

Always and
EverywhereIt is
right and
a good and joyful
thing always and
everywhere to
give thanks.

BY BISHOP PAUL V. MARSHALL

Imagine an unmarried couple saying proudly after thirty years together that “we didn’t stay together because of any vow, but because we chose to.” We have probably all heard it from somebody. But imagine their grown-up daughter replying, “Well, that’s fine for you, and you told me that all the time when I was little, but did you ever think about what it meant to me to wake up each morning wondering if this would be the day that you didn’t choose to stay together?” The parents are taken by surprise and have no reply.

Oddly enough, that encounter took place in a serious moment on the fairly wacky 90s sitcom, “Dharma and Greg,” but it has stayed with me as a grim reminder of the long-term studies of the children of parents who did not stay together. Just for a few examples, they are more prone to depression, do less well in school, and are more likely to end their own marriages.

I think this means that “staying together for the sake of the children” is

I have chosen to live with you

not such a bad idea if it is at all possible. I also believe that those who think they can transcend the marriage relationship are kidding themselves about the risk they take for themselves and their children.

I am well aware that marriage is very hard work at times. At the same time, the vignette from “Dharma and Greg” is a reminder that the marriage vows are more than two individuals staking a claim on happiness. In most cases, those vows involve a very serious responsibility and great privilege of raising children in an emotionally safe environment.

People who are in love begin by idealizing each other. Eventually this wears off and then is the moment of choice: can I live with this person’s strengths and weaknesses? In an odd way, then, love means having a healthy ambivalence about the beloved.

I do not write any of this so that anybody will feel guilty. I know full well that some marriages become irredeemably toxic and must end. What is past is past. I do write it for this month of June brides as a reminder that marriage vows are just that, and that they do oblige us to honor the welfare of others.

After forty years of marriage I believe that living out vows is not a dreary thing but an opportunity unlike any other. “Sickness and health, better or worse, richer or poorer” — two people supporting each other through challenges and achievements of life can gain maturity and beauty of soul.

There is an enormous pragmatism to the vow about “forsaking all others.” I don’t much believe that any two people are destined for each other. In fact, there may well be dozens of “others” one might meet who would make a wonderful or exciting partner. The spiritual and emotional core of marriage as it now exists is that we bind ourselves to one person out of a wide field of possible choices, and in remaining faithful gain our own depth of character.

“As it now exists.” We dare not kid ourselves that marriage has always been the way we know it. The Old Testament tells us of arranged marriages, marriage by purchase, polygamy, and concubinage along side of Adam and Eve. Nonetheless, despite its varied and sometimes troubling stories, throughout the Bible there runs the notion that

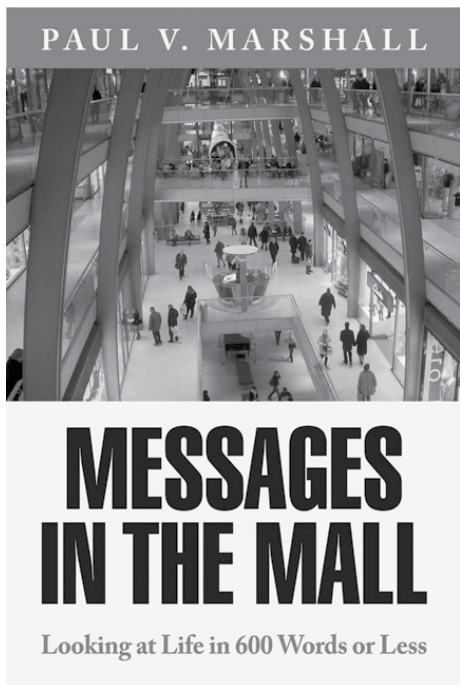
what two people can get in the long run is love, comfort, and delight in each other.

According to the New Testament, the sometimes hard work of being married tells us about Christ, whose self-giving sustains the Church. I think this means that God has a passion for and commitment to us that we can know in our loving each other day by day in our own homes. Sometimes there is joy, and sometimes there may be excruciating pain: it is in hanging in there during both experiences that we can understand something of the Redeemer’s love.

Such knowledge is, of course, not restricted to married people. It is worth remembering that Jesus was single and that David and Jonathan, along with Ruth and Naomi and many others, have a lot to teach us about love, and I have written about that elsewhere. Most of us, however, find ourselves called to marriage, and that is my concern here.

Back to Dharma’s dilemma. There is another way her parents or any parents can teach their children about what’s going on. It is simply a matter of a verb form. Instead of saying “I choose to live with Jane,” saying “I have chosen to live with Jane” speaks of real commitment and gives the children a shot at security. It is also where the miracles happen.

Messages in the Mall, one of many books by Bishop Paul



Bishop Paul Marshall has written extensively both for scholars and clergy and for the general reader. His scholarly

works have been described as “readable” and his popular works as “learned.”

For some 13 years, Bishop Paul Marshall has written a monthly column for secular newspapers, usually 600 words or less and different from the monthly column he writes for *Diocesan Life*. This rigorous discipline of writing to strict space requirements was meant from its beginning in 1996 to engage the secular culture and to bring the church’s message to it by commenting on the realities of the human condition and on issues of general interest. Some six to eight papers in northeastern Pennsylvania currently publish the monthly column. Their combined circulation is about 400,000. *Messages in the Mall -- Looking at Life in 600 Words or Less* (Church Publishing, 2008), a compilation of many of the columns of the first ten years, organized along thematic lines, is Bishop Paul’s most recent book.

The Bishop Is Coming (Church Publishing, 2007) is the first new ceremonial guide for bishops in more

than 25 years and the first book of its kind aimed at helping congregations prepare for a bishop’s visit. This short book equips bishops to minister effectively as the chief pastor in the diocese, while helping clergy and congregations reduce the eternal anxiety around the words, the bishop is coming. His clear, engaging, and often humorous style will put the reader at ease when dealing with ceremonial material.

One, Catholic and Apostolic: Samuel Seabury and the Early Episcopal Church (Church Publishing, 2004) is a fascinating story of the first bishop in the Episcopal Church. It explores the complex personalities, motivations, loyalties and prejudices that went into the formation of the Episcopal Church and the creation of its liturgy. Using Bishop Samuel Seabury’s persona and thought as central themes, Bishop Paul argues that liturgy cannot be understood simply by studying texts. “Marshall does what few scholars ever really do,” Peter Eaton, dean of St. John’s Cathedral, Denver, said in his review in *The Anglican*, October 2005. “He tells us things that are both new and true, and he does this with authority, and not as

the scribes. No one who wants truly to understand this crucial period of our history can do without this book.”

Same-Sex Unions: Stories and Rites (Church Publishing, 2004) is a collection and analysis of representative rites in use in the Episcopal Church and the Anglican Church of Canada, a contribution to the continuing debate on the church’s pastoral care. An expanded version of *Same Sex Unions: An Inquiry*, written initially for bishops on their way to General Convention 2003, it begins with a focus on the lives of two deeply committed Christian couples.

Earlier books by Bishop Paul include: *Leaps and Boundaries: The Prayer Book in the 21st Century* (Coedited with Dr. Lesley Northup, Morehouse, 1997); *The Voice of a Stranger: On the Lay Origins of Anglican Liturgics* (Church Publishing, 1993); *Anglican Liturgy in America: Prayer Book Parallels* (Church Publishing, 1989, 1991, 1996), a three-volume set that compares texts of different versions of *The Book of Common Prayer*; and *Preaching for the Church Today: The Skills, Prayer and Art of Sermon Preparation* (Church Publishing, 1991).

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diocesanlife

The Diocese of Bethlehem edition of *Episcopal Life*, the monthly newspaper of the Episcopal Church, USA. Copy deadline is the second Monday of the month. Opinions expressed do not necessarily represent those of the Bishop or the Diocese of Bethlehem. Send articles and letters to the Editor.

Editor: Bill Lewellis blewellis@diobeth.org
Art Director: Jenifer Gamber

Episcopal Life ISSN 1050-0057 USPS#177-940 is published monthly by The Domestic & Foreign Missionary Society of the Episcopal Church, Inc., 815 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Periodical postage paid in NYC and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send changes of address to *Episcopal Life*, PO Box 2050, Voorhees NJ 08043-8000. Send change of subscription address to *Episcopal Life* Circulation Department, PO Box 2050, Voorhees NJ 08043-8000, elife@aflwebprinting.com, 800/374-9510.