

What IS Marriage?

He pondered long and hard about this moment which he had been waiting for, for several months. With the golden object in his pocket he would make a request from her that she could not refuse...

Will Driscoll was an engineer and an artist. He rented out a studio and began assembling a mosaic of tiles on the wall to impress his long-time girlfriend, Suzy. While he worked diligently, he had scattered a special message for her throughout the tiles in such a way that she could only see it at a particular spot, at a particular angle. Eventually the day had finally come when he finished that cryptic mosaic and he invited Suzy along with all their friends and family to the studio for the opening of his 'art show'.

As Will was guiding Suzy along the myriad of tiles, he said "sometimes that which seems unintelligible makes sense from a particular point of view..." Suzy thought Will was losing his marbles but all of a sudden out of the chaos of the mosaic, a word jumped out at her: "Will". Then she saw: "me" and then "you" and finally "marry". And as she looked down there was Will on one knee with that golden object in his hands...

The desire for marriage is written deeply into the fabric of our hearts, into the very fabric of our bodies. This has inspired many a poet and an artist to write poetry and sing songs about marriage. Yet curiously enough, we are at a point in time when we seem to have forgotten what marriage MEANS, what marriage IS.

It seems like we are staring at a wall of random tiles, a mixture of chaos and ink and we are left to make up our own view in that indiscernible mess. **Today in our culture, we are all left with the question, "What IS marriage?"**

This question is relevant today as it was 2000 years ago when the Pharisees in our Gospel dialogued with Jesus. When they asked, "Is it lawful for a husband to divorce his wife?" they were essentially asking, "What is marriage? Is it a life-long institution?"

Our culture has asked this question but it also seems to have bought into an implicit view of what marriage is. This incorrect view of marriage began during the sexual revolution in the 60s and was institutionalized with the legalization of no-fault divorce. The logical consequences of this particular view of marriage have unfolded itself throughout our generation and now we are reaping the fruits of it. See if you can notice what view of marriage underlies these three extreme examples:

- 1) We have thrupples which are three person couples
- 2) In addition to having a committed relationship with your spouse, you can have an open relationship to include others so that you are not monogamous but 'monogamish'
- 3) Instead of engaging in wedlock, some couples are opting for the wed-lease where you can lease a marriage like you lease a car and the marriage term can be renewed—after four years of good behavior.

What is the underlying view of marriage? It is the idea that marriage is an institution for consenting adults with intense romantic feelings: the relational view of marriage. As long as two adults have strong feelings for one another and they both agree to it, that is what marriage is.

While emotions and consent are important, the relational view of marriage cannot account for the qualities of permanence, exclusivity and monogamy which we intuitively know is critical to marriage.

The problem arises: if strong feelings and consent are what make up a marriage, why can't that exist between three people, between a thruple or in an open, monogamish relationship? Or if the foundation of marriage is based solely on feelings, I should be able to leave when it fades; I should be able to lease or 'un-lease' my marriage depending on how I feel.

Unfortunately, some of us may see marriage through the lens of the relational view just like the pharisees in the gospel. This view of marriage is what underlies the philosophy of divorce and same sex unions and now we question Jesus just like the pharisees did: if the emotional bond is over why can't I just end my marriage? Or if emotional bonds and consent are what make a marriage why can't it be between two men or two women who love each other?

Our world seems so messy like the seemingly random arrangement of tiles and we are struggling to make sense of it all because we see no pattern or meaning so we can be tempted to make up our own view of marriage...

But what IS marriage?

What makes marriage different from friendship, from a football team?

Jesus in his response to the pharisees guides them to see the true vision of marriage, to see the true meaning behind what seems like a mess of tiles. He guides them by moving them into position to see the truth of marriage by looking back at the beginning:

There are three elements to Jesus' appeal to the beginning, his appeal to God's original plan for marriage. (comprehensive union, commitment, goals)

- 1) Male and female and becoming one flesh.
 - a. What is unique about marriage is that it involves the comprehensive union between two persons, the union of heart, mind and body. When you love someone so much, you desire to give of yourself to this other person through flowers, chocolates, through service, through intimate conversation. Yet you desire to give yourself more. You don't just desire to give of yourself metaphysically, but physically because your body is integral to who you are as a person. In giving of your body in that most intimate, marital act, you give of yourself completely in a unique way.
 - b. This comprehensive union is such that husband and wife become one flesh in a way that no other relationship can replicate. If someone sticks their finger in your ear, does that make you one flesh with that person? Thankfully, not! It is only in the marital, complementary act between one man and one woman that we can truly speak of them becoming one flesh. Their bodily union is a sign of their total gift of self.
- 2) Therefore what God has joined together, let no man separate.
 - a. That is why marriage is permanent, exclusive and monogamous because when we give true gifts, they are not temporary. E.g. easy bake oven. In marriage when you make a gift of yourself it is till death do you part because you are making a complete gift of yourself. The total gift of self also entails exclusivity and monogamy because you can only give of yourself totally/exclusively in a monogamous relationship.
- 3) The goals of marriage
 - a. The comprehensive union between one man and one woman is directed toward/aiming at two purposes, two ends: the good of the spouses and the openness to life. The sole purpose of marriage is not just to make babies; it also involves the sanctification of spouses. Love wills, love desires the good of the other and so in a loving relationship between spouses, they should desire the greatest good for one another: heaven. Through common life

- together, through the rearing of potential children, marriage has the possibility of making you into a great saint! Two imperfect people confined to a small space is bound to cause conflicts/purification—then throw in some crying, puking children and you have a recipe for sanctification.
- b. A marriage is still a marriage even though a couple is not able to bear children because they still aim at the good of spouses and the openness to life. It does not make your marriage less of a marriage, although it is difficult and it is a cross because children truly are a supreme gift.

So what is marriage? 1) Marriage involves the comprehensive union of persons (heart, mind, body), 2) a comprehensive commitment (till death do you part), and 3) comprehensive unifying goals (good of spouses and life).

The Church teaches us WHAT marriage truly is as it is revealed to us by the Word of God, by the Author of marriage himself. What can happen is that people start asking for different forms of relationships and asking for it to be a marriage when some of those relationships do not include one or any of those qualities of a marriage. E.g. burgers and tacos. Asking for a wed-lease, or a monogamish marriage or even a same sex marriage would be akin to someone asking for burger but actually wanting a taco: a wed-lease is a temporary relationship but it is not a marriage, a same sex union is a strong friendship but it is not a marriage.

What makes marriage, a marriage is the comprehensive union of persons, a comprehensive commitment and comprehensive unifying goals.

Amidst all the confusion in our world, we have a sure place we can turn to: if we are guided into the Church's understanding of marriage, God's plan for marriage which previously looked like a chaos of tiles will become evident right before our eyes.