

I remember one day in a course we took in seminary on moral theology, the professor remarked how it can sometimes be overlooked how two Christians, when they marry, do so in front of the crucifix. The point he was making was that when two people profess their love for one another, they are saying the life I live now is no longer just about me. I am going to love you as Jesus does; I am going to cherish you, be there for you, and show my love through how I live my life.

Indeed, as the years have gone by, I have to tell you I've seen this kind of love time and time again in so many couples.

As I was reading through stories from married couples last week, one that struck me was one written by Robertson McQuilkin, who lost his wife in the 1990s. He wrote it as his wife was in the twilight of her life, Alzheimer's taking more of her each day.

In his story, he writes that 17 summers ago, he and Muriel began their journey into the twilight. Now, it was midnight, at least for her, and sometimes he wondered when dawn would break, as even Alzheimers was not supposed to attack so early and torment for so long. Yet in her silent world, his wife, Muriel, he reflected, is so content and so lovable. If she were to die, how he would miss her gentle, sweet presence. Yes, there are times when he'd get irritated, but not often, for it made no sense to get angry. And besides, he thought, perhaps God has been answering the prayer of his youth to mellow his spirit.

There was one time though when he completely lost it. In the days when Muriel could still stand and walk and they had not resorted to diapers, sometimes there were accidents. He was on his knees beside her, trying to clean up the mess as she stood, confused, by the toilet. It would have been easier if she were not so insistent on helping. He got more and more frustrated, and suddenly, in an attempt to have her stand still, he lightly slapped her calf. It wasn't hard, but she was startled, as was Robertson, as never in 44 years of marriage had he ever so much as touched her in anger or in rebuke. Never. He was never even tempted, but now, when she needed him the most, he felt like he failed.

Crying, he pleaded with her to forgive him, no matter that she didn't understand words any better than she could speak them. So he prayed and said how sorry he was. It took him days to get over it. Perhaps he reflects he bottled those tears to quench the fires that might ignite again some day.

A young friend asked him around that time, "Don't you ever get tired?"

"Tired? Every night. That's why I go to bed," was his reply.

"No, I mean tired of..." as his friend tilted her head towards Muriel, who sat silently in her wheelchair, her vacant eyes saying "No one at home just now." Robertson responded to his friend. "Why no, I don't get tired. I love to care for her. She's my precious."

Love, Robertson writes, is said to evaporate if the relationship is not mutual, if it's not physical, if the other person doesn't communicate or if one party doesn't carry his or her share of the load. When Robertson hears the litany of essentials for a happy marriage, he counts of what his beloved can no longer contribute, and then he contemplates how truly mysterious love is.

What some people find so hard to understand he says is that loving Muriel isn't hard. They wonder about his former loves - like his work. "Do you miss being president?" A university student asked him as they sat in their little garden. Robertson told him he'd never thought about it, but on reflection, no. As exhilarating as his work had been, he preferred learning to cook and keep house. He'd never looked back.

But that night, he did reflect on his question and prayed. "I like this assignment, and I have no regrets. But if a coach puts a man on the bench, he must not want him in the game. You needn't tell me, of course, but I'd like to know - why didn't you keep me in the game?"

Robertson didn't sleep well that night and awoke contemplating the puzzle. Muriel was still mobile at that time, so they set out on their morning walk around the block. She wasn't too sure on her feet, so they went slowly and held hands as they always did. That day he heard footsteps behind him and looked back to see the familiar form of a local derelict behind them. He staggered past them, then turned and looked them up and down. "That's good. I likes it" he said. "That's real good, I likes it." He turned and headed back down the street, mumbling to himself over and over, "That's good, I likes it."

When Muriel and Robertson reached their little garden and sat down, his words came back to Robertson. God, he discerned, had spoken through an inebriated old derelict. "It is you who is whispering to my spirit, I likes it, that's good." He said aloud. "I may be on the bench, but if you like it and say it's good, that's all that counts."

Muriel hadn't spoken a coherent word in years, but then came February 14, 1995. Valentine's Day was always special in their home because that was the day in 1948 that Muriel accepted Robertson's marriage proposal. On the eve of Valentine's Day in 1995, he bathed Muriel, kissed her good night and whispered a prayer over her. "Dear Lord, you love sweet Muriel more than I, so please keep my beloved through the night; may she hear the angel choirs."

The next morning, Robertson was peddling on his exercise bike at the foot of her bed and reminiscing about some of their happy lovers' days long gone while Muriel slowly emerged from sleep. Finally, she popped awake and, as she often did, smiled at her husband. Then for the first time in months, she spoke, calling out to him in a voice as a crystal chime, "love...love...love."

Robertson jumped from his cycle to embrace his bride. "Honey, you really do love me, don't you?" Holding Robertson with her eyes and patting his back, she responded with the only words she could find to say yes. "I'm nice" she said.

Robertson closes his story by again recalling the words of the local derelict, "That's good, I likes it." Though truthfully, "I love it" might be the better way to put it, because what exists between he and his beloved Muriel, just like in so many people who live out the sacrament of marriage, is what love is all about - a sacrificial giving and receiving.

Our readings this week are more timely than ever because they remind us of the importance of this truth.

From Genesis, we hear of Adam, who has many things in the garden, but lacks one thing. And so God in His wisdom creates Eve, who is equal to Adam unlike everything else in creation. This is why Adam rejoices, "this one at last, is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh." Jesus picks up on this point in the Gospel. Divorce could be easily obtained by the man, who often might mistreat the woman, who had very little rights. Jesus seeing this, reaffirms what people have forgot from Genesis, that the marriage bond and the relationship between people matter and is something sacred.

There's so much to unpack with these readings, but really what I think it comes down to is having the proper understanding of relationships, and in a special way the relationship that comes with marriage.

For starters, we must always have in front of us this understanding of the dignity of the human person. There are so many roadblocks to this. Sometimes through the abuse of images of the human body, a person is reduced to a mere object or just their physical appearance, hence the problems of pornography, and cases of sexual abuse. Other times a person can be looked down based on their race or class or politics. And other times the personhood of a person can be lost, as we forget that the person we are working with, who serves us dinner, or who calls us on the phone to sell us something is an actual human being. And so what should be this guiding principle in all of our relationships is the fact that the human being is unique in creation, and they deserve our respect and love, but also even more than that - our service - which is why we are called to serve one another and do that through things like our mission and service trips, school service marathon, our Matthew 25 garden and why people do so much for one another.

But of course while we have this attitude of love and service towards others, marriage is a special reflection of that. A marriage is ideally an icon of the Trinity. And there are many stories like Robertson and Muriel out there. I think these readings though give those who are married a chance to think back to how they exchanged their vows, and to think about what they mean.

The big thing is that it again goes back to the cross. In doing what Robertson was doing for Muriel, a sacrificial kind of love. At each wedding Mass, I say to the couple that

people are going to look at them and see love on display, not just when they exchange the vows or are dancing later that evening at the reception, but years down the road when they are maybe like Robertson and Muriel. So it's important to ask yourself how do you sacrifice for your spouse and your kids and family? From saying I'm not going out with friends tonight, I'm staying in; to helping the kids with the homework; to doing some housecleaning or getting the groceries, it's an endless list. I'd say it even includes sacrificing one's ego, and apologizing when one makes a mistake. There are so many acts of selflessness and sacrifice big and small that happen in marriages that I've seen from both of my parents, to so many great couples I've come to know in my life and in my priesthood. So challenge yourself to look to the Cross and be transformed by it's meaning living that out in your marriages and relationships.

Another key in marriages is communication and listening. We sacrifice, but we also articulate our love by talking to the other. Do you know what is going on in the lives of your spouse and kids? Do you get back to the basics that mom taught us when we were young, namely using words like "please" "thank you" and "I'm sorry?" Do you force yourself to sometimes not say anything but just listen, so the other person knows you care? When we take the effort to do these little things they can do so much to remind our spouse and kids that we love them, are there for them, and understand them.

One final point: love is not all about sacrifice, but also about a receiving. I think sometimes we can get hung up on the receiving part of love and think the world revolves around us. But sometimes we forget that receiving love is important too, and if that is not there in a marriage, it sometimes must end. Jesus teaches against divorce, but the culture in which he was in was very unfair towards how women were treated. Divorce is a reality and it's a result of free will. This is why as a Church we have annulment. The Gospel can be difficult to hear especially if you are divorced or know people who are divorced, and frankly the Church hasn't done a great job of reaching out to those who are separated or divorced at various points in her history. Sometimes a person is abused; other times a person tries to make a relationship work but the other person is like Judas, who Jesus tried to help but who closed his heart to loving Him. So the point is if in any relationship, if it becomes one-sided and you are giving, giving and giving but getting nothing, speak up. Muriel wasn't able to speak due to her Alzheimers, but she did express her love for Robertson. If someone who should love you is not, confront them on it, and get counseling if warranted, and if it just can't work because the other person is not going to love you at all in return, then perhaps the relationship needs to end and all you can do is pray for that person. Obviously if there's any abuse, the relationship needs to end. But sometimes a person becomes expectant; they never express their love, or they become cold or cruel. It's important that in marriage and in our relationships with others, we are also given love too - for that is how the Triune Love operates, Father, Son and Spirit each selflessly loving the other but also receiving the love of the other.

Every time we see a Cross, we are reminded of how far God went for us out of love. And we are also invited to ponder some questions: how far will I go for the people God puts in my life? How do I look at the people in the world, from my family to the stranger?

How do I treat my spouse and my family? Some people live only for themselves; others write off some people and dismiss sinful actions because they don't really know that person in the magazine or the computer, or develop a sense of entitlement from people they do know. We get so accustomed to sin. But we can't forget with the love of God, when we receive it, we are called to pass it on. The Cross is a call to action. It's a call to see others through the eyes of Christ; to remember the words of Saint John Paul II that we only find ourselves through the gift of ourselves. Maybe God will call you today to show patience to someone on the freeway; to forgive someone; to call an estranged family member; or to apologize for something you did wrong, or to be more attentive to your spouse. No one saw all the daily things Robertson did for Murial, or the things that she did for him over the course of their marriage, but as they lived out their vocation, they made one another better, and I'd suspect made others better too as they saw how they lived out their vows. Not too many will see the late nights you spend working on school projects, the meal you prepared for your family or the times you said "I'm sorry." But God will, and so will the people who experience these acts of love and through them are transformed, and then change others for the better as well. As we prepare to receive Holy Communion, may we remember that the love we are about to welcome into our hearts and souls is a love that is meant to be shared with a world where so many can feel hurt and isolated. To our married couples who live this out by doing so much for one another and their families, thank you for helping us to see the love of God through your vocation. And for all of us, like Jesus, may we love one another never forgetting that through a million little actions over the course of a life, we do so much to build one another up. If we truly love Jesus, let's make sure that the love we are given is always something we pass on. In a marriage, two people become one, and in Holy Communion, all of us are also united as the people of God. Let's make sure the love we are given is something that we also give to one another, never forgetting that through so many ordinary actions we can remind people of what love is really all about.