

Learning to Dance Together: Forgiving One Another

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, by Your presence You blessed the wedding in Cana and showed us that You are the true priest of mystical and pure marriage. We thank You for the day on which by Your heavenly blessing You joined us in the sacrament of marriage. Lord, continue to bless and enrich our marriage in love companionship, mutual support, oneness of heart and progress in faith and life. Protect our Holy wedlock from sin, evil and danger. Nurture between us the spirit of understanding, the spirit of forgiveness and the spirit of peace, that no resentment, quarrel or other problem may cause us to stumble and fall. Grant us to see our own faults and not to judge each other. Keep our bond of love always new. Gladden our lives with the joys of marriage, that with one heart we may praise and glorify You. Amen

Building Activity

Have each couple take turns telling the group how they meet.

Introduction:

Learning how to dance as a couple is quite an endeavor. As an on-looker, dancing doesn't look so hard, but then when one actually attempts to learn to dance with a partner, it can be rather frustrating. There is the stepping on your partner's toes, the accidental falls, learning each other's rhythm and the difficulty of trying to keep in sync. Through the years the tempo of the song may change. It could get faster, then slower and at times may even feel like hard rock depicting our challenging times.

In this sense, a marriage relationship can be likened to the experience of learning to dance together. Just as learning to dance takes a lot of patience and practice, getting along in a marriage requires loving forbearance when toes are stepped upon (feelings are hurt) and the extension of grace to help pick up one's partner after a fall (a compassionate hand when one makes a mistake).

And as no one can dance when standing still, relationships by their very nature are not static.

There is one element in the marital relationship that can cause a couple to stop dancing and grow apart in their relationship. In fact, the lack of this is so devastating it can cause all the music to just stop. The factor that is absolutely necessary in order to have a thriving relationship is the continual extension of forgiveness to one another.

To focus on this, couples can meditate on the first steps that they ever took together as husband and wife. These steps were in fact, the couple's first dance, referred to in the Sacrament of Marriage as the Dance of Isaiah. On the day of their wedding, couples were led hand in hand by the hand of the Priest, as together they danced three times around a focal point.

During the Dance of Isaiah, the couple moved together in harmony as their steps were coordinated together around Christ and His forgiveness. Christ is the center of the dance and the foundation for a lifetime together. Christ, Who is life has set the couple on the path of marriage and it is in His love and forgiveness that there will be life in the marriage as couples love and forgive each other. In order to keep dancing together in the dance of marriage, couples must continue to follow in the steps of Christ.

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1. What do the words “Dancing as a couple” mean to each of you when you look at your partner? Have couples face each other and tell each other what dancing as a couple looks like to them.

2. Name some personal vices that get in the way of synchronizing your rhythm as a couple.

3. Is there a limit as to how many times couples should forgive each other’s sins? Isn’t there a point where, “Enough is enough, already”?

4. What happens in a marriage if a spouse refuses to forgive a repentant spouse’s sin? And what can help this situation?

5. How does mutual obedience to Christ's words, "Take up your cross and follow Me", help the motion of the Dance of Isaiah to continue?

Leader's Guide:

- Have enough copies of the discussion, and hand out to each participant
- Have the Orthodox Bible Study Bible on hand.
- Have a clock nearby so you are conscious of time.
- Throughout the study there are parenthetical Scriptural references which are not intended to be read aloud. The parenthetical references are to be used, on an as needed basis, in order to enhance the study.
- Open the discussion with prayer. Read the Introduction to the group. Then begin the discussion by asking the questions listed. After the group is given adequate time to share their responses to each question, read aloud the Leader's Notes answer summary before going on to the next question. Close the discussion with prayer.

Leader's Notes:

1. How do you dance with your partner? Do you feel each other's rhythm?

Think about the way you speak to each other, look at each other and move together. Is it with love?

Colossians 3:14-"But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection. 15 And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.

2. Allow couples 15min to discuss this question among their selves.

3. Is there a limit as to how many times couples should forgive each other's sins? Isn't there a point where, "Enough is enough, already"?

The Apostle Peter asked Jesus a very similar version of this question, he said, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus replied, saying, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:21-22)

So what does it mean to forgive seventy times seven? Well, Peter had asked his question and then at the end gave another question that he hoped was actually the right answer to his first question, he asks, "Up to seven times?". In a somewhat comical fashion the Lord Jesus Christ answers Peter's question according to the folly of the question. When Jesus says that forgiveness is to be extended seven times seventy, He isn't saying that you only have to forgive 490 times, He is saying that there is no limit to the amount of times one must forgive.

Finding forgiveness for our spouses is like finding the rhythm of your dance.

Sin divides us from one another, causing relationships to crumble but forgiveness unites, repairing the brokenness. Sometimes forgiveness is needed repeatedly, but we must never grow tired of forgiving because we, ourselves need continual forgiveness from God and He does not grow weary of forgiving us. He graciously continues to offer Himself as the Offerer and the Offering, saying to us, "Take, eat . . . drink for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28).

4. What happens in a marriage if a spouse refuses to forgive a repentant spouse's sin? And what can help this situation?

When spouses sin against each other it causes estrangement. Sin always divides us from God and from each other creating static. This was seen

clearly in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve, as sin brought the breakdown of their relationship with God and with each other.

In order for reconciliation to take place, both repentance and forgiveness are needed: repentance from the one who sinned and forgiveness from the one who has been sinned against. When repentance and forgiveness are not present, a dangerous root of bitterness can begin to grow separating the spouses even further from each other. Hebrews 12:14 says, "Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord; Looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled." A root of bitterness wreaks havoc in a relationship, the deeper the root grows, the stronger it becomes and couple's hearts can become cold and indifferent to each other.

The situation sounds rather hopeless from a human perspective so that is why it is so good to remember that with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26). Just as the hurts spouses inflict on one another are real and painful, Jesus' suffering and death on our behalf was real, too. As couple's take their focus off the wounds they feel that they have received from each other, they can focus on the wounds of Christ and it is in His wounds that there is healing for a hurting marriage. Isaiah 53:4-5 states, "He bears our sins and suffers for us. . . He was wounded because of our lawlessness, and became sick because of our sins. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His bruise we are healed." In Christ is healing from our sins and health in our relationships.

The reality is that the marriage relationship can be hard because a sinner is trying to get along with another sinner. Christ likens the state mankind is in to that of being "sick" and needing a Physician (Mark 2:17). Looking at it this way, helps us see that, in this sense, the marriage relationship has two "sick" people trying to function together as one. This is no small task but it is possible because Christ is the Physician of our souls, the Church is our hospital and the Sacraments are our healing medicine. In remaining under the care that the Lord has provided for us, we can increase in "health" as our relationship with God grows and grows.

Christ comes to us, in our sin-sick state, with healing in His wings and as we come to Him, casting our cares upon Him, He says, "I will sustain you"

(Malachi 3:20 LXX, Psalm 54:23 LXX). Christ upholds all things by the word of His power and as couples depend upon Him in faith and prayer, He can most certainly, uphold their marriage, too (Colossians 1:17). So a couple is not all on their own to try to work out their marriage. In fact, there is not one aspect in the Christian life that one can do on their own, for God is energizing within “both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13). Jesus has said, “Apart from Me, you can do nothing” and calls us to abide in Him to bear fruit and this is the reason that He was at the center of the dance during the Sacrament of Marriage (John 15:5).

And remember it was the hand of the priest that led the couple on their first dance together. His hand represents his personal support to the couple. The Priest is there to turn to if a spouse is having trouble forgiving their spouse’s sin. He is there as a wise counselor and spiritual confessor. The Sacrament of Confession is healing as God, through the words of the Priest, forgives sin, removing its baggage and bondage. In experiencing and understanding freedom from our sins we become more and more how God intended us to be and more like the image of His Son, loving and forgiving. The life-giving Trinity gives us life in abundance (John 10:10).

The priest’s hand also represents the support of the Church to the couple’s marriage relationship. In the life and teachings of Christ and the Church is everything needed for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). There is also support of fellow parishioners’ prayers and in the intercession of the Saints.

5. How does mutual obedience to Christ’s words, “Take up your cross and follow Me”, help the motion of the Dance of Isaiah to continue?

The motion of the Dance of the Isaiah in the Sacrament of Marriage was around a table upon which the icon of Christ sat. During this dance, couples moved three times in unison circling around the Good News of the forgiveness of sins in Christ. This motion can continue in a spiritual sense as couples heed the call of Christ.

On the cross Christ took upon Himself the sin of the world and as He calls us to take up our own cross, He calls us to subdue our sinful passions and

follow Him in obedience. As spouses take up their crosses, they are on the same narrow path together. Christ has described the way that leads to salvation as being “difficult” (Matthew 7:14). The allurements of the world like vines twist around our feet, tripping and tempting us to live for the here and now, the devil entices us with so called “easier”, wider paths and even our own hearts at times can become fickle and weak in fighting our flesh and subduing sin. We all stumble in various ways along this path and much forgiveness is needed both from God and from each other (James 3:2, I John 1:9).

In order to keep the dance of marriage in motion, spouses must be “kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ has forgiven us” (Ephesians 4:32). In living this way, there is much happiness and joy in the marriage relationship. This joy is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). The Dance of Isaiah on the day of the wedding was a dance for joy as the Priest chanted about the prophesy predicting the incarnation of Christ. It is because Jesus Christ came to save us, to call us back to Paradise that the marriage relationship can realize its intended purpose of oneness. As spouses exercise abundant grace, love and forgiveness, with each other, there is a small glimpse of the unity of the relationship that Adam and Eve had with each other before sin entered the world.

Closing Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

