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Respectful relationships

by Patricia Datchuck Sánchez

Spiritual Reflections

The short story "The Eight-Cow Wife" by Patricia McGerr gives us an excellent example of the value of respect among married couples. In the days when dowries were expected, Johnny Lingo, an entrepreneur on the Pacific island of Kaniwhata, offered eight cows to the father of Sarita, whom he wished to marry. Sarita was plain and too thin; she walked with her shoulders hunched and her head down. She had no self-esteem whatsoever. Usually, a dowry consisted of three cows or five at the most; eight was unheard of. Nevertheless, that's what Johnny Lingo gave.

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
Genesis 2:18-24 Psalm 128 Hebrews 2:9-11 Mark 10:2-16



Months later, a visitor to the island of Nurabandi, where Johnny now lived,

came over wishing to avail himself of Johnny's business skills. He had heard of the eight-cow dowry and the plainness of Sarita. But when he met her, he found her to be the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen -- the lift of her shoulders, the tilt of her chin, the sparkle in her eyes. The fact that her husband loved and respected her enough to offer an extravagant dowry for her made all the difference. Because of him, she had become her best and most beautiful self. Such is the dynamic of marriage: Two persons who love one another more than themselves call forth the best in each other, and together they bear witness to the world that true love and mutual respect are possible. ('The Eight-Cow Wife' is included in Stephen R. Covey's *Everyday Greatness*, Rutledge Hill Press, 2006.)

According to the authors of Genesis, the love between married people was ordained and blessed by God, who intended that the two become one so as to be helpmates and partners in all they are. Together, married people are to be stewards of all that God has made, and together they are to participate in the creative power of God by bringing forth new lives, which are to be cherished as God's precious gifts.

However, for varied reasons, the ideal is not always realized. Many marriages are not lifelong. When approached with this reality, Jesus (Gospel) did not enter into debate about the lawfulness of divorce. Rather, he focused on marriage as a divinely ordained union, as did the Genesis authors.

William J. Bausch suggests that we recall the times in which Jesus lived (*Once Upon a Gospel*, Twenty-Third Publications, 2008). His was a society in which women rarely, if ever, owned property and had no independent means of making a living. For that reason, marriage was a lifesaver. Marriage guaranteed support for the most vulnerable members of society, women and children. For their protection, marriage had to be stable and enduring. Laws forbidding divorce indicated that women and children should not be left on their own. In criticizing those who advocated divorce, especially for frivolous reasons, Jesus was taking up the cause of the poor and the weak. 'He was,' Bausch says, 'not once-and-for-all condemning divorced persons, but he was coming down squarely on the side of the defenseless. 'Don't do that to women!' is his stern message.' With this background, we can understand Jesus' words not as condemnation, but as an expression of compassion.

Although the social context of Jesus' day no longer exists, his message of compassion and his desire to protect the weak and defenseless continues to apply. Whether married or divorced, whether gay or straight, all people are cherished creations of God. Whether or not each is able to sustain a lasting relationship with another is not a reason to judge or condemn them. On the contrary, like Jesus, we are to be compassionate and caring, trusting in the good consciences of others and respectful of the difficult decisions they have to make. To exclude those who are most in need of the ministrations of the faith community would not only be unkind; it would be contrary to the example set by Jesus and the Gospel he came to proclaim.

[Patricia Sánchez holds a master's degree in literature and religion of the Bible from a joint degree program at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in New York.]

This Sunday scripture commentary appears in full in NCR's sister publication Celebration, a worship and homiletic



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