

ON NOT BETRAYING ANOTHER'S LOVE

There is a beautiful poem by Raymond Carver called Late Fragment. Although quite brief, it captures the essence of what we search for most in our lives.

"And did you get what you wanted from this life, even so?

I did.

And what did you want?

To call myself beloved, to feel myself beloved on the earth".

The decision to commit oneself in marriage to another person is a serious thing, and not to be undertaken lightly. Within the Christian tradition, marriage is a sacrament, a sign and instrument of God's love and gracious presence among us. Such intimate relationships bring with them a deep vulnerability. We give ourselves to another in a very particular way and allow the other into the most sacred part of our life. We promise ourselves to the other, and there is a deep personal trust in that.

Should that trust be broken, the nature of the relationship is profoundly altered. With any broken promise, we become aware of our vulnerability and fragility: all the more so in our most intimate relationships. The sixth commandment warns us against the casual or reckless betrayal of another's love.

It signals, furthermore, the recognition of all that is good and beautiful in sexual love. It calls us to protect and foster loving relationships, to celebrate them, including the physical expression of our love for another. "The sixth commandment stands ... as a reminder that every time we physically extend ourselves to another we nurture the faithful bonds we share with one another" (James Keenan, Commandments of Compassion, 34).

One could even say that this commandment refers

to all our earthly relationships, not just our sexual ones. God is present in every expression of authentic love. All love becomes an opportunity to encounter our God.

WHEN YOU DON'T MEET ALL THE STANDARDS

Contemporary Western society has seen dramatic changes in how people approach and understand sexual relations. Greater numbers of people co-habit or have several sexual partners before marrying. It is far more common now for people to have children before marriage. In The Joy of Love, Pope Francis addresses many of these realities. The overriding message of this apostolic exhortation is one of compassion and understanding. He asks the Church to meet people where they are at. Life and relationships are difficult, and people's circumstances vary greatly. Pope Francis strongly encourages family life and married love, but warns us that the Church must not be a place of judgment and condemnation. The Church's teachings must not become "stones to throw at a person's life" (n.305).

He says that greater effort should be made to make divorced and remarried couples feel part of the church: "They are not excommunicated, and should not be treated as such, since they remain part" of the church (n.243). Pope Francis is a realist. He reminds us that marriage is a "dynamic process" and that we must learn to cope with the imperfections of others. "Love does not have to be perfect for us to value it", he tells us (n.122 and 113). One of the striking aspects of the document is the Holy Father's attentiveness to those who feel insignificant, or in some way excluded from God's love. God's grace in our lives is not a prize for the virtuous. Instead, God's love sustains us as we struggle and fumble our way through life, loving as best we can, and hoping to feel "beloved on the earth." ■

8 October 2017 – 27th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A

Psalter Week 3

SoulSpace

SERIES: THE TEN COMMANDMENTS IN A MODERN WORLD

Season colour: GREEN

In this series, **Suzanne Mulligan** looks at the commandments and their relevance for our world.



Today's readings

GOD'S WORD TODAY

Isaiah 5:1-7
Philippians 4:6-9
Matthew 21:33-43

The parable of the Vineyard has been presented as God rejecting the People of Israel as a whole and replacing them with the Christian Church. We might remember that Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Peter and the other apostles were all Jews. The responsibility for the death of Jesus lies with the leaders of the people of his time, not with the people in general then or the Jewish people since. We should not suppose that the Christian Church has supplanted the People of Israel: both exist in relationship with the same Lord and we should seek out and build on what is common to both in a spirit of respect and collaboration. The Catholic Church has in recent years made great strides in appreciating and making available to its members the Hebrew Scriptures which we call the Old Testament. We should be careful to keep in mind the background against which apparently anti-Jewish texts in the New Testament were written.

“You shall not commit adultery.” (Exodus 20:14)

What keeps us alive? What allows us to endure? The German mystic, Meister Eckhart, said: "I think it is the hope of loving and of being loved". Love, and the positive human relationships that flow from it, are such a central part of our lives that we need only think of those we love to see how diminished our existence would be without them. Love sustains us, affirms us, completes us. It is through love that we encounter God's presence among us. The liturgy acknowledges this when it sings: "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est" – "Where there is charity and love, there God is." The sixth commandment governs so much more than the legal requirements of marriage. It points to the most fundamental basis of our relationships – the bond of love between human beings, and the call to be faithful to those whom we love and cherish.

