

Do you remember the movie, *Signs*? I was and still am a big fan of science fiction movies and one of my favorite directors in the early 2000s was M. Night Shyamalan. I had seen and enjoyed both *The Sixth Sense* and *Unbreakable*, so I was excited when I saw that Shyamalan was trying his hand at a science fiction movie.

For those that haven't seen it, sorry for the coming spoilers. The movie centers around a father and his family dealing with an alien invasion, but the movie is more about faith than aliens. The central story is about a man named Graham, a Christian minister who has given up on God after the tragic death of his wife. He is the father of two young children and his younger brother has moved in with the family to help him out after his wife's death.

As the movie unfolds, Graham is faced with a situation far beyond his control--aliens have invaded and are going around taking people, seemingly at will. They hole up at their family farm, but are unable to ward off the otherworldly invaders. Finally, one of the aliens whom Graham encountered earlier returns to take his daughter and he realizes just how powerless he is to protect his own family. But in this decisive moment, Graham looks back on his life and realizes that even in the midst of all the tragic events he has gone through, God has not abandoned him, but given him signs of his presence and care. In that decisive moment, Graham recognizes a message that God gave him to help him protect his family in that crucial moment. Trusting in this message, with the help of his brother, he successfully wards off the aliens and saves his family.

I am thinking about *Signs* today because in our readings for this weekend, God is giving us the opportunity to meditate on the beauty and the power of marriage and the family. Jesus forcefully rebukes the practice permitted in Judaism whereby husbands would divorce their wives and then marry another woman. His criticism of this practice points us to the deeper reality of marriage and the power Jesus wanted to give it by raising it to the level of a Sacrament.

In response to the Pharisees' question about the lawfulness of divorce, Jesus, in His usual way, takes the conversation to a deeper level. He recognizes that Moses has permitted divorces to happen, but he states: "Because of the hardness of your hearts he wrote you this commandment." Immediately, Jesus takes us from the superficial level of religious law to the level of the heart. When we speak about marriage and the family in the Christian sense, we are speaking about a reality which penetrates to our very depths, to the heart.

Jesus points to the beginning, to the very first couple, pointing to the fact that God designed man and woman to be complementary and to be joined together in a permanent way through the Sacrament of marriage. At every Catholic wedding, we quote His words: "Therefore what God has joined together, no human being must separate." These are powerful and challenging words for us, as we live in a society where so many of us have been affected by divorce.

When Jesus speaks about the harm done through divorce and remarriage, He is doing so because of the reality of the change that happens at the level of the heart through marriage. In our hearts, God pours out abundant grace through the Sacraments. Each Sacrament gives us a share in God's life in a unique way. St. John Paul II, working from this teaching of Jesus, called marriage the "primordial Sacrament." He wrote, "The sacrament of Matrimony has this specific element that distinguishes it from all the other sacraments: it is the sacrament of something that was part of the very economy of creation; it is the very conjugal covenant instituted by the Creator 'in the beginning.'"

In a covenant, people establish family bonds with each other, giving themselves to each other. Thus, God established that self-giving between man and woman from the very beginning, allowing humanity to share in the self-giving which God Himself is as the Trinity. Christian Marriage is something supremely powerful because it fills that covenant between man and wife with the power of God himself. Jesus, as God incarnate, takes that

great self-giving of spouses and allows it to share in His spousal love for the Church.

The Sacrament of Marriage allows husbands and wives to love each other with that same love which burned in the heart of Jesus as he poured out his life for all of us on the Cross. Because marriage is so powerful and important, Jesus is careful to protect his disciples from any misconceptions about it. He warns against divorce and remarriage because this cuts against the fundamental nature of marriage as God intended it. God made marriage to be lifelong, a permanent bonding of spouses, because it is through this covenant that the world can see an image of God's own love for the Church and for all people. God's love and self-giving for all of us is something He doesn't take back. His love is a permanent gift to each and every one of us, protecting us and giving us a shelter in which to flourish in the fullness of life.

The Sacrament of Marriage allows spouses to be that shelter for their family: a protective, stable union that their children can lean on for support, guidance and nurturing. Spouses, with the grace from the Sacrament of marriage, become living signs of that permanent love of Jesus for the Church. Jesus, as spouse of the Church, never abandons her. He supports, guides and nourishes all of the members of the Church. He gives spouses the grace to lean on His protection and to protect their families through His protection.

In *Signs*, Graham's family suffers because he is not able to recognize the grace of God at work in His life. He doesn't realize how much God loves him and is protecting and caring for him, so he isn't able to love, protect and care for his family as he should. But when he has that change of heart and puts his trust in God, He is able to be the father he was made to be. God made marriage and family to be that place of protecting, unfailing love which draws its strength from His own unfailing and permanent love.

But we all know that this doesn't always happen. We live in a world torn by the pain of divorce. For those that have experienced divorce, both spouses

and children, know that God's love and protection is still there for you. Even though we sometimes fail each other, God never fails us.

If you are divorced and think that your previous marriage may have had some flaws from the start, consider seeking an annulment. Contrary to popular misconception, annulments are not a "Catholic divorce." The annulment process works to examine the circumstances in the lives of the spouses leading up to the marriage to see if there was something that would have prevented them from giving themselves to each other in the Sacrament. If they do discover something of that nature, it gives ground for declaring that the marriage was not sacramental. An annulment recognizes that sometimes even though spouses say "I do" in a Christian marriage, there might be things in their hearts that prevent them from truly saying this. With an annulment, a person would then be free to marry, as there was no Sacramental marriage to begin with.

As a church, we protect marriage because Jesus' grace makes it that place where spouses can grow together in holiness and where they can provide that safe place for children to grow and flourish in their lives. Spouses, remember that your faithfulness to your spouse and to the Sacrament of Marriage will allow your children to grow to hear their own call to give themselves either to their spouse in marriage or to the Church as a religious brother or sister and a priest. Let us pray this Sunday that all marriages might be strengthened and that the Lord will shower his grace on those affected by divorce.

*+ Heavenly Father, thank you for elevating that primordial sacrament of marriage through the grace given by Jesus. Thank you, Jesus, for reminding us today of the importance of protecting marriage. Please fill those marriages in our parish and everywhere with an abundance of your grace. Allow them to be places where families flourish in holiness, protected by You. Jesus, give all those affected by divorce the grace to trust in you and to continue growing in holiness. Holy Spirit, help families to guard their hearts against anything that would harm them. We ask this through Christ, Our Lord. Amen. +*