



VERY MARRIED

Field Notes on Love & Fidelity

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

STUDY GUIDE BY SUSANNAH DEBENEDETTO

Chapter 1

WANDER AS I WONDER

1. Think back to when you were younger. What was your childhood understanding of marriage?
2. How are your peers defining marriage? How are society and culture defining marriage today?
3. How do *you* define marriage today?
4. What has shaped your view of marriage? You may want to think about examples from the Bible, literature, people you know, and public personalities.
5. The author offers many examples of adultery, divorce, and relationship problems in this chapter. She then poses an important question we must consider, no matter where we are in our own lives: “Why make the vows—and why keep them?” (p. 25). How would you respond?

Chapter 2

IN WANT OF A HUSBAND

1. Most people get married, and yet it seems we know very little about the history of marriage. What surprised you in this chapter?
2. The author states that “the predominance of the love marriage in the West is a mere two centuries old” (p. 38). Could you marry without love? If so, for what reasons? If not, why?
3. When Pershey and her husband-to-be meet with the priest before the wedding, she writes that she felt that “we had to prove that we were worthy of wedlock” (p. 41). What questions might you ask a couple who is preparing to be married? If you are married, what kinds of questions do you wish someone had asked you?

Chapter 3

THE BINDING THAT BOUND US

1. As the author shares the story of her wedding, she tells us what traditions she did and did not want to be part of her day. For you, what traditions are essential to a wedding? What traditions do you hope to never see at a wedding?
2. Read the portion of the wedding poem shared on pages 47–48. What phrases grab your attention?
3. Weddings usually do not happen exactly as planned. What are some wedding surprises or mistakes that stick with you and make you laugh?
4. What rituals or symbols have you experienced at weddings that make real for you what is happening as the couple enters into the covenant of marriage?

Chapter 4

IF I KNEW THEN

1. In this chapter, the author deals with some difficult and personal questions surrounding premarital sex. What was your general response to the way she handled this topic?
2. What role do gender norms play in conversations surrounding sex before marriage? Are the church's and society's expectations the same or different for men and women with regard to sex?
3. Pershey discusses the difficulty of calling her parishioners and her children to something she herself did not live out. How can we teach abstinence and chastity outside of marriage without shame or hypocrisy?
4. The apostle Paul wrote, "Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body" (1 Corinthians 6:18 ESV). Discuss the ways that you see this passage's truth enacted today.
5. "I know now, and am known now, in marriage," the author writes (p. 55). Talk about the way that sexuality and intimacy within marriage makes us known to one another as spouses.

Chapter 5

NEEDING THE VOWS

1. Does a marriage license make a relationship stronger? How does or doesn't a communal, public ceremony augment a couple's commitment to each other?
2. Pershey quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote in a wedding blessing to his niece, "God makes your marriage indissoluble, and protects it from every internal and external danger." What internal and external dangers to marriage have you observed or faced? How do vows counteract those dangers?
3. "Who decides when a couple has fought the good fight and should just reconcile themselves to their irreconcilability?" Pershey asks (p. 68). How can friends support a marriage that is struggling?
4. Discuss the interplay that the author discusses of commitment to marriage and commitment to individualism (p. 69). What can couples do when the ideals of marital covenant and personal happiness conflict?

Chapter 6

HOMEWARD CRAWL

1. In this chapter, the author discusses infidelity and forgiveness. She writes, “It isn’t fair to put spiritualized pressure on someone to race to embrace the very person who has betrayed them” (p. 74). How can the church, friends, and families of people who have been betrayed by their spouses best support them?
2. Discuss the parable of the prodigal son and whether and how it connects to fidelity and forgiveness in marriage.
3. How might you live out the phrase, “We should live in ways that do not leave our loved ones brokenhearted” (p. 75)? What might that mean for your daily life with your spouse, family, and/or friends?
4. The author reminds us that “we love because God first loved us” (p. 78). Reflect on and then discuss this idea: What does it look like to live and love in response to God’s love for us?

Chapter 7

BLESSING UPON BLESSING

1. Do you think a blessing by an ordained clergy person is an important part of marriage for Christians?
2. What are the “causes and ramifications of the growing trend of couples enlisting family or friends to perform their marriage ceremony” (p. 82)?
3. Discuss the author’s statement: “I believe that what clergy offer—spiritual guidance, pastoral care, accountability to an imperfect but holy church—is valuable” (p. 84). What role can and should ministers and pastors and priests play in marriage in an era when people are turning to them less for counsel and care?
4. Talk about the idea of offering blessings to others in the church. How can you be a person who blesses others, even in unofficial capacities?

Chapter 8

ALL THE MIRACLES

1. Marriage is two separate people joining together to become one. This chapter celebrates the separateness. How can we who are in relationships recognize our own selves while still being one with our spouses?
2. Pershey writes openly of the dynamic in which one spouse chooses *not* to do something (in this case, drink alcohol) because of the other spouse’s problematic history with it. Reflect on times you’ve watched or experienced a similar dynamic in your own or someone else’s marriage.
3. What does it mean to you to call marriage “a dance of reciprocal sacrifice and mutual compromise” (p. 87)? How have you lived this out in your relationship, if you are married, or have you seen it lived out by others?

Chapter 9

LONG OBEDIENCE

1. This chapter begins with the story of the author's temptation and her decision to tell her husband about it. Have you ever had the courage to share a story with this much honesty with someone you trust? How did it change your relationship?
2. Read John 8:1-11. Picture yourself in the story as the author does. Read it again and picture yourself as another character in the story. Read it again and picture yourself as Jesus telling her to "Go and sin no more." How did you feel as you pictured yourself in this story? Are you more in need of hearing or of saying "Go and sin no more"?
3. The author discusses the difference between a contract and a covenant, noting that covenants "are unconditional: if one party fails to follow through, the covenant *remains in place*" (p. 96). How might the church reclaim the sacredness of covenant language? How might we, in our relationships, reclaim and live covenant language?

Chapter 10

FOR THOSE WHO MEANT FOREVER

1. The author and her husband spent one anniversary cleaning a wedding kneeler, and she writes that her husband said, "This feels very marital" (p. 102). What mundane tasks feel "marital" to you?
2. Have you ever participated in premarital counseling? If so, what do you remember about it?
3. The author quotes Josie as saying, "I made myself into something else so that I could please these people and make them want to be with me" (p. 107). How does marriage force us to see ourselves as who we really are rather than who we want people to think we are?
4. "Marriage is holy, but maybe it is something like the Sabbath-made for humankind, not the other way around" (p. 109). How does looking at marriage and Sabbath as God-created opportunities for humans change the way you see them? Do you agree with this parallel?

Chapter 11

FLUNKING EPHESIANS 4:26

1. When have you flunked Ephesians 4:26?
2. How can you disagree with your spouse without being disagreeable?
3. How can we help couples learn to fight well?
4. Ephesians 4:26 says, "Be angry but do not sin." How would you explain that to someone else? How can you be angry and keep from sinning?
5. How can you treat your spouse like a beloved neighbor?

Chapter 12

WITH MY BODY, I WORSHIP THEE

1. Just for fun and to understand the beginning of this chapter, open your Bible to Song of Songs and read for a bit. When was the last time you heard a sermon preached from this book of the Bible?
2. What true and good stories of love do you know? How can we share true and good stories of lovers while still giving them privacy (p. 125)?
3. We use so many euphuisms to talk about sex (“boom, boom,” for example). How are these terms helping or hurting our understandings of sex?
4. Pershey writes, “We are monotheistic in our religion, monogamous in our relationships” (p. 131). What are your thoughts on the link between one God and one lover in our lives as people of faith?

Chapter 13

THE SAME CHOICE

1. What does “forsaking all others” mean for you?
2. If you are married, can you remember your wedding vows? Which phrases from your vows or from traditional vows stands out for you as the most difficult to keep?
3. Pershey quotes Wesley Hill, who writes that he is learning to “steward and sanctify” his sexuality “in such a way that it can be a doorway to blessing and grace” (p. 137). Reflect on what this sentence might mean for you.
4. How can we support one another in the face of temptation?
5. Can a marriage last by simply relying on our own “good intentions” (p. 138) or do marriages need wider support? How can church communities become actively and intentionally committed to supporting marriages?

Chapter 14

MEMENTO MORI

1. How do you think about death? Your own? Your loved ones?
2. With whom have you talked about your own death? Who knows your final wishes?
3. “Blessed are those who mourn” (Matthew 5:4). How do we and can we support those who are grieving?
4. How can acknowledging our own mortality affect the way we live? How can acknowledging the mortality of our loved ones affect the way we love them?

Chapter 15

THERE IS MERCY

1. What role does courtesy play in your relationships? In your marriage?
2. Why is it so much easier to remember times when someone else was the “discourteous culprit” (p. 151)? How might you be more courteous in your requests and your actions?
3. If you are married, where do you find mercy in your marriage? Where do you find holy gladness?

Chapter 16

THE HEM OF JOY'S GARMENT

1. The author writes about dinner as a grounding and joyful part of her family's life. What traditions bind your family together?
2. Think about the times your family gathers. Are they centered on joyful or sorrowful occasions?
3. Must we remember that all things end as we experience joy, or only in the midst of sorrow?
4. When was a time you longed to "cling to the hem of joy's garment" (p. 160)?
5. How do you open yourself "to receive the gifts and griefs of each chapter" of your life (p. 164)?

Chapter 17

WHEN JUSTICE ROLLS DOWN

1. Pershey discusses her social location in this chapter and defines what that is (p. 166). How would you describe your social location?
2. What are some of the ways your social location affects your daily life?
3. This chapter ends by telling us that marriages will be stronger when we listen to the words of Amos 5:24. What are the links between social and economic disparities and marital difficulties?
4. What is the largest issue of justice that affects marriage?
5. How might those of us who are pro-marriage encourage economic and social justice?

Chapter 18

YOKED TO ANOTHER FAMILY

1. Reflect on common stereotypes of in-law relationships. Why do you think those stereotypes exist? What examples come to mind of positive relationships between in-laws?
2. How can we, as the church, encourage good relationships between in-laws?
3. If you are married, in what ways do in-laws affect your marriage? Spend some time thinking about both the positive and negative impact they have on your relationship.
4. How can we help families understand and accept the joys and struggles associated with being yoked to another family through marriage?

Chapter 19

SUBJECT TO ONE ANOTHER

1. How do you hear "Wives be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22)? How would you react to hearing this Scripture read in your church?
2. Discuss the notion of egalitarian and complementarian marriage. How have you seen both kinds of marriages lived out?
3. Talk about Felicity's comments on pp. 192–93. Do you agree or disagree with her?
4. How did this chapter help you reflect on Paul's letters? Did it change your understanding of the Ephesians passage?

Chapter 20

VERY MARRIED

1. How can we support the marriage relationships of others? And how do we support without interfering in their relationships?
2. How can we hold one another accountable to our covenants and uphold the promises we make as friends and family when our loved ones are married?
3. Pershey writes about her husband's support for her telling stories from their marriage. "He sensed before I did that sharing a portion of our journey might [be] . . . redemptive for us and potentially a source of wisdom and encouragement for others" (p. 204). If you are married, how have the stories and examples of other people's marriages nurtured your own?
4. The author describes her writing as testimony: "What is testimony but a glad boasting of weakness so that the power of Christ the Word may shine anew?" (p. 204). What testimony from your life, of marriage or other experiences, could you share with others?

EPILOGUE

1. The book ends with these words: "There's no shame in needing covenant to live" (p. 210). What covenants do you have in your life, and how have those covenants freed you? What can you do to nurture them?
2. How has reading this book changed the way you view marriage?