



At-Home Marriage Retreat: National Marriage Week 2021

Marriage: To Have, To Hold, To Honor

Dear Married Couples,

This year's theme for National Marriage Week is To Have, To Hold, and To Honor, a reminder of the promises made on your wedding day.

The stories and reflection questions that follow are intended to help you renew your commitment "to have, to hold, to honor" your spouse.

Celebrate and enrich your marriage this week by taking some time each day to listen to the Word of God, meditate, reflect, and pray together. Each day is an opportunity to read and meditate on a passage from Scripture followed by a re-imagined story from a different perspective. Reflect on the questions that follow and close with the prayer for couples.

This exercise of praying with the Scriptures is called *Lectio Divina*. It consists of four steps: *lectio* (the reading of Scriptures), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation).

God bless you!

Day One

Adam and Eve: That Could Be Us

Lectio: Gen. 2:23; 3:1-24

Meditatio 1: Scripture reveals that God made man and woman for each other! Adam's cry that "at last, this one is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" signals the holy recognition that God desired man and woman to be husband and wife. Now, consider how sin has affected God's marvelous plan for His children.

Imagine Adam and Eve exiled from the Garden of Eden one year after they ate the forbidden fruit. They toil daily by the sweat of their brow. Eve has already borne their first child, fully experiencing the pangs of labor. Today they have stopped ploughing the fields to take a rest from the heat of the sun. Their conversation picks up the old refrain: who is at fault for bringing them to this point? Who is to blame for their toil and labors?

Adam: Why did you listen to that serpent? Couldn't you tell he was speaking with a forked tongue?

Eve: You were right there next to me the entire time and you didn't say a single word. I took just one bite. You ate the rest!

Adam: Still, that doesn't change the fact that you took the first bite. I was sure you weren't going to fall for his smooth talk. But since you fell for it, I didn't feel like I had any choice.

Eve: Now look at us. We sweat and toil daily, we are not happy here like we were in the garden... and it's your fault.

Adam: Oh, no, it isn't.

Eve: Perhaps God can tell us who's at fault. We can get on with our lives once we know who is to blame.

Adam: Good idea.

Adam and Eve seek out God to find the answer.

God: You are both at fault by seeking out the culprit. You think one is the villain and the other is the victim? You are both the villain and the victim.

Adam: We don't understand.

God: You are far more similar than you are different. It's unimportant to consider who is at fault. Instead, consider how you – together – can work to repair the damage that has been done. You have both experienced the consequences of the fall from grace. Together, as husband and wife, you can experience redemption.

Meditatio 2: (Ask yourselves and reflect)

- **To Have:** We were called by God to be caretakers and stewards of each other and the world he created. Do I cherish my spouse as God's personal gift to me? Do we delight in the blessings we have received, such as our marriage? Or do we grasp for temporal goods that are not ours? How can we simplify our life – especially during this pandemic – and share the goodness we have all received with those who are less fortunate?
- **To Hold:** Do we bring God into our conversations? Do we pray together daily or pray for one another regularly? Do we discern together about God's plan for our family and the number of children He desires us to have? How can we better hold and sustain each other, especially during challenging times?

- **To Honor:** Do I give my spouse the benefit of the doubt? Do I lay blame on my spouse unjustly? How can I honor my spouse better in word and action? How do we honor God's plan for married love? For example, have we rejected all forms of contraception and committed to practicing Natural Family Planning?

Oratio:

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keep, we pray, in a bond of inseparable love
those who are united in the covenant of Marriage,
so that, as you make their love fruitful,
they may become, by your grace, witnesses to charity itself.
Through Christ our Lord,
Amen.

Contemplatio: Spend a few moments in silence, grateful for the gift of your marriage, and allow the Lord to speak directly to your heart. When finished, end by slowly reciting the Our Father together.

Day Two

In the Lion's Den

Lectio: Daniel 6:16-28

Meditatio 1: Daniel was thrown into the lion's den because he faithfully worshiped the one, true God. However, God sent His angel to close the mouth of the lion to protect Daniel from harm.

Let us imagine the perspective of the lion, whose mouth had been closed by God:

"This is a new kind of companion, this Daniel that has intruded upon my space. We circled each other warily all day, keeping an eye on each other. My objective is always the same: to reduce my prey to satisfy my appetite. I am always ready to pounce at the first sign of weakness in my prey – any prey, beast or human.

But, strangely, I am not eager to eat this person of human flesh, who is both vulnerable and vigilant. I am *not* inclined to seduce or entrap, with my careful approach, my cunning eye, my strength always alert.

This man confuses and confounds me. What is so different about him?

Almighty God, Daniel's God, you closed my mouth and opened my heart. What is happening to me? One day, very soon, I may even be willing to lie with a lamb."

Meditatio 2:

- **To Have:** 'To have and to hold' is hugely different from 'to trap and to devour.' How do I shield or protect my spouse from falling into traps set for them by others or by their own weaknesses?

- **To Hold:** In our relationship as a couple, when have I acted like the lion, ready to pounce, rather than protect? An old Czech proverb says, “If I have to bite you, let me bite you with my heart.” How can I speak the truth with tenderness and kindness, and not with brutality?
- **To Honor:** During this pandemic, many couples have experienced new constraints and close confines that have tested the relationship. Have I attacked my spouse verbally, emotionally, or physically? How can my words, my thoughts, and my actions be transformed by God’s grace to better honor my spouse?

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Day Three

The Emmaus Journey

Lectio: Luke 24:13-35

Meditatio 1: On the first Easter Sunday, two disillusioned disciples were returning home from Jerusalem. Jesus’s crucifixion had crushed and bewildered them. All seemed lost. Then a stranger joined them on their journey. Let us imagine that the two disciples were husband and wife. Only one of the two – Cleopas – is named. To help us dive deeper into the story, let us give the woman a name, Judith, and a voice.

“I don’t like it when a third person joins us on a trip, especially another man. It is customary for the two men to walk ahead, and the woman usually follows behind. This time was different, though. The stranger was sometimes by my side, sometimes by the side of my husband, Cleopas.

As Cleopas and I were talking about what had happened in Jerusalem, we walked holding hands, glancing at one another from time to time, and sharing more deeply than we ever had before. The stranger walked behind us then, though not in a threatening way, but protectively.

At one point, he began to explain the Scriptures to us. He talked excitedly and walked quickly alongside us. Suddenly he jumped in front of us and walked backwards facing us. His eyes shone and his voice was alive with feeling.

That's when I began to sense that something supremely important was playing out, but I could not tell what. As the stranger spoke, everything began to get clearer to me. I whispered to Cleopas, 'Invite him to stay with us when we get to Emmaus.' I wanted to hear more.

When we arrived, he took bread and blessed it. When we took the bread from his hands, it felt like the most important meal we would ever eat. I began to pray, 'Help me to take this meal into me and never let it leave me.' I looked up and he was gone. 'That was ... the Lord!' I asked Cleopas. 'Yes! Let us get back to Jerusalem,' he replied."

Meditatio 2:

- **To Have:** What have been the most meaningful spiritual experiences that you and your spouse have experienced together? Perhaps it was a pilgrimage, a response to tragedy or a moment of joy while performing an act of service. Looking back, was your heart burning within you? Remind your spouse of that moment, and why it was so meaningful to you.
- **To Hold:** How do you hold each other accountable for spiritual growth? What ways can you as a couple strive for holiness and help each other become more desirous of God?
- **To Honor:** You might view this week as an Emmaus journey. Try not to anticipate the next hill. As in the Emmaus story, let this be a time of sharing your heart, searching for meaning, and celebrating God's presence in your lives.

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Day Four

The Mother-In-Law Speaks

Lectio: Luke 4:38-41

Meditatio 1: The Gospel of Luke tells us about the healing of Saint Peter the Apostle's mother-in-law. What would she have said?

“My daughter married Peter, a fisherman. He is a great hulking man, a big talker, inclined to extravagant gestures and emotional outbursts. It’s hard not to love him. He is full of energy and always up for an adventure. Where his mind goes, his body follows – right away.

There is always a crowd around him. He has many friends, but one stands above the rest. His name is Jesus. Let me tell you about him.

I love to welcome people to my home. There is nothing I would rather do than take care of the people I love. But I have been sick recently, and unable to wait on others. So, one day Peter told me he wanted me to meet his friend.

Jesus was unlike anyone I ever met. He came into the house having already drawn the jug of water from the well. He smiled *at* me, not past me. He seemed to study me. I couldn’t wait on him and the guests for long. Finally, I had to go rest. He came in and touched me, and now I feel more whole than I have in a long time.

I can see that Jesus is influencing Peter. Peter looks deeper into my eyes. He looks around to seek out the lost and assist the needy. He has become a better husband, father, son.

Peter is not perfect, but he is becoming more noble, good, and free. He is becoming the man he was meant to be.”

Meditatio 2:

- **To Have:** Reflect on your individual strengths and weaknesses. How have your gifts enriched your marriage? How have your weaknesses challenged your marriage? Pray together for wisdom to know how to place these gifts at God’s disposal. Allow Him to transform weaknesses with His grace.
- **To Hold:** As a couple, what boundaries do we need to set? What rules and expectations do we need to adjust, as both our parents and our children grow older or new circumstances require us to adapt?
- **To Honor:** How do we honor our extended family members and their marriages? If we have mother or father-in-law(s) - how do we honor and respect them and their marriage while maintaining our independence and sense of identity as a couple? If we have married children - How can I love and respect my son or daughter-in-law(s) and find a balance between ignoring and intruding on my children’s marriage(s)?

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Day Five

Martha and Mary

Lectio: Luke 10:38-42 or John 11:1-54

Meditatio 1: These famous sisters in the Bible can help us reflect about cooperation and accepting each other's differences as a married couple. They appear again when their brother, Lazarus, dies. Martha runs to Jesus, while Mary waits until she is called. One is pro-active, the other is passive. However, they both demonstrate that they are committed to Jesus.

Martha: Everyone seems to have an opinion of us: I am all work and she is all prayer. In reality, life is not that simple, and I resent being described that way. Sure, I sometimes act before I think. And I prefer to act rather than sit and muse too long over the potential solutions to a problem.

Mary: I don't like being caricatured, either. It's true that you hurried and ran to Jesus when our brother died, and then Jesus raised him from the dead while I stayed behind at home. Regardless of our differences, though, it's fair to say that "anything *you* can do, **we** can do better."

Lazarus: My dear sisters, let us look to our Lord to see the best way forward. Think about this, why did Jesus bring me back to life? Why I was chosen is a mystery, but perhaps here is a clue.

Jesus had already lost Joseph his father on earth, and his cousin, John the Baptist. Both of these deaths, Jesus accepted as His Father's will. However, when I died, Jesus recognized it as an opportunity to glorify His heavenly Father by returning me to life (cf. John 11:4). In a sense, it seems that he acted as Mary during the deaths of his father and cousin, but He seemed to act more like Martha when he raised me from the dead. It takes the wisdom of God to know when it is time for patient acceptance and when it is time for heroic action.

Meditatio 2:

- **To Have:** Discuss how your natural inclinations complement each other. If you are inclined to inertia, pray for the courage to act. If you are inclined to impulsivity, pray for the patience to reflect. Consider a way forward to act and pray together.
- **To Hold:** Tell your spouse about something you have been contemplating or dreaming about for a long time. Discuss together what steps you can take, and help each other to put your ideas into action.
- **To Honor:** Take a moment to reflect on how your spouse has actively helped you to grow as a person—perhaps in encouraging you to try something new, expanding your perspective, developing a skill, or letting go of a sinful inclination. Share your thoughts with your spouse and thank him or her for the positive impact they have had on your life.

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Day Six

Tentmakers for God

Lectio: Acts 18

Meditatio 1: When the Jews were expelled from Rome, Priscilla and Aquila, a married couple, and tentmakers, went to Corinth where they met St. Paul. As fellow tradesmen, they became close friends and traveling companions. This couple tells us about their friend, St. Paul.

Priscilla: Do you know how hard it is to stitch a tent? We work in leather and linen, but we also weave camel and goat hair to make strips of cloth, which we then sew together. The fabric is coarse and heavy. Punching a hole once is hard; try punching in a straight line repeatedly. It takes skill, determination, and practice.

Aquila: A stranger named Paul showed up at one of our gatherings, and he said he was good at tent-making, too. He proved himself to be an expert tentmaker. As he furiously stitched and worked, he told us about his extensive travels. He also told us about a good friend of his, Jesus.

We had heard of Jesus before, but over time, what Paul said about Jesus made more and more sense, and then it became real for us. Paul helped us recognize that Jesus as our Messiah, the Christ, the One who came to save us.

We wanted to help share this good news with Paul. So, we started working in Corinth with him, then moved to the community in Ephesus, and finally came back to Rome. Along with Paul, we stitched the world together. It was a challenge to tell the same story of Jesus – to tailor it to the Corinthians, the Roman-obsessed Ephesians, the ever-debating Athenians. To say nothing of stitching Jews and Gentiles together! Try to get a Galatian and a Thessalonian to agree on anything. But you know what? It is possible. The pattern is everything, and we model everything on Jesus Christ, who gave us the template.

Priscilla: If you believe in Jesus, you are called to be a tentmaker. Our marriage was made for this work, and for these times. Isaiah's words are our motto: "Enlarge the place of your tent,

stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back, lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes” (Isaiah 54:2).

Meditatio 2:

- **To Have:** Like Priscilla and Aquila, few of us live and work in the same place all our lives. Every new place and position is an opportunity to share in the call of evangelization. How do you partake in that call and mission as Christians? Do you have friends who could benefit from your sharing about your life in Christ? Does your marriage reflect what you believe and profess?
- **To Hold:** Can we be tentmakers – sewing and patching the torn and tattered areas of our lives? Where in our lives is there a ragged edge, where healing needs to take place? Is there an area of our marriage or family that needs healing? Or is God asking us to expand our marriage and home – our tent – to the gift of more children, naturally or by adoption?
- **To Honor:** How can I better honor my marriage vows and by doing so, honor my spouse and my family?

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Day Seven

Post-Cana

Lectio: John 2:1-11

Meditatio 1: The story of the wedding feast at Cana is rich with meaning for Christian couples. Let us take a closer look at the one who may have felt disgraced and disrespected by the entire incident: the groom at the wedding.

What should have been the best day of his life, still tormented him. How, after such an auspicious courtship, could things have turned so sour? The energy had run out of the crowd even sooner than the wine had. He knew he was moody and she was spirited, but it had seemed to make sense for them to align their families, their businesses, their lives. It had turned out to be a bad bargain. He could not master her the way he could master the vines.

The wine incident had been the best of all occasions to her, and it should have been for him, too, but he had been so woefully embarrassed. Yes, he admitted, he had cut it too close. He had made too many promises to supply wine to others, and had run short at his own wedding. It was bad business; he had taken a business gamble and lost. But then Jesus appeared. At the moment when all eyes should have been on him, the groom, they were fastened on Jesus.

The same wine jars lay as a reminder of that day among his reserves. "These jars ruined my wedding day," he thought to himself as he dipped a cup into one jar. He swirled the water around. "I can get wine from water too, can't I? I take little grape seedlings, string them out over the countryside, add the rain, and the wine comes, eventually. I just can't do it immediately, like he did."

He dashed the water out of the cup. His mind returned again and again to the day of the wedding. She had watched Jesus with wonder and admiration. Why didn't she watch him with the same admiration? When she did look at him with love, he lived for those moments.

"I'm a winemaker, not a miracle worker," he thought to himself. "I can't fill a stone jar all at once but I can bring my wine to her, slowly and steadily, in every season of my life."

Meditatio 2:

- **To Have:** How have I changed since my wedding day? In what ways have I lost focus? In what ways have I grown? Share with your spouse the ways in which you think you have changed. Share with one another what you most appreciate about your spouse, but perhaps have seen less evidence of lately. Ask to see that quality again.
- **To Hold:** As you look at the next stage of your life, what can you work on to be a better person, a better spouse, a better Christian? Trust that God will change your water into wine, if you let Him.
- **To Honor:** What made you fall in love with your spouse? What drew you to him or her? What do you see and love in your spouse now that was unknown to you on your wedding day? Share these reflections with each other.

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Post-Cana is modified reprinted with permission from *Possible Parables: Biblical Stories Re-Imagined* by Jim Healy, Rooted in Love, 2010, 2020.

Dr. Jim Healy (www.rootedinlove.org) contributed earlier versions of the reimagined stories and many of the questions that became the basis for this year's At Home Marriage Retreat. Dr. Healy was the director of the Family Ministry Office for the Diocese of Joliet for 30 years before his retirement from that position last year. He delights in continuing to write, speak, and consult on marriage and family topics.

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