

Although sharing much common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry, often Mary and Bob find themselves approaching ministerial concerns from different angles... *He said - She said* is a venue to share differing perspectives and provide food for thought.

Perfection, Loveliness, Mess, and Joy

Mary's Perspective:

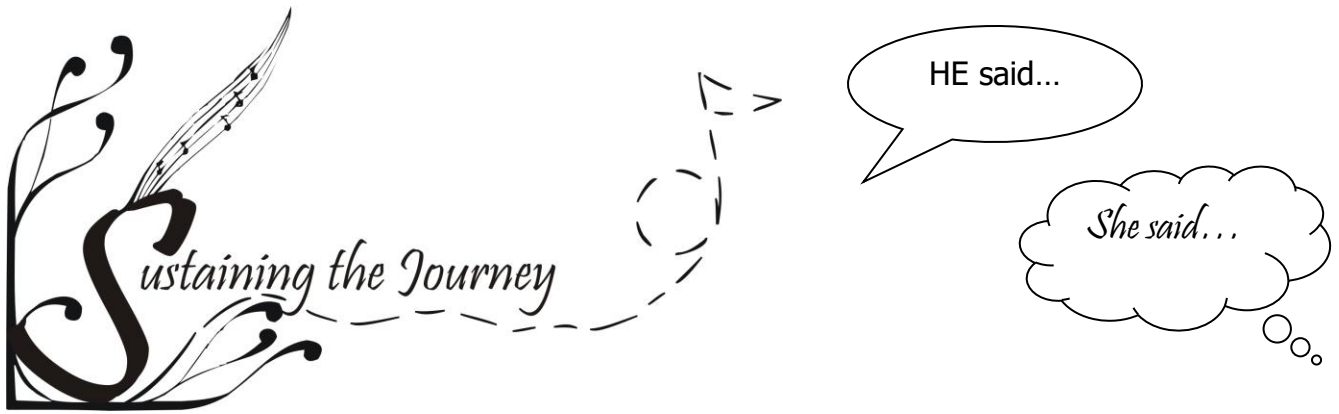
In general, I try not to write too much about my family, as I believe they each have their own story to tell, and I respect their right to tell it. However, the impetus for this blog necessitates sharing a bit of the background. After delaying their wedding a year due to the Covid-19 pandemic, my oldest son and his wife were married this past summer. It was a wonderful celebration, but, in some ways, felt like more of a formality acknowledging a life that had already begun. By the time they were married, Timmy and Sarah had been together since high school, navigated college and grad school, landed their career jobs, moved across the country twice, and were in the process of building a new house in Texas.

At the risk of sounding antiquated, I believe today's generation approaches marriage a bit differently than my generation did. I am so blessed that our offspring have conquered a lot of life's challenges, have figured out money and jobs and building a life together. However, my kids and their friends take more of a pragmatic approach to marriage. My other son (who is getting married this year) once commented that he cannot imagine any couple planning a wedding without living together first, because you have to live together to figure out if you are compatible. Perhaps there is a faith component to their weddings, but often that is to appease the older folks. As Sarah said, "we are not real churchy people, but it didn't bother me to have a minister marry us, and it made my mom happy."

Sidebar – as a parent, I have always believed it is my responsibility to give my children roots and wings. They need to feel free enough to take on life's adventures, but supported enough to know they always have a place to land if the going gets rough. We can share with them our faith and our beliefs and our morals, perhaps even show them by example, but we cannot dictate what values our children espouse. We hope they turn out to be decent, moral adults – and I am truly blessed that all of my children are truly good human beings, as I say, "in spite of us, not because of us!" I've talked to so many folks like me, who lament that their kids don't go to church, or don't vote the way they do, or who make different choices than they would. Parenting takes patience, love, consistency, and more than a little faith.

Anyway, Sarah had made the comment that, after all the planning, the day of their wedding was going to blow by, and she hoped she remembered it. When I work with couples who are preparing for marriage, I often encourage them to etch the details of the day in their memory. By then, all the planning is done, and they typically know they are going to have the opportunity to relax on their honeymoon, so they can be mindful of the people, the words, the interactions, and the love.

In the spirit of wanting to remember the details, I surreptitiously recorded Timmy and Sarah's vows and exchange of rings. For Christmas, I wanted to give them a wedding gift that somehow incorporated those words and a picture. I



graphically designed a print that included a wedding photo, along with the words of their vows and the words spoken when they exchanged rings, and had it printed on a large canvas (that I hoped would look nice on one of the big walls in the new house they were building.) That Christmas gift is where this blog began.

The actual printing was done by a company in Florida. I could have had it shipped directly to the newlyweds, but wanted to see it and wrap it, so I had it sent to me. When it finally arrived, I was a little bit sad because it wasn't, in my opinion, perfect. The layout was exactly what I had designed, but the way the canvas was stretched, there was no margin at the top – the words go right up to the very edge. Now, it is still legible. If I had the time (and desired to spend the money), I would redesign it to have more margin around the words, but it is not imperfect enough to return it to the printer. One might even say it's lovely, but, to my eye, it's just not perfect. A little messy.

My initial reaction was that I was frustrated, and even a little sad. I kicked myself for not realizing I should have added those margins before submitting the art to the printer. I debated writing a heartfelt note to Timmy and Sarah, tucking it into the box with the print, explaining I felt badly that it wasn't perfect. Then I walked 5 miles, debating what to do, and decided that this situation was a parody of life itself – a microcosm, if you will.

When I work with couples preparing for marriage, I often share that I am a big proponent of marriage – Paul and I celebrated 30 years last May – but that marriage isn't always as straight as that big long church aisle. Sometimes he wants the blue car and she wants the red one, or we're trying to have a baby and can't, or oh my gosh we weren't planning on being pregnant so soon. We envision this perfect life, and often it is lovely, but messy. Just like my art print, my vision of perfect turned out lovely but a little messy.

With *Sustaining the Journey* over the past year, we have focused on a different theme each month. For January, we are looking at (Re)Discovering Joy. It was a timely reminder to me, as I lamented my less-than-perfect Christmas gift, to find joy in the whole process. Recalling the warmth of friends who gathered at the wedding, printing a reminder of their promises to each other, wrapping a surprise that they would open – all of this presented joy. If I'm so focused on the messiness, I miss the joy. So, too, life. If I'm so focused on what has been restricted by a pandemic, or on how creaky my old joints have become, or on the cost of a gallon of gas, I risk missing the good that has come about. The pandemic opened our eyes to what's really important. I regularly walk many miles each week, despite aches and pains, and have found great joy in nature, in inspirational podcasts, and in working up a good sweat. Yes, gas and groceries are expensive, but thank God I have always been able to afford them. It is a blessing to drive lots of places and not feel burdened by how much gas I am expending.

When researching inspirational quotes for our January *Two for Tuesdays*, I was inspired by dozens of wise teachers who expounded on different angles regarding joy. The basic message is that we don't need to be overwhelmed by a heavy heart, by the imperfections and messiness of life, because underneath it all, joy exists. There is joy in the journey, not just the destination. And life doesn't have to be perfect to be filled with joy. As we begin a new year, filled with possibilities and potential, may we recognize the loveliness of this life. May we embrace the imperfections, clean up the messes where needed and adapt to them where necessary, and above all, may we discover – or rediscover – joy.



Bob's Perspective:

Joy in one's life shouldn't have to depend on the mood or life status of others. As I've said before, happiness (or joy) is a matter of personal choice. This isn't to say that we never get sad or into a bit of a funk. Emotion is human nature and can't be avoided. However, we can choose to be a happy or joyful person in a temporarily sub-par situation in just the same way that we can choose to be a miserable person (even in the happiest situation). The truest joy comes from letting go and moving forward.

"Amen, amen, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." (John 12:24)

Once there was an old man who had in his possession a beautiful crystal cup – a gift from a cherished friend. Every evening he would brew some tea, sit in front of his fireplace and drink from the cup, all the while remembering many of the good times he and his friend shared. At the end of enjoying the moment, he would say, "This cup is now broken," in remembrance of his dear departed friend. Then, gently washing and drying the crystal cup, he would place it back on the shelf in an honored place.

One day, a visitor to his home picked up the crystal cup in order to admire it more closely. As it was about to be placed back on the shelf, it fell to the floor and broke into a hundred pieces. The visitor was horrified and deeply remorseful. He knew how much that cup meant to the old man. However, the old man calmly picked up a broom and dust pan. Carefully sweeping, he gathered the pieces, took them out to his garden and disposed of them. Then, walking back into the house, he began to brew tea for himself and his visitor. The visitor remained silent and was amazed at the old man's calmness. The old man reached into a cupboard and took out two matching stoneware cups. Pouring equal amounts of tea, he looked at the visitor, smiled, and handed over a cup. They sat quietly for a while and enjoyed the tea.

Finally, the visitor couldn't take the silence anymore and blurted out, "I broke your beautiful cup, why aren't you angry?" The old man held up his stoneware cup and answered, "My dear friend, the tea tastes as good from this cup as any other. The memories that the crystal cup invoked, were just memories. What you and I share today is the beginning of a new chapter."

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