

When I served in Delano, I met two of the most amazing people I've known as a priest, Ambrose and Leona.

At Mass, I'd see Ambrose hold the door for his wife every Sunday, and help her to get to her pew as it was difficult for her to walk. Leona one day, knowing that I like donuts and baked goods, made sure Ambrose dropped some off at the office.

It wasn't long before they invited me over, and they showed me a plaque on the wall of their home. It was from the Archdiocese, and it honored them as the longest married couple. At that point I believe it was 77 years of marriage. They were also on channel 9.

When we sat down at the table, they shared with me their story. They had been in town their entire life. Ambrose met Leona at the big Fourth of July festival, and was quickly head over heels in love. In their lives they built a home on the edge of town, and were constantly active in the Church volunteering in many as they lived out their faith. It was such an honor to know them, because they were two people who were so focused on the other and were filled with love.

This kind of thing among couples isn't new of course. On the Catholic Channel on XM radio, there is a program called "Busted Halo," which is also a website. And as I was browsing through some of the stories, I came across one written by Susan Anthony, a mom of 3 adult sons who writes for the Busted Halo website. She shares a story of a similar couple she got to know near New York City.

She noticed a man named George on the 5:41 train to Ronkonkoma, New York, and writes that if you see him, you might think, "Another salt-and-pepper-haired banker/accountant/lawyer heading back to the suburbs." You might notice the gold band on his left hand and picture a three-decades-long marriage, the pair finally enjoying the quiet comfort of a roast in the oven and Jeopardy on the couch after the often chaotic kids-and-mortgage years.

You would be right, George will see his wife tonight, but not in their home, and while he will tell her about his day, she won't be able to share about hers. Because, like just about every day for more than three years, George will be visiting his wife in a nursing home, where, at just 58, she is bedridden with early-onset Alzheimer's disease.

Josi was diagnosed in 2008 at age 49, and by 2010, she was told to put her affairs in order. George took four months off from work, and they spent that time enjoying life and each other. When he had to return to work, Josi was cared for during the day by family, including his sister-in-law who left her home every morning at 5:30 and returned when George got home from work. George made sure Josi was bathed and dressed before he left, including doing her hair and makeup. But in 2013, Josi lost her ability to walk, and George knew the time had come for the specialized care of a nursing facility.

When Josi had to leave their house, George brought their home to the nursing center. On the walls of her room are photographs of Josi as a vibrant woman, hiking in a

Nevada canyon, exploring Italy, enjoying family gatherings. The room is softly lit with floor lamps and family photos are everywhere. A Mets pennant attests to their allegiance as Long Islanders and religious items to their faith as Catholics. Each season, George hangs different decorations from the ceiling—garlands of silk flowers, snowflakes, Valentine’s hearts. And of course, his presence is the most important reminder, as he comes “home” from work to see her each evening.

Susan first met George almost two years ago on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the only extended amount of time he spent away from Josi since her diagnosis. He had come to pray for Josi, but his faith wasn’t marred by anger towards God. As they stood in Mass at the Holy Sepulcher in front of Jesus’ tomb, tears running down their faces, Susan knew George would become a special friend. About a year after they returned, Josi’s condition declined and Susan was blessed that he gave her the opportunity to meet her on one of his nightly visits.

Susan watched George as he would sit at her bedside and hold her hand as they say their evening prayers. Prayers of thanksgiving for the gift of their marriage, the Lord’s prayer, a Hail Mary, and petitions to St. Peregrine, patron of the terminally ill. Though she sometimes has moments of agitation and grimacing, during the prayers Josi is calm, and her smooth hand grips George’s.

Theirs, Susan reflects, is a marriage seemingly frozen in time. Josi is here, but she doesn’t know her grandson arrived, that he is walking and talking and running. She can’t be part of Christmases and birthdays. There will be no retirement home in the Poconos. But, still, there is a vibrancy to George and Josi’s marriage. As Susan sat at the edge of her bed, just watching her hand in his, their intimacy is palpable. They revel in holding each other’s hand, the spiritual longing in that touch just as strong as their first longing for one another more than 30 years ago.

And in that moment, Susan thought to herself: Could I do that? Could I love my husband so much that I would go to his bedside every day, setting aside myself in such a radical way? I let our petty challenges put little stress fractures in my marriage far too often. How does George stand tall under the weight of such unimaginable pressure? Of course, it’s because of his faith. George is living out what St. Mother Theresa called “the paradox of love”—if you love until it hurts, the hurt goes away and there is only love.

Seeing the sacrament of marriage distilled to its essence—selfless love—is a powerful witness for her as her husband and enter their fourth decade of marriage. She prays that George’s example will encourage them love each other better, to let go of their individual needs and love until it hurts. So maybe, one day, when we they holding hands as one of them prepares to leave the other, the true intimacy of their souls will mirror the love she witnessed in Josi’s room.

Indeed at every wedding Mass I celebrate, I remind the couple that through their sacrament, they will be a visible sign to the world of God’s love, revealing to others what

love looks like in action. But whether married or single, all of us are called to do what that couple did, to have that complete love of God and one another. And living it out, much Ambrose caring for Leona as she got gradually more ill, or George caring for Barbi, requires a special kind of selflessness, something that I imagine you have witnessed too.

Our reading this week reminds us of the flip side of selflessness, which is selfishness or a turning inward, away from God and others, and of the response to that which is one of justice, but also of mercy, of God reaching out to us.

Most all of us are familiar with the story of Adam and Eve from Genesis. But the story is about much more than disobeying God, or God saying "here's everything you need but do not eat from the tree" just as a way to test them. The deeper meaning here is that one needs to cling to God, and to not be the divided house that Jesus speaks of in the Gospel that cannot stand where we are divided from God, one another and even ourselves.

Before the fall of humanity, which occurred when at some point humans gained free will and could make a choice for good or evil, notice there is communion. Adam and Eve even walk about without any garments, much like a toddler would, oblivious to their state because they are at peace and simply happy to be with God. The humans are not to touch the tree because that belongs to God alone; He defines right and wrong. Taking from the tree is to take what belongs to God. And sadly, this what happens today too. It's called moral relativism. We'll define when life begins. We'll define what marriage is. We'll define what is right for me or not. Some things are moral absolutes and are reserved to God alone. When we take what is not ours and try to become like God, problems arise. The solution? To trust God completely. To surrender to Him. To be a person who is selfless. Just as in a healthy marriage two people make one another better, all of us through our relationship with God are made better by Him, but then called to make one another better. And doing this entails three very important steps.

The first is to trust. Adam and Eve hide from God. And then Adam even blames God for his problem. "The woman you put here" is his response. Well how about some personal responsibility? How about acknowledging the fact that one is a sinner, and that we need God? Sometimes like Adam and Eve, we try to hide the reality of sin. But God comes looking for Adam. There is justice and consequence for sin - Adam and Eve get expelled from the garden. But there is also hope. For just as God looks for them in the garden, He sends the Son to return to the garden. And what happens right after the resurrection? Jesus goes to get Adam in a sense - he meets the apostles in the locked room, and there is no condemnation. No shaming. Just simply "peace be with you." So look inward, and know that no matter what it is you may be struggling with, God is there not to condemn, but to give you peace and love. Don't play the blame game or denial; simply trust in God and reach out to Him for help.

The second is to do a personal inventory and look at your level of selfishness. Growing up our parents probably taught us the importance of saying "please" or "thank you" and

of being considerate to others. But as we age, we can gradually think of ourselves first. Kind of like someone walking around with a perpetual selfie stick for their iPhone. There's nothing wrong with taking a selfie, but the focus can't always be on ourselves. We can sometimes think of things to confess like lying, bad language, struggles with sins of the flesh, taking something we shouldn't, etc. But a good examination of conscience will always challenge us to make sure we don't think we are the center of the universe. It's worth asking things like do we expect too much from others or take advantage of their generosity; do we control other people; do we take the time to listen to others; do we get irritated when we things don't go our way with a child's teacher or at work or even at church; do we drive aggressively or show a lack of consideration to people on the road; can we let go of authority and delegate; do you respect your spouse as an equal; do children respect their parents and parents respect their children, seeing that they are not clones of them and have their own dreams and goals in life; do we think of others in the family, etc. It's a lot more than sharing our toys as a five year old. There's nothing wrong with "me" time or doing things we like or for ourselves. But more and more it seems people can think that the world revolves around themselves, when it doesn't. The Cross is the reminder of that before us always; the self emptying love of God that we are called to imitate.

Lastly, we ask ourselves what can we do for others, and this takes many forms. In the Gospel Jesus acts as an exorcist, driving out demons. He takes upon Himself the evil in the world and swallows it in divine mercy. We have that same power to drive out the demons in the world. Notice what Jesus does in redefining family - family he says is not limited to blood ties, but to all who do the will of God. And as such, Jesus reaches out to all people. An icon or image you may have seen is that of Jesus going to get Adam and bring him to heaven. That's what we do when we reconcile with others and forgive, when we show compassion, when we open our eyes to see who is hurting. A marriage is often an icon of the Trinity in how people like Leona and Ambrose, or George and Josi and so many others emulate that love in what they do for others. It's not easy; it can be tough to mend fences, to say "I'm sorry" and certainly tough to day after day care for someone who is ill. But in all of these things, a person is living out the cross; they are emptying themselves like Jesus did through His ministry and on the Cross. And in the process, they themselves not only make others better but become better too, living out what we hear in the second reading - that God's will is that our inner selves are renewed day by day as preparation for eternal glory. That can only happen by dying to ourselves, trusting God, and living out His command to love Him and one another.

An apple may have separated us, but another food, the Bread of Life, unites us to God and one another. As we prepare to receive this food, may our eyes be opened to the reality that we have nothing to fear from our God who is always seeking us out, but also to the reality that we too have a job to do to bring others into the garden of the Lord by being an agent of his love in this world.