

Can We Rekindle Our Love for Society's Less Fortunate?

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Given the divorce rate in this country, it's pretty clear that quite a few folks have trouble staying in love.

A host of contextual and cultural reasons, even justifications, exist for the phenomenon, despite the "death do us part" vows that most couples include in their wedding ceremony and the hard line the Bible takes on the matter.

In fact, I think there's a strong case to be made in favor of divorce in many instances, not just on the biblical grounds of "unchastity" but also on the basis of violence or incompatibility.

If marriage is, in some sense, a sacrament of love, how can it be sacred when one partner inflicts harm and suffering on the other (or when they inflict that harm and suffering on each other)? Or how can marriage be an interpersonal, societal and religious symbol of true love when the partners simply aren't compatible? That would be a violation of what the symbol is supposed to represent.

Still, staying in love remains the ideal, even if the partners find the definition of love changing and evolving over time. And it is in this broader and more mature and religious meaning of love that marriage itself can be a rich and potent symbol for other non-marital kinds of relationships, maybe even all relationships.

A loving marriage has a whole lot of qualities beyond sexual intimacy and mutual feelings of attraction that signal what should be the character of every kind of relationship, which the Bible says are covered by the term "love." The Apostle Paul got it right when writing to the Corinthians: love means patience and kindness, not envy and boastfulness and arrogance and rudeness. It is greater, according to Paul, than hope and faith. We might summarize the supremacy of love in this broader, more mature and religious sense as genuine caring and working for the well-being of other persons, caring even, Jesus says, for the enemy.

Now it is in this broader meaning of love that we ought to be concerned about divorce.

We need to keep working on loving marriages between partners and the love they have for their children and wider family. We ought to try to foster marital and family relationships that don't lead to divorce. But what about the divorce we've been experiencing between ourselves and those outside our immediate circle of love and care – those who need love and care in that broader, more mature and religious meaning of love?

Divorce of this kind was easier to overlook when we were increasingly accustomed to an ascending economy here and around the globe. Yes, of course, there was still poverty to overcome but it would be just a matter of time until the promise of prosperity reached the poor as well. Yes, of course, there was a growing disparity between the very rich and everybody else, but why worry if more and more people were getting by? Yes, of course, families of color were still being denied quality housing, education, health care and employment, but just look at that expanding middle class of minority families that would sometime in the future surely include those currently living in poverty.

It's harder, however, to be glib or blind when the unemployment rate has risen to 8.9 percent and is expected to grow to double digits, when even the well educated aren't finding jobs, when rising rates of poverty and homelessness are being projected well into the future.

New York Times columnist Bob Herbert on May 8 called attention to the findings of the Economic Policy Institute. The institute estimates that the poverty rate for children is in danger of increasing from 18 percent, which is where it was in 2007, the last year for which complete statistics are available, to a scary 27.3 percent in 2010.

For black children, the poverty rate was 34.5 percent in 2007. If the national unemployment rate rises, as expected, to the vicinity of 10 percent next year, the poverty rate for black children would rise to 50 percent or higher, analysts at the institute believe.

Will the tragic divorce between us and others continue to grow as well? Will it, too, expand at just the time when all of us need each other more and more?

Or can we find ways of staying in love?

If we can understand and live out of the truth that the ultimate reality in the universe is love, and that this divine love is active toward us and toward the world, then staying in love has a meaning that includes but also transcends the ethical. It means that just as God is love metaphysically, and thereby has the capacity ethically to love us and the whole world, so too we can be and become love in our essential character and thereby capable ethically of loving and caring for others.

This is what Jesus understood, proclaimed and lived out, according to the Christian witness.

The Gospel of John has Jesus put it this way (John 15:9-10): "As the Divine Parent has loved me, so have I loved you. Stay in my love. And you will stay in my love if you keep my commandments, just as I have kept my Parent's commandments and stay in the Parent's love."

For me at least, that makes what is required of us now in marriage and society a lot less dubious. Difficult and demanding? Yes, of course. But not dubious, if we can entertain the truth that God is love.

Then it's all a matter of staying in love.