

Lasting Marriages

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What are the rings for?

Question authority.

So says a bumper sticker I have seen on numerous occasions. In general I like that idea. It fits with my somewhat iconoclastic view of life: challenge assumptions, don't take old ideas without examining where they came from, don't be afraid to explore new ideas and options, and certainly don't let other people run your life. And in a bigger perspective, we realize that the human race would never make any progress if someone did not question and challenge the status quo, the old ideas.

So, it should not come as a surprise, that as I was sitting in church this morning, I began to wonder, why do we build church buildings? And especially expensive, ornate church buildings? Is not God everywhere and in everything? Can we not worship and create sacred time and space in the woods, fields, gardens, living rooms and kitchens, and even in our cars and shopping malls? Would our resources be better spent elsewhere than in building these special buildings that seem to have such limited usefulness, and are generally so impractical?

Yet, almost as soon as I asked the question, I began to answer it. (What, you may ask, was he thinking the whole time in church? Certainly not paying attention!) It is important, for people in all cultures, religious traditions, and over all recorded history, to have spaces defined as other and sacred. As we strive to connect with the spiritual, holy, and eternal aspects of our humanity, people everywhere have discovered the

importance of having places to go in which the everyday ordinariness of life may not intrude. These places are marked by architectural difference, so that one knows just by the visible appearance to expect to connect to something other than everyday work and relationships. These places are also marked by ritual and tradition, patterns of behavior and speech that remind us that there is a reality beyond what we deal with in the little things of daily cares.

This need to connect with universal truth, holiness, eternal spiritual concepts, seems to be so powerful a part of human nature that monuments to this idea, in many different forms, exist in every culture as far back as history records. I recall visiting the *wats*, Buddhist temples, in Thailand, in the summer of 1978. Even in the small villages, they were ornate, quiet, special places. I saw people kneeling, lighting candles, and I knew that I must not speak loudly or use my camera's flash, though I did not understand or relate to the traditions they were honoring at the time. I recall at another time the wonder of singing with a choir inside the gigantic sanctuary of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. It was not hard to imagine looking up and seeing angels hovering overhead in the lofty stone arches. In places like those, you whisper, walk quietly, and almost hold your breath until you get outside again. They are not like anything else we do, not grocery stores, gas stations, televisions, kitchens, bathrooms, schools or stores. And aren't we glad they exist for us as a shelter against the constant onslaught of the ordinary.

As much as we can benefit from the presence of a sanctuary, a set-aside place, we still know that the sanctuary itself is not God, not the holy other, but simply a signpost, a connector in the presence of which we open ourselves to a reality beyond what can be seen.

And so I discovered why this iconoclast still needs icons, symbols, signposts, and traditions to pull me away from everything ordinary and connect me to the transcendent. Immediately, I also found a new way to understand marriage. Let me explain.

A marriage is not a pair of rings exchanged and worn for life. Nor is it a legal document or license. Nor is it even a set of vows spoken out loud in a holy place in the presence of witnesses. A marriage is a living entity, invisible, transcendent, a third person created by two people who make a commitment of marriage to each other. It has a life of its own. The marriage is an invisible life that breathes and grows, and because it has been intentionally created by two people, its existence marks the relationship between those two as different from any other relationship: set apart, sacred, other, different, extra-ordinary. But just as the sanctuary and the traditions themselves are not the spiritual reality, neither are the rings or papers the marriage. The sanctuary and the traditions are visible symbols that draw us to the invisible. The rings and vows are constant reminders that there is a life between us that can't be seen, and that marks this one relationship as different from any other relationship we have. The husband has many relationships with others: workplace colleagues who share common tasks and visions, his children who look up to his example, his extended family with whom he shares history and stories, neighbors who are greeted with small-talk about weather or local news. But his wife is different: she knows his heart, she can sense when something is wrong, he can let his guard down with her, no-one else knows him like she does, for better or for worse. She seems to know him

sometimes better than he knows himself, and he's learned to listen to her insights and see himself in a new way. The wife also has her relationships: children for whom she cares and labors, co-workers who may delight or irritate her, friends whom she sees at the gym or in the neighborhood, a hair-stylist who understands just the way she wants it cut. But her husband is different. She knows she can trust him to hear her deepest feelings and not betray her confidence. She can lightly accept and appreciate affection or kindness from anyone else, but her heart soars with the tender words of this one man. She can depend on his help without any fear of ridicule when she feels tired or overwhelmed. This one man is not like any other to her, not perfect, but like a safe harbor, a shelter, a sanctuary.

So now it makes sense. Ceremony, tradition and ritual in a sacred place mark the birth of a marriage. Being born in transcendence, the marriage grows and lives there: other-ness, difference, a relationship that has no equal. The rings are symbols and reminders of the presence of that invisible life that is nurtured and sustained by the two people who created it at a particular day in history, in a sacred sanctuary.

Guard that secret life, protect it, walk softly in its presence, treat it like no other. When the rapid pace of life makes our heads spin, when human relationships are often impersonal and shallow, this marriage will be a lasting and beautiful retreat, a breathtaking sanctuary, ornate and quiet, and as near as one's own home. A thing of beauty.

Warmly,
Robert & Gail

Please contribute to our discussion! Email us at gailandrobert@lastingmarriages.net