

Over the years as a priest I've been a part of many weddings, and before each wedding I like to meet the couple to get to know them a bit and learn how they met so I can personalize the homily.

People as you might expect meet in all kinds of ways. At school, at work, and sometimes online through singles websites like eharmony.

But perhaps the most unique story I ever came across was that of how Ben Murrell met his wife Virginia. This was not a couple I ever knew, but their love story that led to a family is one of the most unique ways that two people have ever met to say the least.

The year was 1904, and Ben was part of a railroad camp of civil engineers near Knoxville, Tennessee. The L&N campsite had tents for the men, a warm campfire, a good cook and the most modern surveying equipment available. The only real drawback to being a turn-of-the-century civil engineer was that there was a severe shortage of eligible young women.

Benjamin Murrell was one such engineer. A tall, reticent man with a quiet sense of humor and a great sensitivity for people, Ben enjoyed the nomadic railroad life.

His mother had died when he was just 13, and this early loss caused him to become a loner.

Like all the other men, Ben sometimes longed for the companionship of a young woman, but he kept his thoughts between himself and God. One one particularly memorable spring day, a marvelous piece of information was passed on around the camp. The boss's sister-in-law was coming to visit. The men knew only three things about her. She was 19, she was single, and she was pretty. By mid-afternoon, the men could talk of little else. Her parents were sending her to escape the yellow fever that was invading the Deep South and she'd be arriving in just 3 days. Someone found a tintype of her, and the photograph was passed around with great seriousness and grunts of approval.

Ben watched the preoccupation of his friends with a smirk. He teased them for their silliness over a girl they'd never even met. "Just look at her ben. Take one look and then tell us you're not interested," one of the men retorted. But Ben only shook his head and walked away chuckling.

The next two days found it difficult for the men of the L & N engineering camp to concentrate. The train would be there early Saturday morning and they discussed

their plan in great detail. Freshly bathed, twenty heads of hair carefully greased and slicked back, they would all be there to meet that train and give the young woman a railroad welcome she wouldn't soon forget. She'd scan the crowd, choose the most handsome of the lot and have an instant beau. Let the best man win, they decided. And each was determined to be that man.

On Friday evening, as the other men tried to shake the wrinkles out of their Sunday best and draw a bath, Ben sat down on a log next to the campfire. Something glinted orange by the firelight. Idly he reached down and picked it up. His friends had been so busy and full of themselves, they left the girl's photo lying on the ground.

The men were too preoccupied to see Ben's face as he beheld the picture of Virginia Grace for the first time. They didn't notice the way he cradled the photograph in his big hands like a lost treasure, or that he gazed at it for a long, long time. They missed the expression on his face as he looked first at the features of the delicate beauty, then at the camp full of men he suddenly perceived to be his rivals. And they didn't see Ben go into his tent, pick up a backpack, and leave camp as the sun glowed red and sank beyond a distant mountain.

Early the next morning, the men of the L & N railroad camp gathered at the train station. Virginia's family, who had come to pick her up, rolled their eyes and tried unsuccessfully not to laugh. Faces were raw from unaccustomed shaves, and the combination of men's cheap colognes was almost noxious. Several of the men had even stopped to pick bouquets of wildflowers along the way.

At long last the whistle was heard and the eagerly awaited train pulled into the station. When the petite, vivacious little darling of the L & N camp stepped onto the platform, a collective sigh escaped her would-be suitors. She was even prettier than the tintype depicted. Then every man's heart sank in collective despair. For there, holding her arm in a proprietary manner and grinning from ear to ear, was Benjamin Murrell. And from the way she tilted her little head to smile up into his face, they knew their efforts were in vain.

"How," his friends demanded of Ben later, "did you do that?"

"Well," he said, "I knew I didn't have a chance with all of you guys around. I'd have to get to her first if I wanted her attention, so I walked down to the previous station and met her train. I introduced myself as a member of the welcoming committee from her new home."

“But the nearest station is 17 miles away!” Someone blurted incredulously. “You walked 17 miles to meet her train? That would take all night!”

“That it did,” he affirmed.

Benjamin Murrell courted Virginia Grace, and in due time they married. They raised five children and buried one, a 12 year old son. They didn't trio build the eternal romance you might read about in a novel or magazine. Nor did they have a standing date night. In fact, Ben was so far out in the sticks while working on one engineering job that one of their children was a full month old before he saw his new daughter. Ben didn't take Virginia to expensive restaurants, and the most romantic gift he ever bought her was an occasional jar of olives.

But, what Gwyn Williams, their great-granddaughter who shares the story, does know, is that they worked on their family by being faithful to one another, treating one another with consideration and respect, having a sense of humor, brining up their children to know and love the Lord, and loved one another through some tough times.

Ben died with Gwyn was a baby. NaNa, as she called Virginia, died when Gwyn was 12 and was 85. When she knew her, she was an elderly woman who needed help to get around with a walker and who had osteoporosis. Her aching joints were swollen with arthritis and her eyesight was hindered by glaucoma. At times though through those eyes, they would sparkle and dance with the vivaciousness of the girl her great-grandfather knew. They danced especially when she told her favorite story. It was the one of how she was so pretty once, on the basis of a tintype, an entire camp turned out to meet the train and vie for her attention. It was the story of how one man walked 17 miles all night long for a chance to meet the woman of his dreams and claim her for his wife.

What began as a 17 mile journey turned into a family, one that grew stronger as the years went by. And while there are all kinds of stories of how people meet, what I always follow those questions up with with the couple is how did you fall in love? For while Ben and Virginia met, what they did in the many years that follow was to build a family and a long-lasting love. That is what we are called to do as well, for all of us, married and single, are part of family units. So how do we build on the love and make it grow into holiness?

Our Gospel gives us 3 paths to that.

The first is devotion. Gwyn says faith was important to her great-grandparents and they passed it onto their kids. Faith was also of course very important to Mary and Joseph. The story begins in Jerusalem where Mary, Joseph and Jesus are depicted as fulfilling the law regarding purification as well as the consecration of the firstborn. The focus at the start of the story is on the piety of the family. They are faithful Jews who are observing the teachings of the Torah. And in another reading that is used on this feast Jesus as a child is found in the Temple, and He says to Mary and Joseph did you not know I would be in my Father's house? So, how about us? Is God one thing among many, or at the center? Families can get so overextended and become hubs of activity with so much going on, but it's so important to have God at the center, not as just one thing among many. So take those steps to do just that. Unless there's illness or dangerous driving conditions, make sure to come to Mass every week. Say some prayers together each day, whether it's traditional prayers or prayers from the heart. In my family, no matter what was going on, even on days like today where it's cold, we went to Mass. I'd pray with my parents each night. My Godmother gave me prayer books and prayed for me and helped me learn prayers too. And my grandparents even perhaps inspired my vocation when I'd say a mock "mass" as a third grader, though "mass" would promptly end when the Price is Right began per one of the attendees

request. The point is that we had time for all kind of activities and were a busy family, but God was always at the center of it all.

Second, we can learn from Simeon and see Christ in one another. Simeon has a blessing; the Holy Spirit reveals to him that he will not die before seeing the Christ. The moment he sees Jesus, he knows that his desire is realized. He sees the universal light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory for the people Israel. Of course many will not see Jesus for who He is as Jesus begins His ministry. Even Mary and Joseph may not know fully all that is happening at this early point. But how about you and me, do we see Jesus in one another? Jesus is present in the Eucharist, but we sometimes forget we are created in the image of God. We probably wouldn't use hurtful language, yell or get into a fight if Jesus were looking at us face to face, but so often we can do that in families no matter what our ages. We must show our love for God by loving one another, and apologizing when we fail to do so. Sometimes it can be hard to love people in our families. As kids, siblings annoy us intentionally, take our stuff without asking, hog the bathroom, the typical family stuff that every parent knows. But as we get older, sometimes far worse patterns can develop. A person can become expectant, show their love less often, or become condescending or even selfish with their time. This is why it's so important to not just go to Mass or say a prayer, but to evaluate all

the time, how do I treat the people around me? How do I see Jesus in them, or do I not show them reverence because my eyes are blind to God being in them?

Inevitably we will let one another down, we will have bad days in our families, but it's so important to make sure we always work at truly treating one another with love and kindness, forgiveness and mercy. Ben was smitten with a photograph, but he came to love his future bride Virginia not just for her appearance but for who she is on the inside, as she did with him, and that love truly grew over their many years together.

Finally, we meet Anna in the Gospel. Anna testifies to Jesus, and she is an elderly widow who has spent much of her time in the Temple. Mother Theresa has a famous quote that goes like this: not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love. It's worth thinking about how the lives we lead testify to who Jesus is. As the saying goes do not just talk the talk, walk the walk. And in family life, it's the daily little things that, when we do them with love, evangelize others in the family, but also others who know us as well. Working hard each day; showing patience; praying; visiting extended family; parents treating others with love and respect; or in Gwyn's case, a jar of olives her great-grandfather gave to his wife that made her day. All of these things added up are how saints are created, because through our actions we have testified to the Lord.

Growing up, I was so blessed to have a great home environment. My parents worked hard each day, but always had time for me. And while I'd go on and learn prayers and about the faith both from them and in school, I'd see it and continue to see it in how my parents lead their lives. They've sacrificed so much to provide for our family, and care so much for other people. Like an icon or stained glass window is a way we can see God, even more is window to God that my family has created for me, because they have taught me not just *who* God is, but *how* to know Him, and how to teach others about Him too. So many things happen in families, but above all else what made Ben and Virginia's family and the family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph holy was love. We don't have to be an artist to create a great picture of God, we can do it for one another starting right at home, one loving action at a time.