

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski
February 14, 2021

I've reached an age when almost any story about my life can begin with "once upon a time;" so, hear goes...Once upon a time, I married Mary Rigby and being the Boy Scout that I am, made the decision to take my new wife on a honeymoon, a **camping** honeymoon in an honest-to-goodness tent, to Rocky Mountain National Park. Did I fail to mention that Mary had never been camping in her life prior to our wedding day? Did I also neglect to point out that Mary was concerned about the accommodations that I arranged: A two-person pup tent that was two-feet high, which she called that "itty-bitty tent," in spite of my protestations that it wasn't **that** small of a tent?

I know what you're thinking: It's a miracle that we've stayed married for almost 44 years, but there's more to this story.

The day after our arrival in Rocky Mountain, we went on a "little hike" up Flattop Mountain, down Tyndall Glacier and finally over a boulder field, terrain which was totally unsuited for my new wife, who was only a year away from major knee surgery! This tale ends with us approaching our campsite after that day-long adventure, when we were greeted by a fellow camper, who by the way stepped out of a luxurious mobile home, and recognizing us, she referred to us as the couple "in that itty-bitty tent." At that point, I received a much-deserved elbow in the ribs along with Mary's quick retort, "I TOLD you it was an itty-bitty tent!!"

With a honeymoon like that, the fact that we've been married almost 44 years is confirmation of St. Paul's words in First Corinthians, "[Love] bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, **endures** all things;" even young foolish, naive husbands!! Such love and commitment to our marriage vows is a testament to the graces that God bestows upon those who receive the Sacrament of Matrimony. And that is among the reasons that today, the second Sunday in February, Valentine's Day this year, we celebrate "World Marriage Sunday" which recognizes husband and wife as the foundation of the family, **the basic unit of society**. It salutes the beauty of their faithfulness, sacrifice and joy in daily married life.

Marital love mirrors the love that Jesus extends to the leper in today's Gospel, in which we hear the leper approach Jesus, kneel before him and beg for healing with his plea, "If you wish, you can make me clean." Jesus is "moved with pity," stretches out his hand, and touches the leper. Imagine this scene, shocking by any standard to those of the first century: First,

violating the purity laws about which we heard in the first reading from Leviticus, the leper has the **courage**, the commitment, to risk stoning and approach Jesus. Then, Jesus reaches out to the leper and, bypassing the injunctions of Leviticus, embraces him with His healing touch!! It's a loving touch of gentleness, a touch filled with such fire and power that the sickness is burned away. It is a compassionate touch that gives new life, a whole new life to someone who was otherwise condemned to live in the hell of isolation and loneliness. The love conveyed by Jesus' touch is total, unreserved; a love that has no limits.

Such love, total, unreserved, without limits, is what every marriage is meant to be: An icon of the love of the Trinity, the love of Christ and the Church. The love shared between a man and woman in Holy Matrimony points toward the self-emptying, sacrificial love that God has for each of us.

On this World Marriage Day, let us give thanks to our heavenly Father for the gift and blessing of marriage and the family. As we strive to live our particular vocations and respond to the Lord's graces in our lives, let us renew our focus on marriage and the family through three priorities:

- Prayer—Let us remember to pray with and for marriages and families throughout the world: For marriages in crisis, for families struggling with the pandemic, for broken and wounded family relationships.
- Reclaiming Sunday as the Lord's Day—A day of rest when we can focus on being together as a family. Bishop Johnston, last May, issued a pastoral letter "Keeping the Lord's Day," which encourages us to "reflect more deeply on the value of [a grace-filled] Sunday."
- The practice of charity, remembering that the Church is the family of God and a family of families—During the upcoming weeks of Lent, each of us will most likely encounter individuals who are the modern-day equivalent of that leper from the Gospel:
 - The poor
 - The homeless
 - The divorced
 - Those who have lost a loved one
 - The unemployed
 - The terminally ill
 - The homebound.

When that "leper" encounters us, whether they encounter more of the same (isolation, shunning, and marginalization) or Christ's healing touch depends upon us.