

The Pearl of Great Price

Gospel Wisdom for Christian Marriage

Julie McCarty



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

The author would like to thank all the beautiful people at Liturgical Press who helped make this book a reality.

Scripture selections are taken from the *New American Bible*. Copyright © 1991, 1986, 1970 by the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 3211 Fourth Street, NE, Washington, DC 20017-1194 and are used by license of the copyright owner. All rights reserved. No part of the *New American Bible* may be reproduced in any form or by any means without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover design by Ann Blattner.

© 2007 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, P.O. Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McCarty, Julie.

The pearl of great price : Gospel wisdom for Christian marriage / Julie McCarty.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-8146-3165-2

1. Marriage—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV835.M335 2007

248.4—dc22

2006035858

*For
my husband Terry
and in honor of
those ordinary married couples throughout the centuries
who, without fanfare or public acclaim,
have mirrored the superabundant love
of the Blessed Trinity*

Contents

Introduction	1
Great Expectations	12
Misunderstandings	14
Irregular Unions	16
Infertility	18
Marriage Is a Journey	20
Co-creating with God	22
Obedience to the Spirit	24
The Gospel of Prosperity?	26
The Married Contemplative	28
Letting Go	30
Material Goods	32
Wrong Kind of Trust	34
Power	36
Christ's Presence in Marriage	38
Transformation	40
Marriage and Eucharist	42
Mission	44
Giving Your All	46

Personal Sacred Space	48
Healing	50
One Flesh	52
A Unique Kind of Friendship	54
Forgiveness	56
Marriage Is a Mini-Church	58
Creeping Separateness	60
Peak Experiences	62
Gratefulness	64
Persons-in-Communion (You in Me, I in You)	66
The Ministry of the Towel	68
This Is My Body	70
Sacrificial Love	72
Deep Valleys	74
Listening	76
Discovering Christ at the Kitchen Table	78
The Divine Advocate	80
Love Is Eternal	82
Beyond This Book	84
Selected References for Further Reading	85
Index of Main Subjects	88
Index of Scripture Readings	90

Introduction

A Wedding Memory

After more than two decades of marriage to my husband Terry, I still remember the difficulty we had selecting the gospel reading for our wedding ceremony. For some reason, as we read through the standard choices in a wedding preparation handbook, none of them seemed quite right for *our* special day. So we took out our Bibles and searched high and low, until Terry found this passage in Matthew's Gospel:

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it. (Matt 13:44-46)

At first glance, this reading doesn't appear to have any connection with marriage. So why did we find it so appealing? After years of searching for that unique "special someone" in the dating scene, finding each other felt like discovering a rare, hidden treasure. What we had found in each other was worth "selling" all we had in order to "purchase" our conjugal life together. Each of us would give whatever it took to find marital bliss, not with just anyone, but with *this someone*, this special treasure of a person.

Although we might not have been able to explain it at the time, this gospel passage connected our love for each other

with our love for God. As singles, we had each considered the professed religious life but had discerned that the Lord was inviting us to marriage as a sacred calling. As we grew to know each other, we came to realize that it was *God* who was giving each of us to the other. It was God who created us, God who designed us for each other, and God who invited us to love each other. Because of this, we saw marriage, not as a “worldly affair,” but as the means through which we would live out our baptismal calling. For those of us called to this sacrament, married life is mysteriously interwoven with our call to follow Christ. It is how the Spirit leads us deeper into the ways of the kingdom of heaven.

Applying the Full Gospel to Married Life

This experience brings up an important question: Is the entire gospel message to be applied to one’s married life or only bits and pieces? Surveying Christian books on marriage, I see the same Scripture quotations used over and over again, especially those that explicitly mention marriage. There is very little mention of married life in the four gospels. When I think of marriage in the gospels, what immediately comes to mind is not advice about how to live a great marriage, but rather a discussion about divorce. Being a Catholic, my mind also darts off in the direction of a verse connected with the value of celibacy, having been exposed to the long, historical debate over celibacy versus marriage. Are there other verses about marriage in the gospels? Jesus really doesn’t seem to offer much when it comes to living a dynamic, happy marriage—or does he?

Over the long course of church history, this focus on specific “marriage verses” for our theology of marriage has greatly limited how we think and write about Christian marriage. As theologian Rosemary Haughton pointed out over thirty-five years ago:

If we confine the Gospel message about Christian marriage to the handful of texts that refer directly to it we are distorting it inexcusably. For the theology of Christian marriage the most important Gospel texts are not those that refer to marriage but those that refer to the sacrificial love of Jesus, and to the kind of love he therefore demands from his followers.

Haughton saw that the sacrificial love of Christ, especially when practiced by *both* husband and wife, is precisely the type of gospel value that is core to having a wholesome, long-lived, fulfilling marriage. Because our marriage theology normally looks only at the “marriage verses,” we tend to miss the way other gospel passages might offer wisdom for married life. We forget that Jesus’ sermons were not delivered to a convention of nuns and monks, but rather were proclaimed on mountains and hillsides, in cities and temples, to large gatherings of people, most of whom were married. Certainly Christ’s message was never intended to be isolated from the marriage relationship.

I have no doubt that over the centuries millions of Christian husbands and wives have put into practice many of Christ’s teachings within their marital relationship. However, this has not always been done in a conscious and deliberate manner, connecting the fullness of the gospel with

their conjugal calling. Historically speaking, we have barely begun to consider the area of marital spirituality, the finding of God's presence within the spousal relationship. What would happen if we looked at the gospel "with married eyes"?

Meditating on God's Word

I propose that one key way in which couples might tap into the Gospels is the ancient Christian prayer form called *lectio divina*, or "sacred reading." Sacred reading is a process of meditating on short passages or phrases from the Bible that touch one's heart, reflecting on the meaning for your own life and responding to God in prayer and deed. While academic classes in Scripture help our minds to understand things such as the author's intent, historical context, or cultural customs of the time (and those are good things to know), *lectio divina* is a way of *praying* with the Scriptures. The process of sacred reading involves four basic steps:

- 1) **reading** the Scripture passage slowly, thinking about the basic message (*lectio*);
- 2) **reflecting** more deeply on a particular word, phrase, or image (*meditatio*);
- 3) **responding** to the message prayerfully in your own words (*oratio*);
- 4) **dwelling** silently in God's presence, without words (*contemplatio*).

Because sacred reading is a form of meditation, it is to be done in an unhurried, reflective manner. One bites off a little chunk of Scripture and "chews" on it, as one medieval writer put it. Another way of looking at it is to think of this form

of sacred reading as taking little sips, the way one savors fine, expensive wine. Just as food and drink nourish us, the Word of God, when consumed in this leisurely, pondering fashion, also nourishes us—and transforms our lives.

How can married couples practice *lectio divina* together? I first heard of this idea from Patrick and Claudette McDonald, a married couple experienced in the areas of marriage therapy and marriage enrichment. In their book *Marital Spirituality: The Search for the Hidden Ground of Love*, the McDonalds propose a way for married couples to practice sacred reading together. In every marriage there is the “I” (my distinct self), the “You” (my spouse’s distinct self), and the “We” (our shared self). When I do *lectio divina* alone, I normally think to myself: What is God trying to tell *me* (my distinct self)? When practicing *lectio divina with my husband*, another question is added: What is God trying to tell *us* as a married couple? How is God speaking to the “We” (our shared self)? Discussing the Scripture in this manner gives married couples a way to pray together, to enter more deeply into God’s Word, to develop the spiritual dimension of their relationship, and to enrich their married life.

The Pearl of Great Price

You are not alone if at this point you feel a certain panic arising in you. Me? Take out a Bible and pray with my spouse? Are you kidding? Some couples can barely mumble a rote prayer together before meals, let alone hold hands and say something spontaneously aloud to God. There’s something about praying together that intimidates us.

There are many reasons why I might be afraid to pray with my spouse. Perhaps someone laughed at me when I tried to pray aloud as a teenager. What if my spouse also laughs at me? I might attend a different place of worship than my spouse does, or perhaps I just think about God and spiritual things differently than my spouse does. I might secretly wonder if it's a "sissy" thing to pray together. What if my words are clumsy? What if . . . ? The questions, excuses, and fears are endless.

At the bottom of it all, I think we are afraid of the intimacy of prayer. In some ways, sharing our deepest thoughts, hopes, fears, and failures in prayer is more intimate than sex. When we enter into the presence of God together with genuine honesty, there is a type of spiritual nakedness that can occur. In the society in which we live, baring our bodies has become much easier for many people than baring our souls. However, what makes the strongest marriage is a total sharing of selves—bodies and minds, hearts and souls—and this comes about best in an atmosphere of listening, love, and respect for each other.

The reflections in this book are simple prayer starters to get you off the ground. You don't have to think about the steps of *lectio divina*, because an adapted format for couples is already laid out for you. You don't have to share every little thought that enters your head if you don't want to. There are a couple of simple discussion questions to get you started, and even a prayer to say together at the end.

What This Book Is Not

This book is designed for couples who have a fairly “normal” or reasonably healthy marriage relationship, with its typical high and low periods. As you have probably guessed, this is not a self-help book, nor does it offer advice for troubled marriages. If you feel an inner desperation about your relationship, it is best to seek appropriate help from professionals.

Although basic reference books on Sacred Scripture have been consulted for background information, this is not a Bible study or an academic treatment of the gospels. It is merely my personal reflections on how married couples might possibly apply the gospel message to their relationship. Readers must decide for themselves how they will use the Word of God to live out their vocation to love each other.

Finally, while there is an occasional reference to children in these pages, the main focus is the relationship of husband and wife. Although parenting is a huge part of married life, the relationship of spouses is quite different from that of parent and child. Children are the fruit of your love: they arrived after you found each other, and they will one day fly out of the nest, leaving you as a couple for all practical purposes in your daily life. The other reason I have focused on the spousal relationship is personal: my husband and I do not have children due to infertility. The development of family spirituality is best left to those who can offer wisdom from their own experience.

How to Use This Book

Although these pages can be read alone, it is ideal to share the reflections together as a couple. Creating some sacred time together will take a little planning in order to make things go more smoothly for everyone in the family. It is recommended that you allow twenty to thirty minutes to explore the Scripture reflection, because that allows you to transition from prior activities, put yourselves in the right frame of mind, and foster the leisurely space in which God can speak and something meaningful can occur.

Consider your options. Will you do one reflection together each night after the children are tucked in their beds, or will you be too exhausted? Maybe Saturday mornings might work—before you get out of bed. Do you have a date night together once a week? If so, you could do one reflection during the appetizer course or at a coffee shop. Another approach is to explain to your children that this is “mommy and daddy prayer time,” set the kids up with their favorite half-hour video, and tell them they can find you in your bedroom (your sacred space!) if someone starts to bleed or the house catches on fire.

Prayer preparation. The format of *The Pearl of Great Price* is fairly simple. Before you begin, give yourselves a few moments to gather your wits. Turn off the cell phone, light a candle, and take a deep breath, preparing to listen for God’s voice. You may want to use a favorite prayer to the Holy Spirit or simply ask God in your own words to guide your meditation. Perhaps you would like to hold hands and merely sit in silence for a few moments.

Reading. Using your favorite version of the Bible, read aloud the suggested passage—slowly. After a few seconds of silence, read the same passage a second time, allowing the words to soak in. Remember, this is not a race. It's Christian meditation.

Reflection. After reading from your Bible, turn to the reflection offered in this book. Here you ponder one way this passage might offer wisdom for your marital relationship.

Meditation. The questions provided for meditation are designed as an aid to stimulate your response to God's word. You might have other thoughts about the reading. Allow some silent time to ponder. Some couples will find it helpful to use paper to write down their feelings in response to the questions, in similar fashion to the Marriage Encounter process. This allows each person the private space to reflect without the other interrupting.

When both of you are ready, share your responses. Make sure you treat your spouse with great respect and kindness at this point. It takes nerve to share deeply. Practice listening with compassion and acceptance of the other person's feelings.

Silent prayer. After sharing your thoughts, just sit together for a while in silence. This may feel a little strange at first. This is a way of opening your hearts to contemplative prayer, the style of prayer that is just *being* in God's presence, like a contented baby in its mother's arms. No words are necessary. You might want to use this silent time to imagine God's presence arcing over the two of you like a full, beautiful rainbow. Or you may want to think of God as a warm, loving

presence who dwells in your heart, in the magical space between the two of you, and encircling you both as well. However you like to imagine God's presence, put yourself and your spouse into that picture. (In the strictest sense, contemplative prayer is a gift of God, but we practice silent prayer as a way of preparing our souls for whatever God wants to give us.)

Closing prayer. The closing prayer is offered only as a sample. It is good to pray about whatever you talked about during this prayer time. You may want to insert prayers of intercession (praying for others), the Lord's Prayer, or another favorite prayer. Catholics or Orthodox Christians may want to end with the sign of the cross. Don't be surprised if you feel a sudden urge to seal your prayer with a kiss!

Great Expectations

Reading: Luke 1:26-38

Reflection:

Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. . . . Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." (Luke 1:30-31, 38a)

Every engaged couple has dreams for their future together. Some of these dreams will come to pass, and others may not. When we were engaged, Terry and I imagined that we would settle in one home for a good long time and raise a very large family. What did our first ten years bring? Job changes for us both, three major moves, and an ongoing struggle with infertility.

I wonder what dreams Joseph and Mary had at the time they were betrothed. Did they select a day of special significance for the wedding? Did they share their thoughts about raising children? Did Joseph promise Mary new furnishings, built with his own hands? Did they discuss spiritual things?

Whatever their plans may have been, God had a surprise in store for them: an unplanned pregnancy of the most unusual sort, a virgin birth. Joseph and Mary's plans were good, but God had something even greater in mind, a plan involving the salvation of the entire world.

During her encounter with the angel, Mary is respectful, articulate, and thoughtful. She hears the word of God and acts upon it. But what did Mary feel later, when morning sickness struck and she had to tell Joseph and her parents that she was expecting a child? Did she feel inner confusion? Was she rejected by others because of her out-of-wedlock pregnancy? Did this alter their wedding plans?

Pregnancy before marriage was not the only change in plans this couple would endure. Their son would be born in another town. They would have to flee their homeland to live in a foreign land (Egypt) in order to save the life of their child. If they hoped that Jesus would marry and give them grandchildren, they would have to grow in acceptance of his permanent single status. Mary would experience the horror of her son's torture on the cross—and also the great joy of his resurrection.

Meditation: Think back. Is there something you expected in your relationship that did not come to pass? What was the result? How did you deal with it? Is there some way to see the hand of God in the situation—or is that yet for you to discover?

Closing prayer: O God, help us when things do not go as we had hoped. Guide us to know your path, and give us the courage to follow your ways even in the midst of hardship. Amen.