

Marriage is a gift of grace given by God. God has granted the gift of marriage to the two of you, Alywn and Alicia, but the gift is also for all people of faith. The life that radiates from a committed relationship strengthens a community. But in a Christian context, marriage is also an image of our relationship to God and a reminder of the mysteries of God's creative actions in the world. Within those actions, there is a pattern for the life of thriving relationships.

Jesus left this one great command for his friends: "Love one another as I have loved you." To love the way that Jesus loved may seem beyond our reach. That may well be true, if we forget that Jesus chose to love us first. The love has been given. To consent to that love is to begin a trusting walk toward a deepening friendship.

Cistercian monk Fr. Thomas Keating utterly radiates the abiding love of Christ. He is the closest to a living saint that I have ever met and yet he has described his remarkably deep relationship with God as two friends sitting in silence just being in each other's presence<sup>1</sup>. Of course, Fr. Thomas and God didn't start there.

They started the way we do with most relationships. The path of practice that leads relationships toward unity begins with "acquaintanceship." That seed of awareness can change from casual familiarity into a mutual realization of possibilities. As a mutual realization puts out roots, a shared stance of "friendliness" emerges. We begin to replace social pleasantries with engaging conversations. There is an openness to each other, a curiosity about each other, an exploration of values and perspectives, and a relaxation of defenses and judgments.

With proper care, the relationship may blossom into "friendship," where two wholes decide to accompany each other into an unknown future in with mutual trust and care. Conversation gives way to deeper dialogue. Once we become friends, it would never occur to us to ask the other to give up who they are. Quite the contrary! For the friendship to thrive, both must live into who they each most deeply are while simultaneously looking to serve the well-being of the other. Both must tend to nurturing the joys and both must tend surmounting the hardships that staying connected inevitably entails.

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<sup>1</sup> Personal conversation.

And then, on rare and beautiful occasions, our relationship with another reaches full flowering in a union of lives. Fr. Thomas has said that when we are living in union with God we are able to transcend our singular selves without losing ourselves in the process. We become a channel of God's presence to others, experiencing all in God and God in all. We are drawn to spend significant parts of our daily lives resting in God's presence. Our own life spirit and energy become more consciously united with God's Holy Spirit and divine energy. We become merciful, compassionate and loving because God is merciful, compassionate and loving.

In our relationship with God, we are transfigured into the Word of God by following a path: we become *acquainted* through scripture and liturgy. We become *friendly* through study, our church community and insights from our daily life. We become *friends* with God through prayer and devotion. By learning to rest in that friendship, we experience true communion, *unity*, with God. But through it all, it is perseverance that leads to transfiguring unity; our mutual commitment to the path and fidelity to the practices of friendship. Perseverance leads to unity, not depending on spiritual and emotional highs or even working through the lows.

In our relationship with another person we are transfigured into the unity of a family by following a similar path of friendship. We have come together this morning as a manifestation of the body of Christ to celebrate the gift of marriage granted to Alwyn and Alicia; two people who have found in each other their truest friend. Two friends who have chosen to be for each other, each of them bringing blessings and shortcomings. They have chosen to make each other's lives their own, to share each other's joys and shoulder each other's burdens. We are here to help them persevere.

We will celebrate the loving union that God has already granted them. We rejoice in the paradox of two people who have chosen to narrow their lives—choosing *one* other above *all* others—as a way to pursue abundant life. Their marriage serves as a reminder to each of us to live into this pattern of love and friendship: to choose a path, to give ourselves to it, and to consent to the pain and the joy of it, the light and dark of it, as a way to receive the richness and glory that our lives are meant to be.

It's the pattern of love that Jesus lived and commanded. To love one another as he still loves us, so that his joy may be in us, and that our joy may be complete.