

Introduction

I decided to go off lectionary this Sunday because I read a remarkable article that says so well, something that I think is fundamental to our Christian faith.

The article is provocatively titled “Marriage is For Losers.” and it is written by a marriage counselor, named Dr. Kelly Flanagan. I would like to read it to you, because I think it applies to much more than married couples. I think it applies to all of us, especially considering the covenanted relationship we have with each other as members of the church.

The article is remarkable because it is deeply Christian, without ever claiming to be so. It is a fine example of what it is like to speak from a Christian perspective to a larger population that is suspicious of religion. I took out a few bits to shorten it, but made no changes to the wording. Here goes:

Marriage Is For Losers

Many therapists aren't crazy about doing marital therapy. It's complicated and messy, and it often feels out of control. In the worst case scenario, the therapist has front row seats to a regularly-scheduled prize fight.

But I love to do marital therapy. Why? Maybe I enjoy the work because I keep one simple principle in mind: if marriage is going to work, it needs to become a contest to see **which spouse is going to lose *the most***, and it needs to be a race that goes down to the wire.

When it comes to winning and losing, I think there are three kinds of marriages. In the first kind of marriage, both spouses are competing to win, and it's a duel to the death. Husbands and wives are armed with a vast arsenal, ranging from fists, to words, to silence.

These are the marriages that destroy. Spouses destroy each other, and, in the process, they destroy the peace of their children. In fact, the destruction is so complete that research tells us it is better for children to have divorced parents than warring parents.

The second kind of marriage is ripe with winning *and* losing, but the roles are set, and the loser is always the same spouse.

These are the truly abusive marriages, the ones in which one spouse dominates, the other submits, and in the process, both husband and wife are stripped of their dignity. These are the marriages of addicts and enablers, tyrants and slaves, and they may be the saddest marriages of all.

But there is a third kind of marriage. The third kind of marriage is not perfect, not even close. But a decision has been made, and two people have decided to love each other to the limit, and to sacrifice the most important thing of all—themselves.

In these marriages, losing becomes a way of life, a competition to see who can listen to, care for, serve, forgive, and accept the other the most. The marriage becomes a competition to see who can change in ways that are most healing to the other, to see who can give of themselves in ways that most increase the dignity and strength of the other.

These marriages form people who can be small and humble and merciful and loving and peaceful. And they are *revolutionary*, in the purest sense of the word. Because we live in a culture in which losing is the enemy.

We go to workplaces where everyone is battling for the boss's favor and the next promotion, or we stay at home where the battle for the legos is just as fierce. Nightly, we watch the talking heads on the cable news networks, trying to win the

battle of ideas, although sometimes they seem quite willing to settle for winning the battle of decibels. We fight to have the best stuff, in the best name brands, and when we finally look at each other at the end of the day, we fight, because we are trained to do nothing else. And, usually, we have been trained well.

In the worst of cases, we grew up fighting for our very survival, both physically and emotionally. But even in the best of situations, we found ourselves trying to win the competition for our parents' attention and approval, for our peers' acceptance, and for the validating stamp of a world with one message: win.

And, so, cultivating a marriage in which losing is the mutual norm becomes a radically counter-cultural act.

What do the rebellious marriages look like? Lately, when my blood is bubbling, when I just know I've been misunderstood and neglected, and I'm ready to do just about anything to convince and win what I deserve, I try to remember a phone call we recently received from my son's second grade teacher.

She called us one day after school to tell us there had been an incident in gym class. After a fierce athletic competition, in which the prize was the privilege to leave the gym first, my son's team had lost. The losers were standing by, grumbling

and complaining about second-grade-versions of injustice, as the victors filed past. And that's when my son started to clap. He clapped for the winners as they passed, with a big dopey grin on his face and a smile stretched from one ear of his heart to the other.

His startled gym teacher quickly exhorted the rest of his team to follow suit. So, a bunch of second grade losers staged a rebellion, giving a rousing ovation for their victorious peers, and in doing so, embraced the fullness of what it can mean to be a loser. When I'm seething, I try to remember the heart of a boy, a heart that can lose graciously and reach out in affection to the victors.

In marriage, losing is letting go of the need to fix everything for your partner, listening to their darkest parts with a heart-ache rather than a solution. It's being even more present in the painful moments than in the good times. It's finding ways to be humble and open, even when everything in you says that you're right and they are wrong.

It's doing what is right and good for your spouse, even when big things need to be sacrificed, like a job, or a relationship, or an ego. It is forgiveness, quickly and voluntarily. It is eliminating anything from your life, even the things you love, if they are keeping you from attending, caring, and serving. It is seeking peace by accepting the healthy but crazy-making

things about your partner because, you remember, those were the things you fell in love with in the first place. It is knowing that your spouse will never fully understand you, will never truly love you unconditionally—because they are a broken creature, too—and loving them to the end anyway.

Maybe marriage, when it's lived by two losers in a household culture of mutual surrender, is just the training we need to walk through this world—a world that wants to chew you up and spit you out—without the constant fear of getting the short end of the stick. Maybe we need to be formed in such a way that winning loses its glamour, that we can sacrifice the competition in favor of people. Maybe what we need, really, is to become a bunch of losers in a world that is being a torn apart by the competition to win.

If we did that, maybe we'd be able to sleep a little easier at night, look our loved ones in the eyes, forgive and forget, and clap for the people around us.

I think that in a marriage of losers, a synergy happens and all of life can explode into a kind of rebellion that is brighter than the sun. The really good rebellions, the ones that last and make the world a better place, they are like that, aren't they? They heal, they restore. They are big, and they shine like the sun. And, like the sun, their gravitational pull is almost irresistible.

My Wrap Up

Ok, that's the article. I think you will agree that it is informed by Christian witness. It is the message of the death and resurrection, of losing our lives in order to gain them, by following Jesus to the cross. Only it is written in the language of marriage counseling.

What I particularly like about the essay is that it provides us with a good way to think about how the poetic sentiments expressed in this morning's Bible readings can be put into practice where the rubber hits the road, in our own daily lives.

What does Paul mean, when he says that the seed that is sown will not come to life unless it first dies; "sown in dishonor to be raised in glory, sown in weakness to be raised by God in power." ?

Well, If we are the seeds, our committed relationships are the soil in which we must fall and die to ourselves in order to receive the grace that transforms us into God's harvest. And the essay shows us how that poetic sentiment can be lived out and put to the test in the relationships that are right in front of us.

And Jesus's admonition to us to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, and to do good to others expecting nothing in return, only widens the circle of people among whom we are called to practice being, what in worldly terms would be called the behavior of a "loser."

What every successful loser knows, is that true success is never really about winning and having one's way all the time. True success is the amazing life that is shared by those who know how to lose to each other graciously.

Dr. Kelly Flanagan

Kelly is a licensed clinical psychologist and co-founder of Artisan Clinical Associates in Naperville, IL.