

Acts 2:1-11

Ps 104:1, 24, 29-30, 31, 34

I Cor 12:3b-7, 12-13

Jn 20:19-23

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One of my most enjoyable duties as a priest is working with couples preparing for marriage. Although it involves a lot of effort to complete the paperwork, pick the music and readings, and plan all the other details, I enjoy it because people planning to get married are generally happy and optimistic. They are excited about the wedding and they're full of energy and hope. They are cheerful people.

However, from time to time every priest has to deal with some impossible requests. Many people, based on movies and television, think that they can be married on a beach at dawn. They can't. Some couples, after rehearsal, will ask, "When do you say the part about 'If anyone here knows of any reason why these two should not be wed, speak now, or forever hold your peace'?" I tell them that question is not a part of the Catholic ceremony, and that as far as I know it never has been. (I'm not sure why couples are so interested in this question. Are they hoping for a last minute reprieve, or are they just afraid of what someone might shout out in response?)

There are other such requests, some funny, and some a little loony. "Can the soloist sing 'Memory' from *Cats*?" "No." "Can the wedding party dress up like cowboys or medieval knights?" "No." One groom actually asked, "Can we have the song 'We Will Rock You / We are the Champions' played as we leave the church? I think it will really get people psyched up for the reception!" I said, "No. Perhaps you should check with the Unitarians across the street. Anything goes over there." My own brother actually asked if he and his groomsmen could wear kilts. (We have Irish and Welsh in our background, but no Scottish, as far as I know.) Fortunately, I knew I wouldn't have to deliver the bad news on that one. His wife - "Saint Laraine," as I call her - said, very sweetly, "Well, Matt, if that's an important part of your heritage and means a lot to you, of course you can wear kilts." That's what she *said*. What she *meant* was quite different: "Matt, I love you more than life itself, but if anyone wearing a kilt comes within one hundred yards of my wedding, I will beat you to death with a tire iron."

Finally, I recall the couple who asked, "Can we write our own vows?" And of course, the answer is: no. I told them that priests don't get to write their own Eucharistic prayers, and couples don't get to write their own wedding vows. This is the Roman Catholic Church, not Hallmark. We have certain special vows and time-honored prayers, and they are the same for everyone. But the bride-to-be was insistent, and pleaded, "But just read the vows we have written. They are really nice!" So, wanting to be gentle and kind (but also understanding why some priests take to drink), I took a copy of the vows and promised to look them over. Years later, I still have that piece of paper. The vows are quite lengthy, and involve frequent references to "the marriage of sea and sky" and "the union of stars and planets." I will spare you the rest, and get to heart of the matter, a line which was repeated in each spouse's vow: "Today, I declare my love for you. Today, I am yours and you are mine. The past is over, and we do not know what

tomorrow will bring. Only the earth, sea, and sky are eternal. But on this day, I am yours.”

No doubt, you have already seen the main problem: the vows were completely focused on the wedding day. But a *wedding* is just one day: a *marriage* is about tomorrow and the day after and all the months and years to come. When a couple exchange vows, they are committing themselves to the future, however happy or sad, however sick or healthy, however rich or poor. This couple meant well, but their homemade vows fell short - indeed, there was some doubt in my mind that the vows were intended to be permanent. Since “only the earth, sea, and sky are eternal,” what was that saying about their commitment? (Plus, I’m pretty sure God is eternal, too.) In short, the whole “until death do us part” aspect of the vows was missing.

Beauty has always been impermanent: we grow older, and our appearance changes. Health has always been impermanent: no matter what we eat or how often we exercise, our bodies becomes less energetic, more prone to sickness. Memory is especially impermanent: names and places and facts and figures we used to have at our fingertips gradually become harder to find. (Unless you have children, in which case it’s not a gradual process at all.) But now, in this age, more and more it is our spirits which become impermanent. The strength to make a promise and to keep a promise seems to be slipping away. Marriages break apart, priests and religious leave their commitments, and people drift away from their baptismal vows, stop coming to confession, stop reading the Scriptures, stop receiving the body and blood of Christ. Friendships fade as we take new jobs and find new neighborhoods. Families fall apart over ancient quarrels and new hardships. The ties that bind grow worn and brittle. And these cracks and breaks, these dissolutions and wanings, are excused with the words, “Well, I’m only human.” “People make mistakes.” “That’s the way of the world.” “Nothing lasts forever.”

Today, on the feast of Pentecost, we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit which makes it possible for frail, sinful creatures like ourselves to keep a lifetime commitment. We are human, we do make mistakes, but we have sources of strength and healing of which the world does not dream. St. Paul tells us today, “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” Just so, no one can say “forever” without the Holy Spirit. No one can commit his whole life to Jesus Christ without the Holy Spirit, no one can turn over all that she is to the Lord without the Holy Spirit. Without the Holy Spirit, the Christian life is impossible, because the Christian life is *forever*. Whatever you are called to be - married or single, clergy or religious - you are called to be a permanent disciple of Jesus Christ, to say “Jesus is Lord of my life forever.” Pentecost is the power to follow Jesus Christ: to be permanently pure, perpetually penitent, persistently prayerful, and perennially patient. Relentlessly chaste, unceasingly brave, unstoppably generous: these are the vows of a Christian, and only the Holy Spirit makes them possible. Jesus sends us as the Father sent him: to serve forever, to be witnesses forever, to proclaim God’s peace all the days of our lives. But we are not sent alone. The Holy Spirit abides within us.

“I will be committed to you my whole life.” That’s what we say to Christ in baptism. That’s what we say to Christ when we are confirmed. It’s what we say to Christ if we are married or ordained or solemnly commit ourselves as brothers and nuns. Is such commitment possible? No, not on our own. How, in twenty, forty, or sixty years, can we still be faithful to vows made when we were infants, teenagers, young men and women? “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit.” No one can keep the faith except through the Holy Spirit. Today, and tomorrow, and for the rest of our lives, we celebrate the divine gift of loyalty, of constancy, of wondrous fidelity. God does not expect bits of clay and breath like us to hold fast on our own. He sends us His Spirit. And the Spirit is our only hope, our strength and our assurance that whatever the future brings, we can still be tomorrow the people we promised to be long ago.