

“Christian faith and ethics are not meant to stifle love, but to make it healthier, stronger and more truly free.”

Pope Benedict XVI, Fifth Meeting of Families, Valencia, Spain, 7/8/2006

marriage: God's Loving Plan for Sex

The Jeweler's Shop

In a play entitled *The Jeweler's Shop*, Anna, an unhappily married woman, goes to a jeweler and tries to sell her wedding ring. The jeweler places the ring on his scales. But nothing happens. “This ring does not weigh anything,” he tells her. Without her husband's ring, her own ring had no weight or meaning.

These days it's common to hear that marriage doesn't have a special place among other types of adult relationships. But *The Jeweler's Shop* points out that marriage does indeed have a unique weight and power.

The rings exchanged in a wedding ceremony are not just pretty ornaments. They symbolize something very real. They symbolize the commitment that the husband makes to his wife and the wife makes to her husband. With God's grace, that commitment has the power to change each spouse and to transform the world.

Why? Because it is only in giving ourselves away generously and totally that we find fulfillment. Most people are used to thinking of the Church's teaching on sex and marriage as a list of rules. But here's a great secret: God's plan for sex is to make you happy. All of the “rules” are meant only to protect sex from



selfishness. When sex is about generous self-giving, then it has the power to make us happy.

Self-Giving Love

Of course, our culture is full of temptations to live otherwise. We are told that sex outside of marriage, including living together in a sexual relationship while unmarried (cohabitation), is a way for adults to become fulfilled personally. Actually, the sociological evidence tells a different story: married couples are far happier and healthier than unmarried and cohabiting couples. (You can read about some of this evidence at www.MassCatholicMarriage.org.)

The reason is simple: marriage is the only place where sex can ex-

press self-giving love, and it is only in giving ourselves away that we can find ourselves.

Self-giving love in marriage has the power to make us happy here on earth. But ultimately Jesus wants even more for us: He wants us to be unspeakably happy with Him in a life beyond death. We can't fathom what that joy must be like. But we can begin to taste that joy here and now by pursuing holiness (doing the Father's loving will in all our actions) within the sacramental life of the Church. By grace, Christ's total self-giving love heals and perfects our loving, leading us to a happiness without end.

God has made everything about us to reflect this truth about holi-

ness and self-gift. In fact, the truth of sex and self-gift is written in our bodies. Have you ever thought about the fact that the sexual differences between men and women don't make much sense on their own? Clearly, man and woman are fitted physically for each other. Our bodies allow us to give ourselves to a person of the opposite sex in a face-to-face embrace.

God's Love Creates

Our bodies reveal still more. They show us that sex is oriented toward new life. Self-giving in marriage is meant to be fruitful, the way God's love is always fruitful. God's love creates. It brings new life! And human married love is meant to serve the creation of a new human being. Everyone, even non-Christians, can understand that marriage should be lifelong and life-giving.

So, if everything about us—even the human body—is made for self-gift, why is it sometimes so hard to be married? Why did Anna want to sell her wedding ring?

The cross at the front of the church may help to answer this question. Our Lord died on the cross to save us from sin and bring us into the embrace of God's eternal love. Each one of us is called to be a saint, but most of us are not there yet. Sin of-

“Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.”

Pope John Paul, II, *Redemptor Hominis*, #10

ten makes our relationships difficult. Fortunately, God doesn't expect us to fix things on our own! That's why He gives us his grace through the Church.

In particular, He gives us grace in the sacraments, which make God's grace present. Marriage between baptized Christians is a sacrament, a very special one that injects God's own love into the deepest rhythms of the world.

Sacramental marriage expresses the self-giving love of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit through the bodies of the husband and wife. In *The Jeweler's Shop*, when Anna catches a glimpse of Jesus, He has her husband's face.

Your Vocation

Is marriage your vocation? Is it how God wants you to become holy and happy? Only you can perform your particular God-given mission. No one else can do it for you.

Are you ready to transform the world? Some have already embraced their unique world-transforming mission by giving themselves away totally in the priesthood or religious life. Most of us will transform the world as married persons. Pope John Paul II pointed out, “The future of humanity passes by way of the family.”

All of us—married or single, clergy or religious or lay—can support the family in our society. We can evangelize about God's plan for marriage. We can support family-friendly laws. Most importantly, we can strive to live a life of self-giving love, whatever our vocation.

The Jeweler's Shop presents an engaged couple who fears for the future, but each reassures the other by saying, “The future depends on love.” Years later, *The Jeweler's Shop's* author—Pope John Paul II—would exclaim, “Be not afraid! Do not be afraid to love!”

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