “a long and demanding apprenticeship” (#136).

● **Whose marriages inspire you?**

● **What wisdom do you see in the permanency of marriage?**

DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

Participate in Bread for the World’s Offering of Letters this Sunday or any day all year. Letters urge Congress to end hunger. Visit the Bread.org website for stories about effective programs to end hunger.

● Visit FeedingAmerica.org for Child Hunger Facts.

What's at stake in Adam's rib?

People use Sunday's first reading, Genesis 2.18-24, which Jesus quotes in the gospel, to argue for men's right to dominate women. People say, "Didn't God make a woman to be the helpmate for the man? Wasn't Eve created second and from Adam's rib?" Or, was the best created last?

About helpmate. *The New American Bible*, which Catholics read at Sunday liturgy, has God say, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him." *Suitable partner* translates the two Hebrew words in the story better than *helpmate*. Literally, the two words mean one who corresponds in face-to-face likeness.

About the rib. To be made from the bone of another is to be made of the essence of the other.

About who was made first and second. The word *adam* is not a man's name in the Genesis story. The word *adam* means *human*. The Hebrew word *adamah* means *earth*. In telling how God made the *adam* from the *adamah*, the creation story explains humans are from and of the earth. The *adam* is an *earthling* who is neither male or female at first (Genesis 2.7). Not until the lines of poetry near the end does the story use the Hebrew words 'is and 'issah, expressing male and female sexual difference. In the story, common humanity precedes sexual differentiation.

Read the following version of the creation story with the word *adam* translated human rather than man.

God makes two out of one.

Creator God said: "It is not good for human to be alone. I will make a partner for human." So Creator God formed wild animals and birds of the air out of the earth, and brought them to human to see what human would call them; whatever human called each would be its name. Human gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be the suitable partner for human.

So Creator God cast a deep sleep on human, and while human was asleep, took out a rib and closed up its place with flesh. Creator God built up the rib taken from human into a woman. When the Creator God brought the woman, human said: "This one, at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called female, for from the male this one has been taken." That is why a husband leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.

Genesis 2.18-24

- What use have you heard people make of the creation story to argue men are superior to women?
- How does reading male and female only at the end of the story affect how you interpret the story?

PRAY

Ask God's help in this prayer both for family needs and for help in recognizing ways to work together to build up community.

LEADER: Faithful God, you live three in one dynamic, creative love.

ALL: Help us witness to your faithfulness in our faithfulness to our spouses and friends.

LEADER: Creative God, you make us free to participate in building up your world.

ALL: May our love for family and friends generate peaceful neighborhoods and nations.

LEADER: Loving God, you give us the capacity to love and serve each other.

ALL: Help us draw all people into community and communion with one another.

LEADER: Loving God, you make us for belonging to you and those we love.

Take turns making petitions.

Respond to each:

ALL: Keep us in your love.



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Tips for Using *Sunday by Sunday*

goodgroundpress.com—has three helpful guides for you.

- **How to Use Each Issue** *Sunday by Sunday* is easy to use. This step-by-step outline makes it even easier.
- **How to Form Faith-Sharing Groups** We hear from our readers and pass their wisdom on to you.
- **What Faith-Sharing Groups Do When They Gather** A good review for your group.