

Joyful Ever After God's Plans for You & Marriage

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“The Joy to Be For.” Hi everybody, my name is Damon Owens, and I'm excited for this final installment of our reflections here for the Pray More Healing Retreat. And I've been tracking joy, I've been moving through some of these great beautiful truths of our faith. And I want to close here in this final reflection on marriage. Not just in the natural, but what God created, understanding joy, and love, who we are in our identity, of belonging to God. Understanding marriage in the family is essential for us to understand our place in this world, and the role of marriage in the salvation story.

So let's begin with a prayer. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Lord from the beginning you created. Before church you created man and woman. Before law and government, you created marriage, the union of two that has the power to create a third. And the family that flows from that Lord, is the original institution, the original place where we come to know who we are, whose we are, and why we're here. Help us to reclaim through a radical remembering, the dignity, the value, the worth, the truth of marriage and family, created from the beginning, that still endures in this moment. To see more clearly our particular irreplaceable role in the salvation story, by your will, by your gift, by your grace. All these things, Lord, we pray, under the protection of our Blessed Mother, Queen of the family of St. Joseph, father of Jesus, our Lord, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

How do you truly live to be happy? When God created marriage, and the family, it was way before the entrance of sin, right? This is why you hear people now speaking of marriage, and family sometimes as hell. People say, "Marriage hell, family is hell." It's not hell, it's purgatory, right? Purgatory, because it makes us, the capacity, gives us this capacity to burn off that which is not of God, right? Purging out that which is not the good for us. And it really must, it gives us this this Corpus Christi, this capacity like Christ to burn off, if you will, the dross of self. I know that's really poetic for a recovering engineer. But the dross is the stuff that's not of the gold, and you melt in order to let it come to the top, and you skim it off, and you keep boiling so that the gold itself remains pure, and all the impurities come out. Well, purgatory is our way of understanding this preparation for standing for the beatific vision, purging from us, all the things that are not of God. And God does this mercy for us, in what we call purgatory.

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But marriage and family in a good way, understanding that, is the beginning of this, is the purging out. And it's pulling in all of Jesus, so that when Jesus comes in us, we can then go out to the world as Christ. I haven't talked for years about one of my favorites, it says, "*Is to be, is to be for.*" To be is to be for. There's this dynamism, this moving back and forth, and it sounds more Shakespeare, but it really is John Paul II. And this, this JP2 understanding of the human person called to be gift for the other, is a deep statement of interconnection, or as he would say, interpenetration, one to the other, of identity, of relationships, and mission. That's all wrapped into understanding who we are as persons. What it means to be a human person. Personhood is relational.

And I know I was talking about, I'm going to talk about marriage, I'm going to talk about this to be for the other, the joy to be for other. But there's, again, this rootedness in understanding who we are, that gives us the freedom to talk about this. It's not just one idea among many, it's something that even without a profession of Christ, we can see if we have clear eyes, in creation. And coming to know Christ turns lights on, so that we can see *what is* more clearly.

I want to bring back a word we had in the earlier reflections, munus, M-U-N-U-S. -This task, role, mission, high office, honor, gift, this given by authority, an authority from God, to be able to accomplish something we could never accomplish on our own. Marriage is a munus. In fact, this is what we call matrimony. I'm getting ahead of myself. The munus to motherhood, right? And we reflect in the beginning about joy, because this whole series is really meditating on joy. Which is that overarching, why? Joy is the overarching, why, behind the what of everything we choose. We long for joy. Everything that we believe, our desire for joy, is not just the happiness that passes but, it's that abiding knowing, of who we are, and of living that life to the full.

Pope Benedict gave us a beautiful sentence that said "Its certainty of knowing that we are loved by God." We reflected earlier our mission to love, the building on that ultimate call to joy. That only through love, can we experience that joy. And only love can bring us the joy that we deepest desire. We covered love itself, and trying to rescue it from the really paltry and poor, secular understanding, just a feeling. Knowing these Eros, the passion, philia, friendship, storge, that belonging to the other, with something greater than ourselves, that binds us. And that agape love, that unconditional, that in our case, the free, and total, and faithful, and fruitful self-gift.

Well, a call to marriage, builds on all these truths. And we're still desiring the fullness of joy that God himself promise. And we are called as a mission to love, in

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a very particular way. Marriage becomes a sign and a reality for all of us. Marriage today is controversial, right? Whether we look at it through the political lens, which too many of us do. It's controversial for those political reasons, and for many other broken reasons. Broken experiences that people have had in their own lives, and in their own background. When I talk about marriage, perhaps we go back to that key word matrimony. Just to make the distinction. We used the word munus, in previous segments to talk about a gift, an honor, role, mission, vocation, all these beautiful things that are given by someone in authority, with a particular call to accomplish for themselves, and to accomplish for others.

And we might be better talking about the munus where matrimony comes from. That is Mater, M-A-T-E-R. Which means mother, and munus, a munio, which is a form of munus, that we speak of the marriage, and matrimony, we're really talking about the munus to motherhood. And we know we can't have matrimony obviously, without patrimony that call, that munus to fatherhood. A marriage becomes a sign, not just for those who enter a relationship, or a contract, or a decision to live together. We're speaking about something far more profound. It speaks of an outflow, a living of who we are. The call to marriage is very specific, which we'll talk about just a moment, and to enter into it.

But let's talk a minute about what it does for those in the rest of the world. What does marriage tell us? It says that it's possible for two unique unrepeatable persons, to give themselves one to the other so fully, that they become together something that neither could be on their own. This is the way we look at matrimony. This munus, this mission, this call to motherhood begins with this self-knowledge, I know who I am. This self-mastery, or self-possession that we follow, the virtues, and that we live in the virtues, we live these virtues in order to take possession of ourselves, and really be a free self-gift, or love. So it's a self-knowledge that calls us to a self-possession, and self-mastery through the virtues, in order to make a self-gift. And the self-gift can only be given, if we have possession of ourselves. You can't give what you don't have. And you can't have something that you don't know.

So this dynamic, lived really is a self-knowledge, self-mastery, self-gift. This is how we love. Now it doesn't make any sense if we're talking about love, and the emotion. If love were just emotions, you wouldn't need virtue, you would just follow your heart. You do the Disney, the Jiminy Cricket. Your conscience is your guide, you know all this. There's just enough truth in these statements, that we hear them and go, "Oh, yeah". And there's some good, but they're not good and sound. We're talking about now a fullness and understanding of this call to make a gift of ourselves as an act of the will. That can only be done when we have a self-

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possession through virtues and habit, that we come to know who we are. And again, it doesn't make sense if we're just talking about Eros, that romantic sexual love, that passion. Eros will come and go no matter what we choose. And it certainly doesn't count just for storge. We find in these family relationships, that we didn't necessarily choose. And the duty we spoke about last, of how we live as family, or these kin connections, these sociological terms, basically about how we're connected together in tribes and families, that can be explained through, agriculture, or some other diminished or partial reason. But it does connect with how we live in a family, and how we live out our roles. It does affect how we enter into marriage, where we're actually standing in front of an altar, the place of sacrifice, and we take our I, me, I, Damon walks to that aisle, like I did in April 24, 1993, with my beloved Melanie. Melanie walked in with her I, her individual self, up to that altar, and we recognize the Damon and Melanie as two Is, two subjects, that in a sense, laid ourselves down at that altar as a sacrifice, in order then to raise up together as something that didn't exist before. Where the two become one flesh, that's the poetry, right? Genesis, and even Ephesians. It's a unity through sacrifice, that the two become one.

What that says to everyone in that church, everyone at the reception, and everyone since then, 1993, everyone we've met, is that this kind of love is as radical as that is. And radical doesn't mean wild and crazy. Radical means that it's at its root, the root comes from the word radix. That marriage says at its radix. When a man and a woman give themselves to each other, one to the other, they create something that doesn't, and hasn't existed before. And that union has the capacity to create a third, another, a new person that never existed before, that will live eternally. This is the profound truth about matrimony, the munus to motherhood, and marriage. Not the love of the man, and the woman, which is beautiful and it's necessary, this the foundation. Not the ability just to know themselves, to have possession of themselves, and freely give themselves away to one another. But the miracle, miracle, that the gift given to the other actually gives a life to the lover, and the beloved. Making the gift gives us life, the beloved receives a worthy gift. And that a third, that never would have never existed, if nobody had made the gift. It's all of that together. And all of that is a sign. That's why I'm looking in the back of the room, at our wedding 23 years ago, and there's people crying in the back. I don't even know who they are. So of those people go to wedding, just to be around the heat, be around the hope, right? But there's something that stirs in our heart, when we see what's possible, that we could never self-create. It must have come from so somewhere else. It's also happens when you have your child, when you bear a child. Or in our case, the end of the adoptions. That there's something, that you

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look at this child, and you're like, there's no way we could have create this, there must be God.

And depending on our faith, and our formation, and our maturity, and our catechesis, how much we've actually learned, we can start getting more deep answers, more profound answers to that truth. But there's still something fundamental in our hearts, that we know. We see beauty. And when someone in the back of the room looks at the couple of says, "This is just beautiful. "I can't believe how beautiful it is." And the beauty stirs up in us. Not just in the intellect with truth, or goodness and the will. But beauty stirs up in another way, in another one was transcendental, that there's something in us, that says, the hope for that kind of love, is not the hope to death, but it's a hope to life. -That I come to know who I am in this. This is what the world means that marriage means to the world, - it's hope. And when marriages fail, and they do, it dashes hope for people. First the children, and also for the man and the woman. Maybe this was a big lie. Maybe it's a cosmic joke that the desires of our heart can't really be fulfilled. That's dangerous, giving weight to despair, that great tool of Satan.

As a Catholic, the words of marriage, "Do you come here of your own free will, to give yourselves in marriage, without condition, or reservation?" That's a pledge, the first promise. The first question in the marriage pledge, to which the man the woman must say, "Yes." Otherwise, the day's over. Melanie and I have told tens of thousands of couples, over the years in marriage preparation. You get the most important questions first. Are you here because you have to, you got to? Are you here because your mom made you, because it's your it's a biological clock ticking, my cousin Vinnie. Or it's your only shot. That's not freedom. Love requires freedom. There's nothing holding me back. There's nothing compelling me. I'm here my own freewill, without any conditions, no ifs, ands, and buts, no reservations, and I'll give you not some, but all of me. I am yours, and you are mine. That's radical, the radix of the root.

The second question, "In good times and bad, in sickness and health, for richer for poor." It's poetry, it's a phrase that gets to this reality that you have all of me. Or that the new writes speaks of the wholehearted gift. Are you holding something back? Or are you giving something of yourself, received by another, until death do you part, right? That the gift you're giving is not based on, "If you ever." Or, "I love you as long as you." Those are somewhat reasonable conditions. And sometimes you may hold back something of yourself, because you don't want to lose yourself. That's a reservation to reserve. But the death do us part, it's not a threat. It's not even a curse. That's meant to be the pledge of faithfulness. That this is a life long pledge, that you can be sure, that the good times and bad, no matter

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what happens, sickness and health, richer for poor, I am yours, freely, totally and faithfully. You are mine until death do us part, because we control neither our own life, or our mortal end. But our pledge is meant to be a lifelong pledge of ourselves, as long as we are ourselves. That's the kind of thing that gives people hope. You can't plan that. You can't bootstrap what's going to happen in your life to the rest of the day, much less the rest of your life.

The third question of intent that the priest or deacon will ask you, "Will you lovingly accept children that God may bless you with, and raise them in the knowledge of the Lord in his church?" This reveals the fourth element of this marriage pledge, what makes marriage, marriage. This is agape pledge. Remember that free, total, faithful, and fruitful pledge? Well, what the Greeks recognized in that agape love, that unconditional gift, Christ raises, elevates, to the dignity of a sacrament. That's what the catechism means by that. Takes what is natural and good, that God created from the beginning, which makes it good, and raises it to actual sign of God himself. Elevated to the dignity of a sacrament. It's not just a natural reality. It also now is a supernatural reality. To make this unconditional gift, with the four marks that we can measure, and know what love is, what agape love is. Free, and total, and faithful, and fruitful. They're right there in the wedding vows, freedom, totality, faithfulness, and fruitfulness. We say fruitful, because it bears fruit from the giver, and the receiver. Creating a new covenant, one to the other, another Catholic word, not just contract, exchanging goods and services, but covenant, one to the other. And foremost it gives to the lover, the beloved, and now, as I said, the capacity to create new life outside, and to exist on its own. Now, clearly it's a sexual union, the gift of sex. In a certain sense, marriage is the sacrament of sex. Raising just the natural beauty, and goodness of sexual difference, sexual desire, sexual union, now to the creation, and the act of love, self-gift, that can create new life.

The joy before, is this exercise of our humanity, of our authority given to us as stewards from God. Of helping us to remember, in this radical forgetting, through a pledge that's made, to receive the created reality of being bodily sensual creatures. And that the power that he's given us, is the power to love to give life, the two greatest truths about God himself. That he is life, and he is love. And we can love, and we share in his being with our existence. And when we exercise this, when we do that, when we act as persons, we become more human. But here's the kick, the more human we become, the more divine we become. Remember, were made in the image and likeness of God. So this divinization, this becoming who we are, is the acting person as John Paul II would say. And we act, not just in words, but in our whole being. We pledge, and then we become. So the sexual difference, is not

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just a static reality. Sexual union is not just in a moment, but it's a language. John Paul II called it the language of the body. I love that phrase, in the language of the body, in the sexual embrace. It's called marital, because in fact, it speaks the same vows that the language we speak in our mouth at the altar. I am yours, you our mine, is what the body speaks in the sexual embrace. It's a free, total, faithful and fruitful self-gift, of the sexual union of the man of the woman. Now that sounds romantic, it sounds idealistic. It sounds divine, because it is. And we speak about these truths, about being free, total, faithful and fruitful. And we hold up like a Northstar, or magnetic north. It's an ideal. And you never get North.

But perfection is like North. And we know that when we're off, and we reorient ourselves back to that Northstar. It's not that we grasp it and attain it, is that we can constantly reorient, we can actually repent, we can actually begin, and begin again. And if we didn't have that ideal, we would never know that we're off. How would we orient ourselves? How would we know when we are disoriented? It would totally change the meaning of that embrace, it carries with it this call to create new life. It's a language of love, not a language a language just of Eros. Which is Eros is not bad, it's just limited. The beauty would be, is, agape, infused by Eros. Or Eros, perfected by agape. Meaning that our hearts are drawn to it, it's a passion that happens to us, and we're ordered, in our will, to choose the good. That's the beauty of why all love is good, all love is from God, but not all of us the same. Together, even the loves, can more perfectly reveal the truth of God.

You see, we come to God, as his sons and daughters. We're called to love, and the fruit of that love is joy. And marriage carries with it, from the beginning, the promise that the gift given of ourselves, doesn't annihilate us, it protects us. That we're made for communion. That the joy to before, is the truth of the human person, to live and love in communion, in the image and likeness of God, who himself is the perfect Trinitarian communion.

So I'll leave you with this. Ask God, ask the Father to reveal how in your life, you're called to live that communion. Not everyone is called to the sign of marriage. But the sign of marriage is essential for all of us to restore, and rekindle the hope of love that lasts forever. May the joy of Christ, that he wishes upon all have us be received by you and me. May we remember, radically, who we are, whose we are, and why we're here. And may the joy of the Lord be our strength. Maybe we shout with joy, so that people from all around, will come and see what we're screaming about. And the fire that we have will draw people to us, where for miles around people will come to see just why we're burning. God be with you.