

5 Lessons From 48 Valentines Together

This year my husband, Greg, and I celebrate our 48th Valentine's Day as a married couple. After being married that long, you realize that neither you nor your husband are the same person you were initially.

Greg often says, "I've been married to five women, a different one each decade—and all have been Cathe!"

Greg's humor always gets me, but I think he makes a wise point. We have a wonderful marriage; however, the truth is that it has not always been smooth sailing. Like many couples, we came with personal expectations of marriage. This led us to try to change each other to fit our ideals. Of course, we were disappointed when we came short.

Nobody arrives ready. For a marriage to grow strong and healthy, each person has to change to meet the other's needs. Doing this is not easy, but here are five lessons that have helped me over the better part of the past five decades:

1. Check your heart. A good starting point is to examine my motives in wanting my husband to change. I need to hit pause and look for the "log in my own eye before I try to remove the speck out of his" (Matt. 7:3-5). I try to understand why he is or is not doing something.

I need to ask the Holy Spirit to show me what fuels my feelings by examining them through the light of God's Word. So often, He gives me a filter to run things through before I even go to Greg with an issue.

2. Choose a good time. If an issue needs to be addressed, Greg and I try to use wisdom to decide when to have those conversations: not when we are tired, in a hurry, hungry or in

the heat of conflict. Have those important conversations, but not while emotions are raging and tempers are frayed. Find a better time to sit together and talk it through. This doesn't mean you avoid difficult conversations, but you step back to give space and the opportunity to think before you speak.

3. Choose your battles. I admit that I tend to be rather nitpicky about certain things that matter to me. And I am sure Greg can be a bit nitpicky on certain things that matter to him. But the worst thing I can do is nag. That never helps!

The same goes for the silent treatment, verbal manipulation or complaining. After praying about the issue, calmly state what you need. Don't expect your partner to read your mind. And then, for goodness' sake, be willing to negotiate. Most likely, your partner has issues with you that they would like to see change. So, show the same grace that you want to receive.

4. Allow for differences. Multiple divorces and break-ups marked Greg's family life. My parents stayed married for a lifetime, loved each other—not perfectly—but provided us a very stable home life. In my family, all of us girls passionately expressed ourselves—loudly! But we always understood that no matter what, we were staying together.

This was not Greg's experience. Getting loud and expressing yourself passionately usually meant someone was leaving. So, understanding how we communicated was crucial for us. I needed to be sensitive to his upbringing and speak to him effectively and constructively.

5. Pray. First and always. Making prayer my default—and continuing—course of action keeps me in a place of depending on and cooperating with the Holy Spirit in my life and marriage. Greg is God's man, His child. He belongs first to God, and it's the Holy Spirit's job to change Greg, not mine!

The book of Proverbs talks about a grape farmer who neglects

his field, and it comes to ruin (Prov. 24:30). Not overnight, but over time. Marriage similarly needs constant attention. Neglect in marriage can easily set in, and things will eventually break down when it does.

Whether you have been married for a few months or many decades, I encourage you to not fear but embrace change—both in yourself and your spouse. A good marriage is like a fine wine: it improves with age. {eoa}

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