

World Marriage Day
February 8, 2009
Fr. Tom Elliott

From Purpose to Service

Job 7:1-4, 6-7

Psalm 147

1 Corinthians 9:16-19, 22-23

Mark 1:29-39

In my preparation for our celebration today of World Marriage Day, two things struck me as particularly funny. First, when our Family Life Director, Sandi, gave me the information about World Marriage Day, I looked at the papers and was immediately concerned by the fact that “weapons of mass destruction” was talked about so frequently. Apparently, the abbreviation for World Marriage Day is the same as “weapons of mass destruction.” That gave me a good chuckle. Later, as I began preparing my homily for this celebration, I got another good laugh from the first reading. On this day, World Marriage Day, our first reading begins, “Is not man’s life on earth a drudgery?” (Job 7:1). The reading ends, “My life is like the wind; I shall not see happiness again” (Job 7:7). That reading made me laugh for a long time! Hopefully, all of you married people here today did not find yourselves empathizing with the first reading!

Thankfully, the other Scripture readings today set a better stage for me to preach on marriage than the first reading! Our Gospel reading today actually speaks of something extremely important to marriage and to every vocation—purpose. In the Gospel reading, we hear how Jesus was being overwhelmed with people who wanted to be healed. His time was being consumed with the physical needs of those who were ill or possessed by demons. It was only after He had spent time in prayer to His Father that Jesus discerned just how much He had been pulled away from His purpose. We are told by the author of Mark that through prayer, Jesus’ purpose became clearer.

Simon and those who were with him pursued him and on finding him said, “Everyone is looking for you.” He told them, “Let us go on to the nearby villages that I may preach there also. For this purpose have I come.”

-Mark 1:36-38

Just as it was important for Jesus to know His purpose so that He did not become overwhelmed and distracted by other things, it is important for married couples to know the purpose of marriage. While the Church describes the purpose of marriage in very simple terms—unity and procreativity—the reality of this purpose is quite profound. This week, I e-mail several marriage couples and asked them to describe in their own words the purpose of marriage. Here are a few of their answers—

“The relationship of marriage should emulate the relationship of the Trinity in terms of love, affection, tolerance, etc.”

“The purpose of marriage is to love as Christ love, which is sacrificial.”

“God’s purpose for marriage is for a couple to reflect in each other the love He has for them.”

“To complete one another mentally, physically, and spiritually as they could not do individually.”

“God’s purpose for marriage is for a couple to draw each other closer to Christ.”

“The purpose of marriage is to become one and serve God to the best of our ability.”

There may be some married couples here today who have become overwhelmed by the busyness and craziness of life. Just as Jesus turned to prayer, I invite you to spend some time together this weekend praying and asking God for a renewed sense of purpose in your marriage. This is so very important, especially since purpose begets service.

Our second reading today from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians spoke about the beauty of service. Saint Paul explained his service in these words, “Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible” (1 Corinthians 9:19). The purpose of every authentic vocation ultimately invites us to willingly enslave ourselves to others. The word “slave” can bring up a lot of negative emotions and thoughts in us. These might rise out of historical reasons or our desire for independence. Most of us are much more comfortable *servicing* others, rather than considering ourselves their slave. The former makes us feel as though we have options, while the latter makes us feel like we have no options. Serving has a connotation of something we can do when we feel like it, whereas slavery connotes something that is done when the other person wants it.

Regardless our uneasiness with the word, Paul describes his vocation as one of slavery. And, ultimately, every authentic vocation is an invitation into slavery—our free will choice to be enslaved to another for the sake of salvation. I asked a number of married couples to describe to me their experience of being a slave or servant to their spouse. Several of them shared with me that they were uncomfortable with the word slave. Here are some of their answers—

“I prepare blankets and warm the bed for her prior to bedtime. I pray for her.”

“I listen to him and take care of his aches and pains. I pray for him.”

“We appreciate our different strengths and weaknesses and work together to build each other up.”

“We put one another first.”

“When I volunteer to take the kids to daycare so that he can get to work early, or he volunteers to clean the kitchen so that I can go read a book for a little bit and unwind at the end of a the day, we become servants to one another.”

“Being a good servant means not taking the other person for granted.”

“I do small things for her—oatmeal in the morning, the paper by the couch in the evening, dishes in the dishwasher, clothes by the washing machine, frost [scraped] off the car window before work. Nothing big, [but I do little things] because I love her and I do try to make a hectic life easier for her.”

This week, as we continue to celebrate God’s gift of marriage, I invite all of you who are married to spend time prayerfully reflecting on, not only the purpose of your marriage, but also, how you willingly enslave yourselves to one another. I’ve shared with you how a number of married couples describe their service, but how would you describe your marital service? I want to thank all of the couples who took the time to share with me their thoughts on marriage. It gave me a lot to reflect on regarding how I live God’s purpose and service in my own vocation.

I would now like to invite all of you who are married to please stand with your spouse as we pray for God to bless your marriage.