

# Marriage

*Deacon Dick B. Tracy and Deacon Rita V. Tracy*

*Trinity Episcopal Church, Lawrence, Kansas*

*October 4, 2009*

**Rita:** Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

**Dick:** First of all, let me explain that the reason both of us are up here is that this is a “dialogue sermon”. Generally, the only time we do a dialogue together is in Bible School, and there we use hand puppets. So, we hate to disappoint you, but there won’t be any puppets today.

**Rita:** When father Pogue asked us to preach on October 4, we said that of course we would. But we hadn’t looked at the lectionary yet to see what the scripture readings would be for today. When I saw what the text was, I thought, “Well that was a really smart move on his part. If I were in charge, I’d have someone else preach on this text too, because I think this text contains at least something to offend almost everyone.

**Dick:** Yes, this Gospel is about some very touchy subjects— marriage, divorce, and children. And I think we may have been given this assignment because we’ve been married to each other for

forty-five years, so maybe it was assumed that we should know something about it. But I can tell you that we went into this marriage as complete amateurs. What we know has been learned in “the school of hard knocks”, and we’ve made a lot of mistakes on the way.

**Rita:** We know we have a mixed congregation here at Trinity. We’re at different stages of our lives and in different states. We have some married people here—some married for only a short time and some married even longer than we have been. We have some single people here—some who would like to get married some day and some who never want to get married. We have some people who are widowed. And we have some divorced people—who often have good reasons--and some who have been divorced but are married again. Besides that, we’ve got some young people who maybe haven’t given marriage much thought yet one way or the other. So we’re not all in the same place or on the same page.

**Dick:** By the way, Rita, the guy driving our get-away car just called and he can’t make it today.

**Rita:** Well, I guess then we’ll just have to forge ahead and let the chips fall where they may. Why don’t you just go ahead while I look

around for all the exits. By the way, what does our Gospel reading say to us today?

**Dick:** In today's Gospel, some Pharisees came to Jesus and asked him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?"

**Rita:** Why would they ask that? I always thought that the Pharisees were the recognized experts on the Law. If anyone ought to have known what was lawful and what wasn't, it should have been them. Why would they ask a question like that?

**Dick:** Of course you're right. They were the ones who should have known. But they weren't really looking for information. The Pharisees really had it in for Jesus because he challenged their authority, and he always seemed to be able to show them up when they argued with him. And as you know, the Mediterranean culture that Jesus lived in was very conflict prone. It still is. In that culture, people often challenged the honor of their opponents in hopes of shaming them because if they could bring shame on their opponent, it enhanced their own honor.

**Rita:** I see. And one way to shame someone is to "stump" them—that is, to ask them a question which they can't answer satisfactorily. So the Pharisees' question about divorce seems innocent enough, but it was a really loaded question. They intended

to get Jesus into an argument about divorce, and that could lead to a whole lot of trouble. So Jesus just turned things around on them and asked them a question in return: “What did Moses command?”

**Dick:** Right. That actually put them on the spot. Of course, they knew their Book of Deuteronomy, so they said that Moses allowed the man to write a certificate of dismissal to his wife and divorce her.

**Rita:** That seems pretty one-sided to me. All he had to do was to send her a note and the marriage was all over. Yet, Jesus says that Moses did this because he knew that the people were “hard hearted”. What did he mean by that? It certainly doesn’t seem very “soft hearted” just to send your wife a note and divorce her.

**Dick:** Well, by today’s standards, it certainly doesn’t. But, in Moses’ time, marriages were generally arranged by the parents or by a go-between. Moses required a certificate of divorce because that would release the woman from the control of the husband and allow her to marry someone else. Without the certificate she would still be considered his property.

**Rita:** That seems too easy and very unfair. What about the wife? Could she divorce her husband?

**Dick:** Not according to Jewish tradition. Only the husband could initiate a divorce. But, in practice, it wasn't always so. In Jesus' day, some Jews were following the Roman law, and that did allow the wife to divorce her husband. For example, Herodias broke tradition by divorcing her husband and marrying his half-brother, King Herod Antipas. By the way, Herod executed John the Baptist for criticizing this arrangement. So the Pharisees were really trying to get Jesus into deep trouble—maybe even get him killed.

**Rita:** And then, Jesus sort of threw the Pharisees a curve. He went back to the book of Genesis. He said, "From the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.' 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate."

**Dick:** That seems pretty definite to me. Is it that cut and dried?

**Rita:** Well, Jesus was talking about marriage in the Kingdom of Heaven. By that, he meant not where we are after we die, but ideally where we could be right now if we could only follow the will of God perfectly. According to Jesus, marriage is a part of the ideal human relationship inherent in God's creation. Marriage is a

shared life. Marriage is never supposed to be just about me. It's supposed to be about us. Do you remember the declaration we signed before we were married?

**Dick:** Well, yes, I do remember signing something, but I can't quite remember what it was. I was pretty excited that day, and I think I would have signed anything. Besides, that was forty-five years ago.

**Rita:** Well, to refresh your memory, it said that the purpose of marriage is for mutual fellowship, encouragement, understanding, and for the procreation of children and their physical and spiritual nurture, and for the safeguarding and benefit of society. We agreed to establish this relationship and to seek God's help in doing it.

**Dick:** So I guess we were setting out to establish the kind of relationship Jesus was talking about. I haven't thought about that for a while. Where does love come into that? It seems to me that people get married because they're in love.

**Rita:** The basis for any relationship we have is love. But, loving isn't the same as being in love. In God's terms, this means agape love. Agape love means always trying to do what is best for the other person. If we dwell in Christ's unconditional love for us, we can begin to learn, in small steps, what kingdom living is about. The love

between two people is a mirror to Christ's unshakeable love for us. Have you and I reached this goal? Far from it, but we do want to reach that goal. We keep striving to do it.

**Dick:** But we can never do it without God's help. You know, I believe we both had excellent role models. Your parents and my parents gave us good examples as we grew up.

**Rita:** Yes, they had loving relationships. They weren't hard hearted toward each other, and they weren't hard hearted towards us. They didn't have a lot of material things to give us, but gave us examples of respect, kindness, forgiveness, togetherness, and true caring about each other. It takes a lot of things to make a marriage work. Certainly, it's important to be able to meet the basic physical needs of your family, but other prerequisites include compatibility, effort, commitment, and support. There will always be both good and bad times, and that requires adjustment. Marriage takes hard work sometimes.

**Dick:** Some people think that if a marriage takes work, it must be a bad marriage. But the truth is that a marriage that takes work is a normal marriage. What makes it good or bad is determined by how hard each spouse is willing to work and persevere. You've got to stick to it.

**Rita:** That reminds me of what a good family friend told me the day before our wedding. Dr. Gray was my father's chiropodist—a foot specialist. My father went to him regularly for years. Anyway, the day before our wedding I was home alone, and he came to the house to bring a present. We talked about my coming marriage, and he said, "I've got a word for you. Now let me see—what is it? Yes, that's it! Stick-to-it-ive-ness. That's the word stick-to-it-ive-ness."

**Dick:** Stick-to-it-ive-ness! Well, I don't know if that's really a word, but I think I know what it means, and I think Dr. Gray was right on.

**Rita:** He certainly was. It is in both good and bad times that couples have to find mechanisms to deal with stress and change. No two marriages are exactly alike. Based on our own marriage, I feel that the key to adapting to these changes is to have the ability to forgive, to trust, and to be trustworthy, to grieve our losses, to weather through physical and psychological illnesses, and to solve family conflicts.

**Dick:** I couldn't agree more. We have also learned to express our true feelings to each other, not to gunny-sack issues, not to hold grudges, to keep a sense of humor, and finally just be good friends.

**Rita:** And, I might add, no hitting below the belt! Life is a matter of growing and developing into who we really are. Married couples

go through a predictable life cycle. Our own cycle began when we were first married. Our first task was to adjust to one another and begin to establish a home.

**Dick:** That was really tough for me. I had to learn that I couldn't just make decisions all by myself without considering you. And I had to learn that you were pretty competent to do things for yourself.

**Rita:** Right, and I had to learn how to tell you when I didn't like something you were doing.

**Dick:** Right! The silent treatment didn't work with me. I'd know something was wrong, but I never could figure out what it was. You had to learn to be direct.

**Rita:** Yes, just speaking up works a lot better with you. But, somehow we both made the initial adjustment to each other and moved forward. The next phase of our life cycle had to do with child bearing. We had to adjust to pregnancy and then caring for an infant. This can be a very stressful time for new parents.

**Dick:** I had a lot to learn in this stage. I don't think I had ever changed a diaper before. But I learned, and it was worth every minute of it. Some of my best memories come from that time.

**Rita:** This stage really doesn't last very long because that baby grows very quickly into a toddler. The next stage is child rearing, and that requires giving a lot of care and guidance to our children and doing everything we can to make them mentally and physically healthy and productive. If parents are successful in this stage, our children will be ready to live as independent and productive adults.

**Dick:** That doesn't mean that we've molded them into what we think they should be, but if we're completely successful, they become whatever God wants them to be.

**Rita:** When we reached our "empty nest" cycle, we had to reestablish our own relationship. Retirement meant that we no longer separated at the beginning of the work day and went our separate ways until evening. Now we're finding ways to work together as deacons in the church, and we're learning to be grandparents. And as we continue to age, we have to prepare for the final stages of our lives--widowhood and death. But our goal remains the same--to keep the promise we made to God and to each other—and to always continue in that relationship.

**Dick:** Well, enough about marriage and divorce. I'm wondering why Mark added the story about Jesus speaking on behalf of the

children. Jesus said, “Do not stop the little children from coming to me.” Who would intentionally stop a child from coming to Jesus?

**Rita:** Probably none of us—that is, not intentionally. But we can stop or hinder a child from coming to know Jesus simply by neglect or failure to act on their behalf. Children will follow our example. If we as parents don’t come to church and bring our child to church so they can see and learn how much God loves us and how much God does for us, we are stunting their spiritual life. In this day and age, there are plenty of places to go and things to do on Sunday morning, but we’ve got to make church a priority if we want our children to make it a priority. As it’s written in the Book of Proverbs, “Train children in the right way, and when old they will not stray” (Proverbs 22:6)

**Dick:** Earlier, we said that today’s Gospel contains something to disturb almost everyone. The fact is, that we often fail to keep the idealistic promise to love one another forever, exclusively and unconditionally in all circumstances.

**Rita:** There is plenty of hard heartedness to go around. But to love God and to love one another and our children as God intends, even in the midst great difficulty is what life is really all about. Amen.