

Marriage Appreciation Banquet 2008

Thanks Dean and Michelle

We are very pleased and excited to be here. Welcome Bishop LeGatt, friends in the Task Force and all who work so hard to support marriage ministries in our diocese.

Lots of people have raised questions (or eyebrows!!) at the title of our talk tonight. I guess that's a good thing. To many, the idea that Jesus, Mary and Joseph are a blended family may be quite a stretch. Tonight as we talk a little about our experiences as a remarriage couple in a blended family we hope to show you how it is that **we** see them in this way.

We see so many images of remarriage and blended families in our society. Many of them seem to carry the pretty-much negative message that these marriages and families are somehow second-rate, or at least less than ideal. Gail and I are not authorities, in any sense. Our only right to speak on the subject is that this is our life and we'd like to share our message of hope and encouragement for second marriages and blended families.

We'd like to start by taking a look at a couple of "blended family" images.

The first is something we found on a website purporting to offer help and support to stepfamilies. One introductory section is entitled "Myths About Stepfamilies" and one "myth" reads:

Managing a stepfamily is not that different from running an intact biofamily.

It then offers this view of reality:

It is usually far more complex and stressful because there are many more people, rules, homes, developmental stages and adjustment tasks, and conflicts, and average co-parents and supporters (including many professionals) don't know how to manage these well.

That is **not** my idea of help. Not only is it going to be almost unmanageably hard, but even the pros aren't going to be much assistance. If I had read that before I met Gail, I might just have run, screaming, when I found out she had three kids. Why not just hang a sign over the "Stepfamily" door reading "All hope abandon, ye who enter here", and have done with it.

Now let's take a look at another "blended family" that you're all familiar with.

I hope you saw this at the registration table. It's a pretty powerful image and one that sits prominently in our home, not only at Christmas, but year-round.

Now there's a family that had some issues to deal with. They were forced to change homes several times, often on only the advice of "angels" speaking in "dreams". Odd and disturbing things kept happening around them, and Mary certainly was aware that something glorious and yet terrible was destined to happen. And yet, in spite of all of the challenges, their incredible faith and grace saw them through to the point that we revere them as our "Holy Family".

Why?

Because Mary said "Yes" to God. She believed in God. She had faith in Him and she opened her life to the challenges and possibilities that God had planned for her. She came to her relationship with Joseph very young, pregnant, vulnerable and afraid yet trusting and faith filled. She lived her life as wife and mother with an unwavering belief that God would provide for her and her family's needs.

And Joseph said "Yes" to God. He became the stepfather to our Christ! That was a pretty big challenge. He loved and respected Mary enough to believe a pretty incredible story and he supported her in what she needed to do. He loved his God enough to be His hands on earth. And he also loved God's son – his son – enough to

parent him, protect him and sacrifice for him through all those early years.

Now that is a pretty wonderful image for any family. Isn't it? Both "intact biofamilies" and blended families alike. I know that we hold that as **our** example for a loving, healthy and faith-filled family.

A couple of months ago, when Mark and Blake approached us at a Marriage Task Force meeting about speaking to you tonight, I think Gail and I shared the same initial reaction, namely "What?? Are you crazy?? We're not speakers!!". We pointed out that we'd been to this banquet for a couple of years and listened to the wonderful addresses by Father Mark Miller and Father David Tumback – and they were pretty tough acts to follow. Mark immediately put us at ease "Oh," he said, "we're certainly not expecting you to give a polished talk like they did." So far, so good. Then Blake added "But you guys have such passion for what you're doing with remarriage preparation. It's a message that needs to be heard". And, well, we were outvoted and here we are. Not much polish, but a whole lot of passion.

Gail and I met in 1991, playing volleyball, of all things. I confess that I don't remember the night altogether clearly, but I do remember thinking: Wow! She's gorgeous. What a great smile. Beautiful eyes. I wonder who she's here with. Followed by: Wow! She can really spike a volleyball. Oh!! That ball is getting really BIG! Followed shortly by, I wonder if she would help me find my glasses. And I wonder if she would help me find my nose!

I certainly hadn't set out with the intention of falling in love with a separated woman with three young children, but when I asked her what else she did for fun, and she told me that she was pretty busy raising her three children, it certainly didn't scare me off.

We quickly found that we shared a lot of interests, shared common beliefs and values, and found our goals and dreams to be very compatible. We quickly fell in love and got engaged three months after we met.

When I met Pat, my best friend asked me "You've been hurt so badly. And so have your children. How can you risk doing this again?" My reply was "How can I not?"

I know what God wants for me.

I know his hopes and dreams for me." At least I believed in those.

I knew that a marriage in God's eyes was a safe, secure and healthy place – I had seen that in my parents' experience of marriage, I wanted the wholeness and richness of that, not only for me but for my children – and for the world.

These expectations of marriage didn't die with my first marriage. How lucky I was to realize that, if anything, my desire to fulfill those dreams was enhanced – and the blessing of Pat's love has allowed those dreams to come true. I know that our God is a God of second chances. Through the healing process of annulment I found peace and forgiveness and the understanding that I deserved to be loved in a marriage that helped me grow into the woman that God created me to be.

Now that's Grace.

Although I decided rather quickly that Gail was the one I had been waiting to share my life with, it was still the subject of much soul searching and prayer. My past relationships had not been altogether good, and I had doubts that I would make a good husband and parent. I remember one evening, asking God for probably the hundredth time if Gail was REALLY the one he had in mind for me – and his response was the first, and only, time I heard God laughing at me. It went something like, and God often seems to speak to me with a bit of a Jewish accent, for some reason, "Yes. Enough already. You want I should set fire to the bush in your back yard and say it from there, or something?"

OK. I was convinced. There would be a lot of hurdles and challenges ahead, but I knew without a doubt that we could make it work. God said so. He gave us his blessing – and he continues to bless us in so many ways, every

day. But I had no more doubts that this was, indeed, what God wanted. And I knew that, indeed, it would be very good.

Now that's Grace too.

Pat was wonderful, but he was a very independent man – a confirmed bachelor. He had a busy, demanding career and I really felt like this would be a huge load for him to bear.

I remember saying one evening, a bit sadly, “But just LOOK at everything I'm bringing into this.” A vivid image of me carrying a gunny sack over my shoulder came to mind.

Without a second of hesitation his eyes lit up and he smiled broadly as he said, “Yes, just look at EVERYTHING I'm getting.” Suddenly what I saw as my big sack of challenges, failures and fears became a beautifully wrapped gift, and he treats it, and us, like that still.

Now I don't want to make it sound like it was easy. It wasn't. One night, early in our relationship, Gail was working nights and it fell to me to put the kids to bed. It was a horrible evening. Constant squabbling, refusing to go to bed, and ongoing bickering even after the lights went out. Finally the kids fell asleep, but I spent a long sleepless night. It was what I call a “holy shit” moment. Suddenly realizing that I was going to be responsible for three kids who had WAY more experience at being kids than I had at being a parent – that was pretty scary.

I've always been incredibly blessed in that such “holy shit” moments are almost invariably followed by “Holy Spirit” moments. In this case it was the next morning. I was driving to work past the West Portal Mennonite church on 33rd St and the sign outside the church said, in big fluorescent letters “The Greatest Gift a Father Can Give His Children is to Love Their Mother”. Well, I thought with much relief, “THAT I know I can do. And if that's the GREATEST gift I can give them, it might even make up for the many things I'm not going to do so well at.”

While we were preparing for our marriage, we went through a wonderful marriage preparation program at St Peter's parish. We had opportunities to learn a bit more about each other, and some of the issues we would face as a married couple, and we met some terrific people but the one thing we didn't get much help with was the challenges we would face that are unique to our situation as a “second marriage” couple with a “blended family”. Of course, at that time, we were the only couple in that situation out of 16 couples – and none of the presenting couples had had those experiences either.

Years went by, and we became involved with the marriage preparation program at St Patrick's. It was pretty obvious that the types of couples entering the program were markedly different from the couples we went through our program with, just 12 years earlier. In some classes, fully half of the couples either had their own children or one or both partners had children from a previous marriage or relationship.

The “new” diocesan marriage prep program was well received, but in every class, we received feedback from one or more of the couples we taught saying “We could have learned so much more from you guys. We needed to hear more about your experiences as a blended family.” We began to feel like we were missing an opportunity to be of more help.

When we were approached by the Task Force a couple of years ago, to talk about the development of a “second marriage” preparation program for the diocese, we were glad to see that the Task Force and our faith communities were recognizing the need for such a program to support the changing people entering marriage these days.

We knew that there were many families and couples who were not receiving support and encouragement within their faith communities. Some of them were no longer active in the church and many couples were remarrying outside the church.

Some couples attended the “standard” marriage prep program, which didn't entirely meet their needs, while others went to a “special” second marriage program that was not faith-based. We felt that it was important to keep remarriage couples in their faith communities while going through their marriage preparation. This was

accomplished by adding two optional sessions to the existing marriage prep curriculum. The first session, for couples entering into their second marriages and the second, for blending together their families. Either, or both, can be added to the course, depending on participant couples.

We know this will start to address some of the concerns of remarriage couples and their families. But maybe more importantly, we're exposing them to other couples who have lived the experience they are embarking on. That's a good start.

But is that enough? How do we, as a faith community, provide that supportive, welcoming environment for people in our midst who are remarrying as well as those who are struggling with troubled marriages, separations, and divorces?

It is so encouraging to see that our diocese is acknowledging the real needs of people in all states of marriage. Statistics show that almost half of all first marriages are ending in divorce. The success rate for second marriages is even worse. Many of those people belong to our faith communities and failing to support them as important members of our communities would be negligent.

We are called as Christian married couples to mirror God's love for his people, not only in our love for each other, but in our love for those around us. We never hesitate to pray for the sick, the poor, the hungry, but sometimes those going through a failed marriage (or looking to enter a new marriage) still feel abandoned or rejected.

Just a few weeks ago while attending Mass, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I recognized the woman as a parishioner from my old community. This woman had been a very active member of my church and I remembered her as a leader and mentor in her faith. We quietly agreed to meet after mass. When we spoke after, she opened by apologizing to me for not being as supportive and understanding to me as she could have been when I was going through the breakdown of my first marriage almost 20 years ago. In tears she told me that she too after 33 years of marriage was experiencing that same pain and sadness. She told me that she felt separated from and unsupported by her church, her community and her friends and because of that she had come to feel separated from her God. She was guilt ridden and angry, heartbroken and frustrated.

How sad is that? What do we need to do? How can we, as God's hands on earth, fail to be there at a time when she felt as far away from Him as she could be. I am so thankful that, after two years, she is now finding her way back to her God but I know that she and her community have missed so much in her time away.

If her husband had died, her community would have been knocking down her door with cakes and flowers and big pans of lasagna. But because her **marriage** died, she was left lonely, hungry and afraid. The failure of her marriage didn't mean that her love of God, family and community has failed. And it certainly didn't mean that the gifts that God has given her to share with our world are not as special as they once were. We know as well that when we go through those dark times in our lives we can grow and mature in our faith. I know that my journey to know and love God really kicked into high gear after my first marriage ended.

Now, this isn't a case of one faith community in a small town being blind. Our society as a whole sees divorce, remarriage and step-families in a negative light. But maybe that's not so bad. We should be striving to make first marriages successful. We're not here to, particularly, extol the virtues of second marriages. We're not suggesting that everybody should have one. But we are saying that we must not turn away from those whose marriages do fail. And from those who try again.

People have expected less of our children, because they come from a "broken home". By the way, I hate that expression. I'll freely admit that ours was frequently "under construction", but "broken"? That seems pretty harsh.

People have expected less of me as a stepfather than they would of as me as a "real" father. And that's wrong.

Our son Mike played a lot of hockey, growing up, and we traveled a lot to tournaments. One day, while waiting for a game, the mother of one of the boys on the team said "You know, I really think it's wonderful how committed you are to Mike's hockey. You come to all the games. You're so supportive. I just wanted to tell you

that I think that's really great." I didn't know what to say. I think I just sat there with my mouth hanging open for a while, feeling both a bit pleased and a bit insulted. Finally all I could come up with was "I think it's wonderful how committed you are to your son's hockey too." She stared in astonishment for a minute, then she "got it". I wasn't doing anything different from any other parent of any other boy on the team. Why should I be "expected" to do less?

Look again at the Holy Family. Remember when Jesus was left behind in Jerusalem? For three days I am sure that Joseph shared Mary's fears and anxieties as she worried about Jesus' whereabouts and he searched with her, just as any frantic parent would. I don't think he was any less concerned because he was "only" a stepfather.

That was certainly not the first, nor the last, time that the Holy Family had to deal with some special issues – and I'm sure glad that my children's "real" father wasn't God the Father. Now that could be a challenge. In that circumstance, just how **would** one respond to "You're not my **real** Dad!"?

Today's blended families will also have issues that need to be dealt with. There are difficulties – and some families struggle terribly with the challenges. But I'm sure that some of you "intact biofamily" couples here tonight have faced some challenges of your own. Right?

Like any Christian family we believe that our God has brought us together for a reason and He wants this to be good. Who are we to make it hard or to assume that it will be beyond our capabilities to make it good? Faith goes along way to accepting and overcoming difficulties. Believing that this family is "God Blessed" gives us the grace we need to meet the challenges.

Humans are very good at meeting expectations. We succeed at living up to high expectations but it can also be easy to live down to low ones. We never expected our relationship to be second-rate in any way. And we have no second-rate expectations for our children. As I see them enter into adult lives my hopes for their relationships must not be clouded by the "failures" that I experienced and they must expect whole and loving marriages and family lives. They **should** look forward to watching their families grow **together** and expect to grow old with their partners.

While preparing for tonight, we looked back over our experiences to find some really dramatic stories of the "blending" of our family. At first we were a bit disappointed when we couldn't find very many. But as we talked and thought about it, it became clearer to us that that was a good thing. In a weird way, it showed that our family was just that. A family. Different names perhaps, but just a family of ordinary people having ordinary experiences. Knowing and believing in God's presence in our family helps us to keep it simple. We just do what He expects us to do. Love each other.

In today's workshop we took a broader look at the state of marriage in our church. The needs of our communities are changing rapidly and thankfully there are many organizations striving to support all that marriage is meant to be.

Our diocese offers a marriage preparation program that is helping engaged couples prepare well for marriage. In each session, we hear that couples have learned to think differently about more aspects of their relationship and to communicate more effectively. Would anyone here tonight who is involved in marriage preparation or Engaged Encounter please give a wave.

We encourage the growth of strong marriages through the work of Worldwide Marriage Encounter. Would anyone involved with Marriage Encounter please wave.

We need to support couples whose marriages are not so healthy. Our faith communities need to embrace and encourage these individuals and couples by being examples of God's love and forgiveness and reassuring them that they are accepted, valued and loved. Everyone in the church who is aware that there is a couple struggling in their midst has a responsibility to support them and pray for their needs. Retrouvaille is working with couples on the brink of divorce, bringing them together to help them heal and renew their own marriage relationships. Would anyone involved with Retrouvaille please wave.

When marriages fail, and I'm afraid that some will, we must encourage people to remain part of their faith communities. Most of us will be called to support a loved one, child, grandchild, neighbor or friend through the end of a marriage. Our everyday acts of reassurance and acceptance go a long way to support those among us. Programs like Transitions and New Beginnings are helping people through those troubled times. Would anyone involved with these programs please wave.

Wow!! Now that's a LOT of GRACE!!!! Thank you all.

Finally, when people remarry in the church, we must not only welcome them and accept them, but let them know that we have high expectations for them. People do not remarry in our Church lightly. It's hard. It takes a lot of commitment, soul searching – and a bit of time. Without faith and God's Grace and a sense of belonging, some find it easier to leave a faith community that should be their home, and a home for their families. That's a loss to all of us.

The Bible says: "From those to whom much is given, much will be expected." and there are few among us as richly blessed as we who have been given a second chance at fulfilling God's plan for us. So, support us, pray for us, accept us, and expect a lot of us. God does. And we do too.

I think this prayer says it best.

God of second chances and new beginnings, bless our marriage with that love which never depletes.

Give us the optimism of hope and the wisdom of memory and reflection.

Let us learn to trust again while we blend our lives and families together forever.

Thank you, goodnight and God Bless.