

Welcome, everyone, as we gather together to worship. One of the things you'll hear me say often is that we are all naturally in different places in our discipleship. If you've just entered the Church or have just come back after a long absence, it's natural that you're still getting used to what we believe as Catholics, that you're just starting to delve into the deep, beautiful truth that has been revealed to us, and that's a step in front of you to take. Or perhaps you've been Catholic all your life but never really developed a personal relationship with Jesus, and experienced the intimate, tender love that he has for you, and developing your life of personal prayer is a step for you to take. The point is: that's fine. It doesn't matter so much where we are today as it does whether we're trying to move forward. That is who we try to be as a community, as a parish.

Today's gospel, I suspect, presents a challenge for a number of Catholics, but that means it also presents an opportunity. This is an opportunity to dig deeper into Catholic teaching, come to a better understanding of what we believe, which in itself is a step forward in discipleship.

Many people think of today's gospel as "Jesus' teaching on divorce." But really, it is not divorce that Jesus wants to speak about. It is the Pharisees who bring up divorce, but Jesus wants to speak about the beauty of marriage. Jesus turns their

question around in order to get the Pharisees to focus on God's original plan for husband and wife, the ideal of what a marriage looks like.

Notice that we are talking about the ideal. I am very aware that divorce is not uncommon in our society, including within the Church, including within our parish. If you are cringing because of this topic and afraid that I'm going to rail against you because you're divorced, please know that that is not what I intend to do, and I apologize if this topic is difficult. Every marriage has its own unique circumstances, and sometimes those circumstances even call for divorce in order to protect yourself or your children. Especially in the case of spousal abuse, the Church does not demand that you must stay in that situation. And just in case it needs to be said out loud: men, there is no justification for ever harming your wife or your children. That is a heinous sin, a betrayal of your wedding vows, and calls for true repentance and conversion, or else the Church will counsel your wife to leave you and take the children with her.

Of course, such a breakdown in the marriage covenant is not a part of God's plan for marriage. I would hazard to say that it is not a part of the couple's plan for marriage on their wedding day. They do not go into a marriage planning to divorce. But as divorce becomes more common in our culture, it is important that we don't lose sight of God's original intention. We are called to something greater

than what the world offers us, and we hold up the ideal of marriage as still the standard that we strive to achieve.

So what is that standard that Jesus gives to us, and why is divorce not a part of God's plan? To answer that, we must first speak of the nature of God's love.

God's love is perfect and irrevocable, meaning that He will never take it back from us. God will never stop loving you, no matter what.

God invites us to love like that, to participate in His love for us, and He gives us His grace to do that. One concrete way He does this is through the sacraments.

Through the sacraments, we tap into that irrevocable love, they are concrete signs of God's grace in our lives that will remain forever. For example, once God brings us into the Church through baptism, we stay baptized. He won't take it back. Once He transforms the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, they remain the body and blood of Christ. He won't take it back. Once He forgives our sins in the confessional, they remain forgiven forever. That is the nature of His love for us in the sacraments. And once God unites a man and woman with the bond of marriage, He won't take it back. That bond will last for the rest of their lives, which is what the couple freely asks Him to do when they come to the church and exchange their vows.

Imagine if that were not the case. Imagine if we did not know whether or not God would take back His forgiveness that He gave you, or take back my ordination, or take back His Son's body and blood? It is unimaginable, because God does not do that, He does not break His promises, He does not fail to do what He said He would do. This is the joyful message that Jesus wants us to focus on when we think of marriage, that we do not have to wonder whether or not God will withdraw His blessings from our unions, whether or not He will continue to pour out His grace upon us, because from the very beginning, He has designed marriage to be permanent, and He will do His part and keep His promise.

But, we are fallen human beings, and we cannot say the same. We do not keep our promises. In confirmation, we professed to reject Satan's empty works. In confession, we promise to avoid the near occasion of sin in the future. At my ordination, I promised to unite myself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest. And in marriage, we promise to love and honor our spouse all the days of our life. Can anyone say they have not broken these promises?

But our broken promises do not unforgive our past sins, they do not unconfirm us, they do not unordain us, and they do not unmarry us. Because despite the fact that we break our promises, God does not break His. His faithfulness does not depend on our faithfulness, He does not take back His love because we have taken back

ours. Instead, He invites us to begin again, to renew our promises again and share in His irrevocable love again.

And the awesome power of His love makes that a possibility in marriage, so long as both spouses are willing to try. I greatly admire married couples who have faced some grave hardship in their marriage, and then worked together to overcome it and even grow closer through it. That is far more impressive than those couples who have been fortunate enough to avoid such hardships. A marriage tested by fire like that gives witness to God's presence within a marriage, and I want to encourage spouses to be open to God's grace in their lives and do their part to live their marriage vows faithfully and joyfully.

God's love is irrevocable, and He extends that love to each one of us, in every situation, in every joy, in every difficulty. Let us trust that love, let us believe that the Lord desires our true happiness above all things, and cooperate with His will for us in our vocations.