

## **28th Sunday in Ordinary Time – October 9-10, 2021**

As I said last Sunday, during this month which is Respect Life Month I am going to try to address issues having to do with marriage, family and human sexuality.

In the Gospel last Sunday Jesus addressed the question of divorce and reminded us that God's plan in creating man and woman and marriage did not leave any place for divorce.

Jesus came to call us back to union with God's original plans in creating us and our universe. The bond between a man and a woman in marriage was to be permanent as a reflection of his love for humanity and for the unity of all creation.

This call to get back to God's original plan for marriage was difficult – very difficult -- for the people of his day to hear having lived with the exceptions that Moses had allowed for divorce and difficult for us to hear in our day as well.

We do not live in a world before the fall of humanity. We do not know what it like to live in a marriage that is pure communion. We can think about it and hope for it but it is not our world. – For this reason Jesus put before them a child. He wants us to take up the posture of a child.

When we teach our children, they are generally open to what we propose. They may not always understand or like the teaching but they generally accept it because they presume that it is for their good. There will be questions from our children such as how something is possible and whether it is fair, but a parent does not respond with force or violence. Likewise, Jesus allows us to raise questions and wonder how to live out his teaching, but he wants us to accept that it is good, even if it is hard. It is what God wanted for men and women from the beginning.

At the same time -- there is a difference between a legal marriage and a valid or true marriage. The church does grant annulments for marriages that for various reasons should never have taken place -- even if those reasons were not fully realized until later years in the marriage.

But the key point I wanted to make is that in last Sunday's Gospel Jesus called us to be open and trusting as a child to his difficult yet lifegiving teachings for us.

In today's Gospel we again see Jesus presenting very difficult yet true and life-giving teachings to a person seeking to grow in his relationship with God and to his disciples about the danger of riches to a life of faith. We have this image of Jesus being all about love and forgiveness and we forget that Jesus can also be a demanding teacher.

But in today's Gospel-- Jesus' response to their difficulties and questions is not that we be trusting like a child but he says, "For human beings some things are impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God."

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" asked the rich man. Jesus' answer is a challenge. Jesus asks him to give up everything and then come follow him. Jesus invites the rich man to leave behind the spirituality of his youth, and to take on a deeper spirituality that abandons all for the sake of love.

The man had accomplished much – kept all the commandments from his youth – and was ready to do more. But Jesus' reply knocks the wind out of his sails. Jesus is calling the man, and us, to trust more deeply –not to do more but to sacrifice himself and be transformed.

In youth, clear guidelines with boundaries and actions for moral living are needed. But as we move into maturity, Jesus looks upon us with a love that calls and enables us to abandon everything else. This love cannot be earned but is a pure gift of the goodness of God -- the "one thing" that surpasses all else. The only condition for attaining this one thing is that a person must be willing to let go of everything else and put the Lord first..

It is easy to get caught up in depending upon ourselves, but our relationship with Jesus calls us to a radical trust. It calls us to give up our plans, our backup plan, and our safety nets.

Jesus' answer to the man, said with love to him, convicts the man of holding back. His words shock the man out of the illusion that he was well on his way to eternal life. Instead, he must accept Jesus' challenge to go deeper. It is no easy thing – he must sacrifice everything to follow Jesus. But, it

seemed impossible to him. What happened to the man? Did he later accept the challenge? Will we?

To hold on to power, control, and security is contrary to the vulnerability that giving oneself totally to the love of God requires. It is not impossible for people with riches to do so, but it is exceedingly difficult.

It is not having riches that is the obstacle, rather it is what one does with one's possessions. As we deal with such challenges, Jesus reminds us that we are not alone. For human beings some things are impossible, but not for God. When things seem impossible, God is ready to help us because total surrender to God is the one thing that brings abundance of life to all. When we answer Jesus' radical call to "Come, follow me," the good news is that he promises his presence with us every step of the way.

As I thought about seemingly impossible things we are challenged by in the areas of marriage, family and human sexuality, what came to mind immediately was the issue of contraception versus natural family planning.

Contraception has been around in various ways since the beginning of time but was opposed by all Christian churches and even secular authorities until around 1930 when the Episcopal Church rejected Christian moral teaching and allowed married couples to use contraception. In 1921 Margaret Sanger founded the American Birth Control League now known as Planned Parenthood in large part with the goal of preventing inferior people from reproducing. All this led in time to the sexual revolution of the 1960's. While the world and many other churches proclaimed it to be a blessing for women and families, the Catholic Church refused to go along with the spirit of the times. In 1968, Pope Paul VI restated in his encyclical (*Humanae Vitae*) the unbroken teaching of the Church on the wrongness of contraception. When we read what popes like Paul VI and John Paul II taught about contraception we see that their intention was not, as many accuse, to oppress women. Rather, their intention was to free women from being seen as objects just for pleasure and to prevent marriage from losing its sacred dignity.

As Pope Paul VI warned in his encyclical – “contraception will open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards”. We can surely see that he was accurate in that prediction. Among other things, there is a strong connection between contraception and abortion. Many who use contraception are not open to the possibility of conception so when an unexpected pregnancy happens the temptation for abortion is quite strong. Rather than lessening the need for abortion, contraception actually makes it a greater temptation.

In their marital relations, a married man and woman don’t merely engage in an activity that is pleasurable and makes them feel closer to one another. It is in giving themselves fully to each other that they become one flesh and one body. This does not fully happen when their fertility is artificially blocked out in their gift of themselves to each other.

This does not mean that every sharing of themselves is to be intended to conceive a child nor that God wants all to have many children. Some have few or no children because God has not gifted them with children. However, God has gifted us with ways to naturally space children – one of which is Natural Family Planning or NFP.

Rather than blocking our natural fertility, NFP gives us information about how our bodies work so that, along with God, couples can plan whether or not to invite the possibility of new life in their marriage.

Natural Family Planning does call for some difficult sacrifices of abstinence from marital intimacy when choosing to avoid the conception of a child, but rather than artificially blocking our natural human fertility, it allows for respect to be shown to the full meaning of our sexuality as God made it.

It may seem like an impossibility to practice Natural Family Planning in the world’s current way of thinking about personal rights, but God’s ways are always for the fullness of life, and he will always make it possible for us to do what the world tells us is impossible. Furthermore, in talking with women about NFP, they lift it up as the way for couples to truly respect each other and to be aware of each other’s

bodies and their changing needs and as a way to grow in their communication and understanding of each other avoid putting harmful chemicals into our bodies..

I encourage all couples to look into NFP if they have not done so and help their children to learn about it as well. It so happens that this Tuesday evening the diocese is offering an hour-long introduction to NFP on Zoom. You can link into that presentation through our parish website and you can find information on that in the bulletin and many options for on-line or in person instruction on NFP at the diocesan website..

Perhaps, like the man in today's gospel, it is possible that God is calling you today to go deeper in your relationship to Him and to your spouse through NFP. It may seem impossible or improbable for you but God is always with you and with God all things are possible. And perhaps in taking this deeper step into NFP you will discover the richness of God's wisdom that is praised in today's first reading.