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“I swore an oath to you and entered into a covenant with you” (Ezek 16:8).

*Ezek 16:1-15, 60, 63; Matt 19:3-12*

God’s covenant with Israel is expressed in the Bible as a love story, not just a contract with mutual obligations. In today’s first reading, Ezekiel describes how God brought his people from abandonment to glory. This love story made Israel’s betrayal and slide into idolatry all the more egregious, but it also showed how limitless God’s mercy was when he freely renewed the covenant and restored the nation from exile.

The prophetic tradition of proclaiming God’s fidelity took up the original blessing in Genesis where the love between man and woman was a sign of God’s intimacy with his people. Just as human love united husband and wife as a single being, so God’s covenant with his people was a nuptial commitment, a promise of mutual fidelity. This ideal is the basis for Jesus’ defense of fidelity in marriage in today’s Gospel. The ideal has survived within the distinctions and exceptions built into church law about the indissolubility of a true marriage, one that meets the conditions of full knowledge, freedom, capacity and intent.

The heart of every sacramental marriage is therefore supposed to be a love story, and the failure of a true marriage entails the death of something meant to be a sign of the covenant. Some marriages can live out this ideal, but others cannot. The Bible has been called the long history of a large dysfunctional family, and many of its best stories are about the human weakness and failure. Real people want to be

faithful to the ideal, but they need forgiveness and mercy along the way.

Jesus knew that Moses had accommodated failed unions, and he tells his astonished disciples, "Not all can accept this word, but only those to whom it is granted." It is a gift, an extraordinary grace. He added realism to his instruction, noting that some are incapable of marriage, from birth, because of others and by choice in order to devote everything to the Kingdom.

His approach encompasses the whole range of human success and failure, blessing and tragedy. The Gospel is for anyone struggling to find God's will. The saving grace is that mercy meets us at every twist and turn in the road, and even in profound failure we are still being guided and encouraged by God's unconditional and undeserved love. This makes every life a divine love story, especially those filled with sin and suffering.

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