

Seeing the sacred in marriage

By Dr. Rob Lees

Do you ever find that old words can bring new meaning to certain aspects of life? Last week I attended the thesis defense of Eli Norman, a Masters student at Trinity Western University. Eli's topic was the sanctification of marriage. The word took me back to my days studying the theology. Sanctification seems like a "churchy" word. But there it was being used by social scientists to talk about matters other than religion.

In case you are familiar with the term, to sanctify something usually means to hold it sacred. According to Eli's research, the notion of sanctification has been used to study views towards a wide variety of things, including the environment. In these studies, the more people saw the environment as sacred, the more committed they were to financially investing in its protection. Although research usually finds conservative Christianity to be negatively correlated with pro environmental views, this doesn't seem to be true for those who see this sacred in nature.

Another interesting study cited had to do with dreams. Many of us do remember our dreams and if we do, we don't give them another thought. Based on a sample of college students, those who sanctify their dreams had better psychological and spiritual outcomes arising from stressful life events related to their dreams.

There have been studies of sanctification of the body, of sex, of strivings and of family life. All indicate that when we see something as sacred, it has powerful behavioral and attitudinal results. We invest time and energy in those aspects of life that we sanctify. Once something becomes sanctified, whether we would normally use that word to describe how we feel about it, it takes on religious overtones.

Eli Norman's own research study found that being religious didn't necessarily impact on mental functioning, but the degree of sanctification did. The more sacred the view of marriage, the more balanced and healthy the marriages tended to be. This as an

important finding, particularly for those in many Christian churches in Chilliwack. Spiritual development and marital development do not necessarily go hand in hand. Communities of faith one thing to promote healthier marriages, and likely many other kind of intimate relationships, need to tackle this had on. But this might be easier said than done.

Marriages of painful topic for many. Large numbers of people have experienced in divorce or break ups of significant relationships. Discussing the sacredness of marriage may raise guilt, shame, or other negative emotions, particularly if a person hasn't come to terms with the fact that the past is the past, or that all human beings regularly fail, that some marriages are abusive emotionally and physically. A particular hobby horse of mine is that longevity is not a sign of marital success. We can easily forget this and focus on relationships that end and not attend to the many that continue in name only. Statistics Canada can tell you how many marriages end in divorce. It likely cannot tell you how many marriages continue, but are unfulfilling. A bad marriage is just as much a failure as a divorce.

When we talk about sanctification of marriage, we need to think not only of keeping relationships together, but ensuring that they're satisfying to those in them. All this being said, it is still important, according to Eli Norman's research, to inspire people to see the sacred in marriage and relationships. Why? Because of the relationship between marital health and sanctification. If people can be helped to see their relationships as spiritual, not just in a perfunctory religious way, but in the way that makes it a priority, they will invest effort in them. Usually this effort pays off in relationship quality. Not only that, but where married partners are parenting children, their own or step children, or even foster children, if their marital relationship is healthy there are multiple positive side effects for the children.

I've sat in a counselling office with people lamenting that their spouse is having an affair, or had left them, and they have realized too late it was caused, at least in part, by their inattention and neglect of their relationship. Although seldom using the word "sacred", their regret is that they didn't see the relationship for what it could be.

By definition, to see it is sacred is to see it as central. According to Annette Mahoney, an expert in the psychology of religion and family life, to see marriage as sacred is to believe that God plays a role in the development of the marriage, that in fact, God is present in the marriage and that by loving one's partner, one is loving God.

There are times we put on a polite face to people outside our homes, give our best behavior at the office or with friends and save our worst for those closest to us. If we see marriage and families as sacred, this common pattern needs to be challenged. We should practice our best with our family so that it comes naturally in other circumstances.

In the next two weeks in this column, I intend to write about some practical ways of improving marriage through communication and conflict resolution. Theistic believer or not, seeing relationships as sacred can be an important starting point.

This article was originally published in the Chilliwack Progress, September 10th, 2006. Dr. Rob Lees is the community psychologist for the Ministry of Children and Family Development, Child and Youth Mental Health, Chilliwack