

Reflections on Faith and Life for March 7, 2021

Our Lenten mid-week theme is “community,” with creation, saints, neighbors, the marginalized, and Christ. Relationships are the basis of community; therefore, this week I want to share with you the story of my divorce.

Joe and I met in Miami in 1975 and were married in May, 1976—the year of America’s bicentennial. Picture a kitchen-full of bicentennial wedding presents, all engraved with “1976”! We were blissfully happy the first year, but things began to fall apart after that. He became quite possessive of me, my interests, and my time. We tried marriage counseling, but that takes two parties, and he really wasn’t interested in it.

I began seeing a counselor by myself, and we soon diagnosed at least part of the problem. I was 29 when we married; I’d lived a year in Germany, two years in Baltimore for grad school, and three years on my own in Miami. But Joe had lived his whole life with his mother and moved directly out of her apartment into the house I’d been renting with two friends. He’d never been on his own and couldn’t bear it when I had friends and interests outside our marriage.

Things got even worse after Paul was born, because the baby was the center of my life. Joe loved Paul and wanted to be a good father, but he wasn’t able to set aside his jealousy. Meanwhile I was so depressed I began to think of taking my own life. At that point my counselor—who rarely did much but listen—told me I needed to leave the marriage. Joe was crushed when I told him, but he didn’t fight it. I’m thankful that in Florida back then an uncontested divorce was quick. Six weeks after we filed, it was final.

Then Joe went into a rage. I came home from church one morning to find a trashcan in the driveway with flames rising out of it. He had burned all the (hundreds!) of photos of our son. He began stalking me; I got a restraining order. He kept driving past the house. I told him I was selling it and moving to a smaller place. I *didn’t* tell him that place was in northern California, where my mother lived.

Life in California was very different. In Miami I’d been a college instructor with a Master’s Degree; but California required a Ph. D. to teach college level courses. I had no savings (it was all spent to purchase the 30-year-old mobile home we lived in). I had to get food stamps and Medicaid—and God bless the kind lady who assisted me in that! I was so ashamed to be dependent on welfare, but she pointed out that I had been paying into the system for more than ten years and had nothing to be ashamed of.

I finally went through a temp agency and got an entry-level job in a doctor's office. (That was another blessing, because it grew into a second satisfying vocation for me; my last 13 years in Chico I managed the office of a colorectal surgeon.)

Joe became deeply depressed when we left Florida. We rarely spoke. Our divorce settlement required him to pay me \$100 child support each month. Somehow he discovered we were on welfare (my beginning wage in the medical field couldn't support us), and for some reason God only knows, he began sending \$250/month. I thought perhaps then we could improve our relationship, but that didn't happen. He flew out for Christmas the following year and agreed to talk with me and my pastor—but he wasn't ready yet; he left the meeting within minutes.

But absence did make our hearts grow fonder. The year Paul turned five I was able to send him (escorted by a flight attendant) to visit Joe. Paul had never heard a bad word about his dad from me and was really excited to make the trip. I, however, wasn't so happy. At that time Joe had moved in with Cecilia, a fellow law student. And at that time I was feeling quite holier-than-thou and informed him that I didn't want our son to be with him when he was "living in sin." But he patiently insisted, and of course, I had to put Paul on the plane in San Francisco.

No sooner had the doors closed than they announced that the plane was going to be diverted to a different airport. Panicking, I called Joe's home to let him know—and the phone was answered by Cecilia. She completely won me over with her first words: "Gail, it must be so hard for you to let your son visit with a complete stranger." I jumped off my high horse and Cecilia and I have been like sisters since then. And many of you may remember that three years ago, when Joe was hospitalized for almost six months, "Cissy" called and asked me to fly down and sit with him for a week so she could have some time off. (Everyone knew Cissy; Joe enjoyed introducing me as "wife #1.")

Is divorce a sin? Yes, Jesus says it is. So is anger, lying, cheating, judging, and about 600 other things. Can a broken marriage relationship be healed? Sometimes, in some cases. Joe and I were fortunate, because we both loved Paul more than we hated each other.