

As a deacon, I get to see the entire marriage spectrum – on the plus side, couples looking to get married, or working hard at their marriages, and alas, on the negative side, individuals seeking annulments after a sad and painful decision to divorce. I guess that’s why the Holy Spirit likes to put me on the preaching schedule for this Sunday! Some variation of this gospel reading occurs every year, taken each time from the synoptic writer’s point of view. Mark’s version, which we just heard, is the harshest and most black and white. Mathew and Luke’s version add qualifiers, and St. Paul is the most lenient of them all. What are we to believe?

I really like the way Pope Francis deals with this topic. The Church sets a high bar for married couples – we promise to marry for life, in sickness and in health, to forsake all others, to death do us part. I have yet to hear a couple qualify their vows, promising to marry for 10 years max..., or “as long as she looks as beautiful as she does now...,” or “as long as his family stays in Pennsylvania...” Everyone readily agrees to go for that high bar, and to that end, marriages are one of the most optimistic sacramental events I can witness. No wonder everyone is smiling. But...life is life. We are human beings, subject to sin and weakness, and despite the optimistic beginning, marriages do break down, although not to the degree most think. You probably remember being told that half of all marriages end in divorce, right? Wrong – the reality is much less, and varies considerably by factors like education, family history, presence of children, and income. The true number? It ranges between 25 and 40 percent, depending on your definitions and qualifiers. From my point of view, anything over 1 percent is a problem, a bar low enough to allow Hollywood stars to keep being idiots.

Back to Francis. He famously compared the Church to a field hospital that cleans and heals wounds. Those of you who are married out there know that a bad marriage can cause horrendous psychic, emotional, and yes, physical wounds that take your breath away. Sometimes abusers use the religious devotion of their spouse to justify remaining in a marriage, which is about as bad as it can get. Religion is a powerful force for good, but as we’ve seen in many places and circumstances, the devil loves to twist good in such a way that it still appears to be good, but is in reality just a thin veneer over a horrible story. Before I go any further, let me state with absolute clarity that if you are in an abusive relationship being held together by an imagined religious law, you need to wake up and get out. The Church does NOT support such a situation despite what you may heard from misled people.

But the Pope doesn't stop there. He asked the Church to re-examine rules and procedures around annulments as well. This is where the field hospital analogy works quite well. I'm always a bit surprised by the misconceptions out there about annulments. An annulment has nothing to do with a legal divorce – they are entirely separate. In fact, an annulment is not even possible until and unless the marriage has been legally dissolved. An annulment is a religious procedure that starts with the reality of a divorce and asks the question, “Given where this divorced couple is now, what was wrong from the beginning? If this couple knew then what they know now, they obviously would not have married. What was missing?” In Church language, the couple was not free to marry way back then because they did not have all of the information that they needed to make an informed choice. In short, they were not free to marry. Their promises, their vows, were based on insufficient information, which means that the vows cannot be valid. The marriage shouldn't have happened. It is canceled, zeroed out, annulled. I don't want to oversimplify this either. Digging into the past like this is painful for individuals seeking an annulment, because sometimes they realize that the problem was theirs to own as well. Cleaning and dressing wounds is often painful, but it is the only way that healing can ensue.

Under Pope Francis' leadership, several significant changes were made in the process. First of all, no money can be charged to anyone seeking an annulment. Secondly, the process should be streamlined as much as possible. Extra, often time consuming reviews were eliminated. Thirdly, if both parties agree on the reasons why the marriage should be annulled, the annulment should be rapidly concluded without resorting to witnesses and extra review steps. These new guidelines have shrunk timeframes from months and years to weeks and days. One more point of clarity – divorce in and of itself does not bar a good Catholic from receiving the sacraments, including the Eucharist. However, remarrying after a divorce without the annulment is a problem, because the Church still considers your prior marriage valid. Bottom line: if you are unsure of your situation, please please ask any of us clergy here and we'll help you to figure it out. Check into the field hospital!

I'd be remiss if I didn't point out the second part of today's Gospel, as Jesus takes a child into his arms and proclaims, “Whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it.” Why would Mark follow his strong defense of marriage with this incident? I'll share a story with you. A

couple of weeks back, a young couple came into my office to start the paperwork needed for their premarital preparation process. I smiled at their youth and innocence – who wouldn't? Somehow we got on the topic of young children, and I shared how my little granddaughter was now into the game of peek-a-boo, and we all laughed at the thought. Then the young lady turned to her fiancée and with a sly smile on her face said, "I *still* like to play peek-a-boo!" And then it hit me. Young couples in love act an awful lot like little kids, don't they? Funny faces, giggles, holding hands, and a whole lot of tickling. Maybe St. Mark saw the same thing. A good marriage demands that we be like kids at times, doesn't it? So, for all of you newlyweds, 10 years married, 25 years married, 45 years married, and 65 years married, I have a simple recommendation. Tonight, at some point before you call it a day, play peek-a-boo with each other and smile. Your marriage is blessed.

I know that there are a bunch of people out here that have never been married, or are divorced or widowed. I apologize for seeming to leave you out of today's homily. But the odds are pretty high that you have experienced or will experience marriage before you die – 95% of people marry at least once in their lifetimes. There's one more nugget to share – the Pew Research Center surveyed American couples in 2017 and asked a simple question – what is the most important reason to get married? The number one answer, given by 88% of the couples, was a simple, one syllable word. Any guesses? Yeah, *love*. St. John made a very profound observation 2,000 years ago that resonates to this day: *God is love*. Not God is like love, or God expresses love. No, *God is love*. God equals love. So, can we therefore say that 88% of people marry because of God? Yes, and they don't realize it. Our job as Christians is simple – show the world that God is love, and marriage is a great place to display that reality.