Column: Marriage and the Family

Partners on the Way

by Dannis Matteson

Recently my husband and I were promoting postgraduate service opportunities to college students and we were telling the students how we had both individually participated in service years ourselves. A religious sister nearby responded, “And I gave my whole life!” Tom and I both looked at each other with a similar expression of shock; we both see it much differently. We don’t see our years of service as the time in our lives that we “gave up.” Our lifestyle as a married couple is one of complete surrender to God’s will in the service of others. We don’t see our vocation as anything other than a giving of our whole lives to God. ¹

“The judgment of the nations” from the Gospel of Matthew fits well with this outlook. The other evening, Tom and I were sitting around discussing scripture commentaries (like good CTU grads) on Matthew 25:31-46.

Then they will answer and say, “Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or ill or in prison, and not minister to your needs?” He will answer them, “Amen, I say to you, what you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me.” And these will go off to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

We had just heard a homily on this reading and were talking about what we would have preached about. Tom was struck that various commentaries identify the sufferers as Christians, while most homilies we have heard emphasize the ones who serve the sufferers. For example, many interpret the passage to mean that if Christians respond to someone in need, then they have just served Jesus himself. The commentaries that Tom was reading, however—the Catholic Study Bible and the Sacra Pagina Series—provided a different interpretation. According to these commentaries, the scripture passage centers on the judgment of all the nations and their treatment of suffering Christians who are going around spreading the message of Jesus. Conditions such as thirst, hunger, estrangement, nakedness, illness, and imprisonment are actually describing circumstances Christians found themselves in as a result of preaching the gospel. As advocates of the message of Jesus, Christians were most likely going to find themselves in pretty severe situations; their survival left at the mercy of the righteous sheep to reach out in times of need.

Tom and I sat there pondering this passage’s relevance to our lives as a married couple dedicated to spreading the Gospel. We see evidence of these qualities surface in our married life together, and we witness God providing for our needs through the generosity of others. As campus ministers, we would be homeless without the righteous sheep in the residence life department who provide us with housing. We would be hungry if we were not supplied on-campus meal plans. And the list goes on...

¹ Dannis Matteson has an M.A. in Theology with a concentration in Systematic Theology from Catholic Theological Union and currently teaches feminist theology as an adjunct professor at Saint Xavier University, Chicago. Dannis also staffs the Catholic Common Ground Initiative, and, as a former Bernardin Scholar, she is honored to carry on Cardinal Bernardin’s legacy. Dannis and her husband, Thomas Cook (also a CTU alum) are starting a community in the Back of the Yards neighborhood in conjunction with the Port Ministries. The community is open to those who want to live out their faith as a supportive presence to both the neighborhood and the Port.
We find God’s generosity extending beyond day to day needs, as well. Relying completely on God has meant that as a married couple we choose not to plan. We would rather wait for God to show us the Way, than to take matters into our own hands. This brings with it much uncertainty. We literally live year to year. And so, this radical dedication to the gospel has brought about an alternative lifestyle for both of us, both before we were married, and especially beginning this life together. As disciples on the Way, we may not always know where we will find the next roof over our heads, but we have found life to be much richer than “making plans” as a result of surrendering our whole life to God.