

Pre-Marital and Marital Christian Pastoral Counseling #1

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This Person I Marry Will Change and So Will I:

In the popular culture, the decision to marry is often based on a static idea of our “ideal” companion. We brain-storm and ask ourselves about what we think we want and need and then we embark on a research project to find that person in the world. When we think we have found them, we are able to successfully check off the several qualities, traits and virtues that we have been looking for all along. We then exult, “Eureka!”

Then life happens, and while conservative Christians reject that concept of evolution which views us as having come from apes, we shouldn’t deny lesser forms of evolution. You can bet your bottom dollar: the one you are about to marry is going to change over time and just before you can really start worrying, you should tack on the fact that you’re going to be changing over time as well. Not all of the change will be pleasant.

This is why I have personally never been impressed with folks who come in for crisis counseling after one, five or 20 years of marriage and say, “I want a divorce, because I was different, I was too young, I was too dumb, I was depressed, I was unclear, I have changed, I have new needs, priorities, goals, ambitions, etc. etc.” These are the words of fools who do not understand the first thing about marriage.

Jesus said, “So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” (Matthew 19:6)

God’s plan is to create the highest arena of love and we’re talking “love” in the most genuine sense: that which empowers an individual to put another ahead of themselves. That “power” of course is Christ Himself who is love and it is through His love for us that we love (1st John 4:16 & 19). In this love, the husband puts the wife first; the wife puts the husband first. The husband sacrifices for the wife as Christ sacrificed for the Church; the wife submits to the husband as the Church submits to Christ (Ephesians 5). Love keeps reaching out through all of the changes.

Christ married us – He joined us and began to live out the supreme antitype/fulfillment of marriage, that is, His union with His Church – when He was baptized by John the Baptist. He entered into our lives. By doing so, He entered into permanent relationship with fickle folk. Yet, He never divorced us. He did not divorce His disciples who one minute were ready to die with Him and the next denied Him three times. He did not divorce His disciples who spread out their garments for His processional and waved palm branches one day, but then shouted “crucify!” the next (though not all of them did). And presently, He does not divorce us today though we run as hot and cold throughout our lives toward Him. He will not divorce us. He is faithful even if our own hearts condemn us (1st John 3:20).

Evidently, marriage must mean a whole lot more than the silly imaginary idea that we marry the “perfect fit.” On the other hand, we really do marry the “perfect fit” when the person we become one with holds the Word of God in their hearts and views us and our marriage in the same way as we do. Marriage is designed to love in and through change. Marriage is holy and sacred, precisely because it does not discard when change occurs. Marriage testifies to the love of God that holds us in the palm of His hand though we go up and down like yo-yo’s in our lives and undulate like the stock market. When we marry, we do not proclaim, “I marry the one who is perfect now and will never change!” But we proclaim, “I marry one with the same faith who will abide with me regardless of the change we experience!”

And we are comforted and know great joy because of this realization: that if I get into a car accident and suffer brain damage, this one will not forsake me. If I am around an explosion and my face changes, this one will still love me. If the chemical make-up in my body causes my personality to shift, this one will continue to hold my hand. If I suffer Alzheimer’s, this one will still remember their vows.

When we marry, we are confessing that we are ready to enter the most important of all human relationships as a testimony of our faith in Christ who gave marriage to show the very relationship between Himself and His bride, the Church. Marriage is for companionship – that we would not be lonely – but it is companionship through change, great change. But God loved and stood by His people when they were in Israel and when they were in Babylon; we are called to stand by our spouse when they are “in the dumps” and “on the mountain top”.

The world and the sinful flesh doesn’t respond to this very well. These things to the sinful nature are in fact unsavory. The sinful mind simply doesn’t understand. Those who have the spirit of Christ do.

A deep mystery occurs when we walk by faith and not by sight, that is, the life of faith occurs and for those who are married, this life of faith occurs in marriage. When we hold onto the Word of God: “I’ve made you ONE” instead of our sight that says, “We’re drifting, because we’ve changed so much...look upon our great change.” What the Lord in fact performs is a beautiful work: He allows us to change together. He allows it so that we may be refined in faith, hope and love. In forgiveness which must be re-enacted constantly, and in receiving forgiveness from our spouse who stands in the stead of Christ as we continue to live in James 5:16 confessing our sins one to another that we might be healed. We have to, because we keep changing and we’re anything but graceful in the process. And so the Lord sets us up to need – constantly – mercy, patience, love, grace, forgiveness. Change demands these things, but through this pattern, our forgiveness is renewed and love is shown to be true.

In this way marriage gets better, so that we can understand why the believer can say after years and years in holy matrimony, “It is inadequate for me to say that I love him/her as much as I did on the day I married him/her, because in fact, I love him/her more.” This is a necessary statement, because the more we love, the more we practice love, the more we give love to the beloved, the more we receive love from the beloved, the more our cup overflows. Marriage precisely because the Word operates in and through change, gets better over time.

One last thing in the form of a question: "But what if our faith itself changes?" Good question, glad you asked! ☺ The Lord has accounted for this possibility. Thus, He has a plan for us: remain in the Word and Sacrament. Do not drift from these. If you remain in the Word, then you are truly Christ's disciples. Remain in the Word no matter what and the Lord will keep your faith alive, and with this abiding faith, you will be led by God to remain steadfast as a faithful husband and a faithful wife.

Prepare for change. Count on it. Let there be no surprises! Know that changes...many changes are coming. But rejoice! Because as you trust in the Lord and remain in His Word and Sacrament, the Lord will use that change to cause your love to grow. And do not give in to silly temptations like the one who sins on purpose so as to cause God's grace to abound (Romans 6), do not unnecessarily aggravate and tempt by forcing unnecessary change, but remain steadfast in Christ and remain steadfast in loving your spouse and when change must and does occur. Through it all, you will be blessed.

In your service & to Christ's glory,

Pastor Espinosa