"40" [1]

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Today my parents celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary. It was done without pomp1: just going out for family lunch while visiting relatives on the west coast. While I was driving out there yesterday, I thought about the implications and significance of this anniversary. My parents have had a rough time for most of those 40 years and are (in different ways) not where you would expect a couple to be after such a time.

Nearly 20 years ago, my father suffered a series of small strokes. These initially went unnoticed, but were eventually identified when his work was affected. Writing by hand became difficult for him and his speech became slurred. But perhaps the most significant was that the part of his brain which is in charge of long-term planning, was damaged. After a lengthy (and sometimes traumatic) process, he was diagnosed and declared unfit to continue work, which was as a high school principal. Suddenly my mother (who was actually a victim of gender discrimination under the previous regime, which hampered her career) became the bread winner. We moved to the city, where there was more opportunity for work. After a long period of unemployment and job instability, she finally settled into a teaching position, in which she remains to this day, even though she is nearing retirement age.

Strife, and I suppose unhappiness, entered our home. My father became resentful of not being "in charge" anymore, even though he simply could no longer manage the finances of the household. He also developed a problem with walking and became increasingly dependent over the years. He also grew in isolation. On the other hand, my mother was forced to bear a heavy, and sometimes I think unfair, burden. She also had to deal with my father's outbursts and irrationalities2.

But when I witnessed my mother's unwavering vigil during my father's illness last year [2], I realised that there was still real love despite everything.

"So what are we celebrating?", I thought to myself yesterday. This has been no fairy tale for them. No-one was riding off into the sunset, and they also are not oozing puppy love-like affection for each other all the time. My mind turned to what marriage really is: a symbol of the loving relationship between God and people. We are all sinners, and before we accept Jesus as our personal Saviour and King, we are vile to Him. If God is reaching out to us, but we actively reject Him, then we commit adultery3 with Him. God made this point clear when He instructed Hosea to marry a prostitute so that he might get a glimpse of what God endures with His chosen people (Hosea 1:2). Hosea was to stick by her, even when she rejected him and ran away (Hosea 3:1–3). He had to remain faithful to her through the shame and the pain, because that is how God is with us.

This is the measure of the love of God: that He is faithful and patient with us despite the sorrow which we cause Him. If the measure of the love of God was limited to what makes Him feel good and what was in His best interest, He would have finished the job and not spared Noah and his family. His divorce of His people the Israelites, and indeed all of humanity, would have been complete in our total annihilation. But God's love is not limited to being patient and forebearing. God serves. That was one of the main points which Jesus, God incarnate, was careful to get fully across to His disciples. Love is not, "what can I get out of this relationship", but what can I *do* for the other person. Love is surrendering your own comforts and preferences and lifting up the other party. Love is also forgiving. These qualities might not make for a very appealing Hollywood movie, but they were all embodied, and accomplished, in our Lord Jesus the Messiah.

> By this we know love, because he laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.
>
> 1 John 3:16

And in a marriage, ideally, this is a two-way street: both are patient, both serving and sacrificial, and both are forgiving. How wonderful it would be to experience that. I pray that God will grant me such a relationship, that it might shine out this message towards others.

My parents are not perfect. Nor has their marriage. But I have seen patience, sacrifice, servitude and forgiveness—in a word, love—in their relationship. For that I thank God.

Happy anniversary, Mom and Dad.

- 1. Unlike another wedding ceremony which took place yesterday, but congratulations to them.
- 2. Finally, throw into the mix a moody, self-centered teenager: me.
- 3. "Forsaking the intended relationship".
- . Photo credit: Wiener Edelstein Zentrum [3].

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