

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sunday, January 28, 2018
Father Mike Holloran

In today's reading from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he recommends celibacy as freeing a person up to serve the Lord. It's easy enough to see where he's coming from. If Paul had had a wife and family would he have thrown himself into his calling as an apostle the way, he did? Traveling all over, preaching a message that stirred people up in unpredictable ways, putting himself in dangerous situations. Being free of family responsibilities can free you up, but you can be unmarried and not be at all anxious about serving the Lord. As someone said, a priest might be single but he's not a bachelor. In fact, if a man would not have made a good husband and father, he won't know how to be a good priest either.

I don't think Paul would disagree. He was simply saying that celibacy has its advantages in serving God. Hopefully a single person does so. And I don't think he would disagree that married people can serve the Lord through married life. His own total dedication to his particular calling may have filtered his thinking here, and he does offer his advice as his own and not as a command of the Lord. Nevertheless, what we've been hearing from his letter to the Corinthians these last few weeks does show an appreciation for the dignity of Christian marriage.

Two weeks ago, we heard this: "The body is not for immorality... Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?... your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, whom you have from God, and you are not your own." (1 Cor. 6:13-20)

Let that thought seep in-- you are not your own. Completely true. None of us had any say about being brought into this world, into this temporary bodily existence. None of us have power to keep ourselves young, strong, and healthy indefinitely. The most we can do is stretch it out a little.

None of us has any control over what happens after we take our last breath of physical air in this physical world. After that we are each entirely in God's hands. No, you are not your own, you belong to God. True, yet so contrary to how we normally think as we design our lives, pursue our interests, and gladly take what we think we deserve.

And yet that truth, that you are not your own, is fundamental to our existence, and in a particular way to married life. Because what do wedding vows say? That I am not my own. That from this day forward, with God's help until death do us part, I belong to you and you belong to me. It can only be with God's help because God created man and woman to be one flesh, and through their faithful union to love one another as God loves-- unconditionally and permanently. So, the love of spouses reflects God's love. The wife

experiences through the faithful love of her husband God's love. The husband experiences through the faithful love of his wife God's love. Their community of married love reflects the love community of Christ and his Church, which is why marriage is a sacrament, an outward sign through which God communicates His powerful love and His eternal life.

To go back to Paul, last week we heard this: “Brothers and sisters, the time is running out... let those having wives act as not having them... use the world as not using it fully, for the world in its present form is passing away.” (1 Cor. 7:29-31)

When he said that those who have wives should act as though not having them, he did not mean that husbands and wives should be celibate. He was remarking on the nature of marital possessiveness. My wife, my husband, is mine in the sense of not being someone else's. Marriage vows are exclusive. They forsake all others. But if I am not even my own, if I ultimately belong to God, I cannot possess my spouse as a belonging over which I have power and control. My spouse also belongs to God. God is his or her primary relationship, on which they rely for their very existence. Marriage is only until death do they part, and the time is running out. The world in its present form is passing away.

I used to do an imagination exercise with high school seniors. I would ask them, “At the end of your long life, what will you want to be able to say about it?” Very few wanted to be able to boast about their careers, or their money, or their beautiful spouse or their perfect children. Almost all said, in one way or another, that they wanted their love to have made a difference in the lives of other people.

Funny how we know, innately, what really matters. It's because God is love. He created the human race male and female so that the two could become one flesh and by loving each other experience something of God's love. But human marriage, being a limited and temporary relationship, points to something beyond itself, points to the unlimited and eternal. So, what is the greatest thing a husband or wife can do for their spouse? By faithful love help them into the Kingdom of Heaven.

What is the greatest thing a single person can do? Help others to the Kingdom of Heaven by standing in this world that is passing away pointing to the world that cannot pass away; reassuring others by their faithful love that we, who are not our own, have been promised something much greater than anything we could be on our own.

So, it turns out that marriage and celibacy are just different ways of tending to that primary relationship on which everything depends, the relationship with God our Creator, whose love encompasses all and Who will bring all who love to perfect fulfillment.