

A newspaper cartoon showed mother reading a bedtime story to her little, curly-haired daughter. The book was called **Grim Reality** Fairy Tales, and the text read, "and the prince kissed her and they fell in love, dated a while and moved in together, broke up, got back together, got married, had a baby, got separated, got back together again, broke up, got divorced, spent time alone rediscovering themselves, met someone new, fell in love and repeated the pattern **habitually ever after.**"

Another look at grim reality: This appeared in a SC newspaper: "Mr. Jim Galeway and Miss Georgianne Bentlow were married Monday at the home of the bride's parents. The groom is a popular young bum who hasn't done a lick of work since he got expelled his junior year in college. He manages to dress well and keeps a supply of spending money because his dad is a soft-hearted old fool who takes up his bad checks instead of letting him go to jail where he belongs. The bride is a skinny, little idiot who has been flirting with every boy in town since she was 12. She smokes cigarettes and drinks mean corn liquor when she is out joy-riding in her dad's car at night. She doesn't know how to cook, sew or keep house. The parent's house was newly plastered for the wedding and the exterior newly painted, thus appropriately carrying out the wedding theme, for the groom was newly plastered and the bride freshly painted. P.S. This is the last issue of this paper and my own health is failing rapidly, but my life ambition has been to write up one wedding and tell the truth. Now that it's done, I can be at peace."

The ultimate grim reality is that somewhere between a third and half of all marriages will end in divorce.

There are lots of reasons but saddest of all are studies suggest that, in the US, when every young couple gets married, somewhere in the back of their minds is the thought that “and if this doesn’t work out, we can always get a divorce.” Commitment has the life span of a cell phone.

Yet the gospel clearly says that what **God has joined men must not separate**. And you are probably thinking that things were different back then. Actually, no they weren’t; in fact they might have been worse. Some of the Pharisees of Jesus’ day were just as lax in their treatment of marriage as many are today. A Jewish man could divorce his wife if she became “displeasing to him.” In such a case the man could write a certificate of divorce, hand it to her and send her on her way. Women could not initiate a divorce, but the men could reject their wives for trivial matters--burning his dinner, nagging him or gaining a few pounds.

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 he would contradict the commands of Moses. Or maybe in his response, he would offend Herod Antipas as John the Baptist did and be arrested and executed.

Jesus, however, skipped right over Moses’ teaching to 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.

And, as always, that was the message he wanted each person to hear and accept. If we do not hear a gospel passage as good news leading to thanksgiving and hope, it means that we are missing something essential. In the present passage, the point is not that Jesus is making a more severe law about marriage, but that he is continuing to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom. This central proclamation of Jesus' mission means the possibility of a new kind of human existence for those who accept God's reign, including men and women who enter marriage.

But, for far too many today, that possibility seems to remain out of reach. For many couples there is a lack of care and concern and an obvious lack of seriousness about the marriage vows. Ask any priest you know and they will admit that they would much rather do a funeral than perform a wedding. It's not because we are morbid or delight in other people's suffering. It has to do with how receptive people are to ministry. At the time of death, people are much more receptive to facing the ultimate issues of life. They have just experienced the limits of life and are primed to listen to the words of hope.

However, at a wedding there are so many distractions that the last thing anyone wants to hear about is their need for the love of God in their lives. The focus is on the flowers, the dresses, the music, the reception, the party, the photographer – and notice the time spent with the photographer is usually two or three times as long as the service itself. And you begin to wonder what is more important to them.

When a couple comes to begin marriage preparation one of the first questions I usually ask is, "Why do you want to get married?" The look on their faces says they are thinking "What a dumb question for the pastor to ask. They love each other! They love each other passionately. They can't stand to be separated from one another. They can't keep their hands off each other." I'm usually thinking that being passionately attracted to each other is only good for about two years.

Then for several sessions we use to testing instruments that help us talk about the stuff that will get them beyond those two years. I suspect that sometimes premarital counseling may seem like I am trying to talk them out of getting married. But that is not the case at all. I am deeply interested in helping them begin this new adventure in their lives. I want them to be happy. I want them to succeed in their marriage. It's just that marriage is such a wonderful gift from God. I want them to take full advantage of its benefit. I really want these two to become one. I want them to see that in a marriage the other person has become part of me and as I take care of me and want the best for me, I must also want the best for my mate and seek his or her highest good.

That realization prevents the need for the divorce in the first place. For a man does not treat his own flesh with contempt. He does not abuse or neglect his own flesh (unless of course, there are deep psychological and spiritual issues). All those things we do in marriages that cause the relationship to break down will be avoided if we understand that how we are treating the other is how we are supposed to treat our own flesh.

Marriage is meant to be a covenant of mutual fidelity to a lifelong union made before God and with God's help. It doesn't always work out like that but that is the ideal. Centuries ago, Tertullian wrote: "How beautiful, then, is the marriage of two Christians, two who are one in hope, one in desire, one in the way of life they follow, and one in the religion they practice." One in all the things that matter.

A writer tells about a scene at an airport that literally changed his life. He was picking up a friend. He noticed a man who stopped to greet his family. The man motioned to his youngest son (maybe six years old) as he laid down his bags. They hugged and he heard the father say, "It's so good to see you, son. I missed you so much!" "Me, too, Dad!" said the son. The oldest son (maybe nine or ten) was next. "You're already quite the young man. I love you very much, Zach!" Then he turned to their little girl (perhaps one or one-and-a-half). He kissed her and held her close. He handed his daughter to his oldest son and declared, "I've saved the best for last!" and proceeded to give his wife a long, passionate kiss. "I love you so much!" He said to his wife softly.

The writer interrupted this idyllic scene to ask, "Wow! How long have you two been married?" "Fourteen years," the man replied, as he gazed into his wife's face. "Well then, how long have you been away?" The man turned around and said, "Two whole days!" The writer was stunned. "I hope my marriage is still that loving after fourteen years!" The man stopped smiling and said, "Don't hope, friend . . . decide!"

And that's it, isn't it? For most of us it comes down to a decision. "Till death us do part."

It's not about attraction or passion, or convenience; it is a decision to reproduce in my life the faithful love that is God's life and his gift to us.