

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from the Church's Spouse,
Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen.

PJ and I celebrated our 39th wedding anniversary last week in Chicago. We had a great time being together. We always do. People always say to me, 'you guys really do a lot together.' I'm not sure if we actually do a lot more than other couples, but we do as much as we can together because you only get one life. There isn't any reset switch where you can back up and redo a part of your life that you'd like to play out differently. We've both seen other couples, including in our own family who put off all the things they wanted to do until after retirement or until later when they thought they would have more time or more money. The truth is you might not have even tomorrow let alone years to enjoy after retirement. So, I believe one of the key ingredients to staying power in marriage is doing things you both enjoy now, because you only get this one life.

Having said all that, I realize divorce statistics are ever increasing. This week I read that a staggering 40% of children will be part of a divorced family. In today's culture a marriage of longer than 10 years is cause to celebrate. It's as if we've exchanged 'til death us do part' with 'satisfaction guaranteed or your money back'.

In our Gospel today, Jesus has some harsh words about divorce. In the past I've struggled with preaching on this text while still being sensitive to all who have been divorced in their lives--that is still my struggle. I'm not going to even try to mitigate Jesus' very demanding words regarding divorce. You heard them and are adult enough to figure out what Jesus meant. Today I'd rather spend these precious few sermon minutes on maybe discovering what it takes to help us all have a better marriage and celebrate those things that can improve the time we have to spend together. It comes down to three areas we can all concentrate on to improve our relationship with the most important person in our lives, our spouse. Those three areas are chemistry, mathematics, and exercise.

First chemistry. Recent research tells us chemistry between two people is responsive to mental and emotional processes over which we have tremendous control. That's right, you can make chemistry happen. If you don't feel the flutter in your heart for your spouse you once did, if the magic is gone from your relationship, don't panic. You can change it! In his book titled *The Triumphant Marriage*, Neil Warren makes several suggestions to help couples mix up some new chemicals to get some of the old romance going again. He says couples should do things like plant a tree together and watch it grow. Couples can give a gift in honor of your marriage. I suggest a gift to the ELCA's Good Gifts where you could buy a cow or a pig for a poor family in an impoverished country.

Warren suggests couples renew their wedding vows as a way to rekindle the chemistry or maybe just buy a great big wedding cake and invite all your friends to help you celebrate another year together. You might even exchange some jewelry or other memento representing the love you share. The important thing to remember is that any ritual can be used to refocus your energy and restart the romance you once shared. It's a matter of choice and effort and maybe even a little bit of creativity.

The second area to help us enrich our marriage is mathematics. As important as it is to become a good chemist, it's equally important to become a bad mathematician. In marriage, each partner must be willing to put in more than he or she takes out. Too many people believe marriage is a 50-50 proposition. If you believe that, I will tell you your relationship with your spouse is headed for disaster or at least could be much better. This week I read an article by Psychiatrist Allen Fay who advises his marriage therapy couples that marriage is more like a 60-60 ratio, where each spouse gives more than they take from the relationship. That might seem reasonable, but I tell couples who are preparing for marriage they can do much better than that. I tell them to expect a ratio closer to 100-100. Ideally, I try to put my spouse's needs, wants and desires ahead of my own 100 % of the time. Notice I said ideally... We all get selfish sometimes, but the goal is to always put your significant other's wishes ahead of your own.

Consider each of our interactions with our spouse to be like a financial transaction at a bank. We're always either making deposits into the relationship or taking withdraws. It's bad marriage strategy to be a precise mathematician when it comes to divvying up the effort you put in, but it's good marriage strategy to have enough mathematical savvy to keep track of the emotional deposits and withdrawals you and your spouse are making. When your bank account is nearly empty, every deposit or withdrawal is keenly felt. In relationships, every act of love or caring is like money in the relationship bank. Each argument or instance of uncaring is like a withdrawal from the account. To be happy, couples must have a reserve of love and caring to help them through the rainy days in their relationship and every relationship will have rainy days. Finally, Paul's counsel to marriage mathematicians from First Corinthians, chapter 13, verses 4 and 5, is to remember "love ... keeps no record of wrongs."

The final area that can help renew our marriages is exercise. Among successful, long-lasting marriages, there is always an underlying given that both partners rely upon without hesitation: successful married couples who have happy marriages that last, invariably flex the muscles of trust and bend their knees in prayer. Trust may not seem glamorous or sexy, but many marriages have found out too late without trust, there is nothing. When trust is strong honest communication happens naturally and each person feels safe to express their

thoughts and opinions. Each person can take risks in the relationship because they know the other has their back and respects their opinions. The connection between complete, genuine trust in one another and faithfulness is perhaps what underlies one final finding about lasting marriages that shouldn't be a surprise, but often is. It's one of those statistics that catches your eye and makes you say, 'No, that can't be!' According to a groundbreaking Gallup survey, happiness in a marriage is better predicted by how often a couple prays together than by how often they make love. You heard that right. Happiness is more a function of prayer than sex. There's more. Couples who pray together (compared to couples who don't) report having greater respect for their mate (83 percent vs. 62 percent), agree on how to raise children (73 percent vs. 59 percent), are more playful (56 percent vs. 45 percent), and believe their mate is a skilled lover (62 percent vs. 49 percent). Individual prayer correlates with marital happiness, too, but joint prayer correlates at a level twice as high. Now, lest you think these statistics only apply to us older folk, Religion and spirituality play a more important role in marital happiness for couples of all ages than most people realize. In a Gallup survey, religious beliefs enhanced marital stability for people of all ages not just for older folk, who tend to be more religious and maritally secure.

The words "married life" or "marital bliss" need not be oxymorons. By paying attention to the details of chemistry of our relationships, by dropping an

obsession with math, especially with trying to balance the equations, and exercising our trust-muscles and strengthening our knee-bending prayer life, we can all infuse our marriage with long-lasting life! May we hear the harsh, demanding words of Jesus, but understand we are all sinners and Jesus came to save people like you and me. May we understand that even though we can never achieve the perfect relationship God envisioned for us in creation, there are still many things we can do to enrich and enhance the most beautiful and Holy gift God has given to mankind, the gift of marriage. May we all rely on the grace given to us through Jesus to forgive each other in order to renew our marriages so we can all be living examples of God's love. Amen.