

Why Theology Needs the Simpsons

Presented by Michael Wode and Brendan Ryan, CSC, 2-1-17

Transcript

Karen: Good evening everybody and welcome. Nothing is more exciting than violating the fire code. That is great.

My name is Karen Eifler and together with Father Charlie Gordon, we run the Garaventa Center for Catholic Intellectual Life & American Culture.

This event is part of that and it's also under the umbrella of an amazing program that only happens at the University of Portland, called the Beckman Humor Project. A few years ago a man named John Beckman gave some money to the university, and he said he wanted it to be used for programs that fought the forces of evil through the healing power of gentle sideways humor.

About a year ago, a young man named Michael Wode was sitting where you are, and under the direction of Dr. David Turnbloom from our Theology faculty, a couple of students, Jonathan Wiley and Kit Tobin put together a program called "Why Theology Needs Louis C.K." and we had about this many bodies there. It was one of the real highlights of our year. And I'll never forget that Dr. Turnbloom began his comments by saying, "Don't let anybody tell you that you're not a theologian," and young Michael Wode heard that, because we all wrestle with those great big questions of who we are and who are we and relation with God and to one another and I think that a vein got opened in terms of looking at popular culture in terms of what it has to tell us about ourselves and about all of those big questions that theologians love to wrestle with.

Mike had had this idea for some time that there's a lot of material worth mining in the Simpsons and as fate would have it, and it's not really a coincidence, his high school friend, literally, from Columbus, Ohio. St. Charles Bartolomeo Preparatory High School in Columbus, Ohio, which produced both of our speakers tonight, thousands of years later and lots of life experiences later, they wind up at the University of Portland, Oregon's Catholic university and Mike pitched his idea to Brendan and a great program emerged from that.

I need to say that if you're a student who is here as part of a class, we will have sign-up sheets for you after the program at the back of the room under that painting by the refreshments table.

If you're a teacher who's here, a K-12 teacher from any school, we are able to offer you at no cost to you, PDUs, professional development units, and you get

those simply by signing your name and email on the way out and those units will be in your inbox within the next 24 hours.

If this is your first Garaventa Center program, welcome. I know that you're going to love what you're going to see and you're going to want to find out more about the fast-breaking Garaventa Center agenda. We have some of our calendars for the semester out in the hallway. Next week we have "Rock Stars From The World of Comics." You might or might not know that Portland, Oregon, is kind of the epicenter of some of the best comic and graphic novel work being done in the whole world. We have a panel of people at the top of their game. A collective Eisner Award total of, you need more than two hands to count all the Eisner Award winners that will be part of a panel that's going to look at the question, "Why aren't comics funny any more?" That's going to happen right here. We've got flyers for that. Our whole calendar and you can sign up for our electronic mailing list, we send out a newsletter every month, that also connects you to podcasts of all our programs that we do and we would love to have you as part of that as well.

I think that takes care of all the announcements and you are here to listen to Mike Wode, formerly of Corrado fame, now of Lund family hall fame and Brendan Ryan, not only of Charles Bartolomeo Preparatory High School, but rocks it at Villa Hall and a member of the Holy Cross community, talk to us about why theology needs The Simpsons. Please welcome.

Michael Wode: Thanks for coming out. My name is Mike Wode. I am the hall director of Lund family hall. I am not trained as a theologian, strictly speaking. I do have my master's in social work and I really like being a hall director.

Brendan Ryan: I'm Brendan Ryan, I'm a seminary with congregation of Holy Cross. I don't have my master's yet, but I'm three-quarters of the way done with that so I know a little bit about theology, much less about The Simpsons. Mike and I complement each other pretty well.

When Mike was watching The Simpsons in high school, my mom wouldn't let us watch TV. I really didn't see The Simpsons until Mike approached me with this idea tonight. I've learned a lot, I hope you learn a bit too.

Michael Wode: That's a good point. I actually grew up watching The Simpsons as a family, even when I was a very small child. We just want to know real quick, how many of you actually watch The Simpsons or know anything about the show? Quite a few of you. Do you know the earlier seasons or you only know the later seasons? Early stuff? No?

Tonight we're mainly focusing on seasons one through 11. I know it's going to be disappointing to some of you since there's been 28 seasons of The Simpsons. In the 28th season.

We could do a whole conversation tonight about why we're just covering the first 11. For me, the 11th season ends with an episode called Behind The Simpsons, like a Behind The Music kind of thing. It starts to get very meta. I think the show is so a part of our society that by the 11th season, it starts to become a character of itself.

I honestly haven't really watched any seasons probably 13 on. I know all of the episodes from season one through 11, so that's why we're covering them.

Just as a disclaimer. Well, why don't you show the clip.

Can you hear OK?

Video:

In episode 2, ep 09 when Itchy plays Scratchy's skeleton like a xylophone, he strikes the same rib twice in succession, yet he produces two clearly different tones. I mean what are we to believe that this is some sort of a magic xylophone or something? Boy, I really hope somebody got fired for that one.

I'll field this one. Let me ask you a question. Why would a man whose shirt says, "genius at work," spend all of his time watching a children's cartoon show?

I withdraw my question.

Michael Wode:

So, it's a disclaimer. It's funny in one point because we are watching a ... it's not really a children's cartoon show about cartoon show, which is funny. But also a disclaimer that we're going to have some fun tonight and we have some things that we want to say about the show based on things that we believe or that we've read. In terms of theology, but if our theology is not 100% sound, don't get too angry. We're going to make fun of you if you do that.

Why The Simpsons though? They've won a lot of awards. I think that just shows how prevalent they are in our society and that they've kept going for so many years. I think that alone is worth studying it. It's a good program. People like it.

Also it's made a lot of money. A lot of people have seen it. It's made over a billion dollars just in syndication. That's just from reruns. I just thought that was cool.

We had technical difficulties earlier and some of our slides didn't save, so one of them has to do wide.

Brendan Ryan:

The title of this talk is "Why do The Simpsons need theology?" There was a study done by a professor at Cal State University at San Bernardino. He found that nearly 70% of the shows contained religious content. He spent eight weeks watching reruns from the first 11 years of the series and 70% contained at least one religious appearance and that there was religion as the context, like the sole context, of at least 11% of those episodes.

The question tonight that we posed is "Why does theology need The Simpsons?" Or "Does theology need The Simpsons?" Theology in its root term is the study of God. So theo logos, the study of God. Is The Simpsons necessary for that? What do you think, yes or no, just before we get into that? Who thinks that theology needs The Simpsons? Raise your hand.

Michael, what do you think?

Michael Wode: I think you probably know what side I stay on.

Brendan Ryan: Who things theology does not need The Simpsons?

All right, great. We've got a pretty diverse crowd. Well, I fall on your side. Talking about this to Mike, we were going over this and I told him that I didn't think theology needed The Simpsons and he almost fired me. I think that theology benefits from The Simpsons, though. While has theology has done just fine in the first 2,000 years of Christianity without this cartoon series, I think that The Simpsons is beneficial to theology because it tell us something about how we relate to God and it tells us something about how society portrays and society caricatures and how society just thinks about religion, God, and moral issues as a whole.

The Simpsons is a pretty divisive show. One author said it ridicules the pious, lampoons the religious and questions traditional morality. However, they followed up, instead of sermonizing at the audience, this program speaks with them and possibly for them as well. So rather than sermonizing at the audience, the program speaks with them and possibly for them. In my opinion, I think that's the benefit of a show like The Simpsons for theology.

Another author referred to The Simpsons as insightful heresy. Insightful heresy. Although it thrives on satire, caricature and irony, it does so with a keen understanding of the topics, which is lampooning. It does so in a witty and insightful way that really picks apart the spiritual and religious lives of American people in its audience.

While it does poke fun at religious topics, there's really no issue to The Simpsons that is unapproachable and that is off-limits. That was important to a lot of the things I wrote. Because that's kind of their defenses. Yeah, we're making fun of religion, but it's not just to make fun of religion, it's to draw attention to something else. They also make fun of politics and consumerism and things of that nature.

Here we go. Evagrius Pontus who was a desert father said that a theologian is one who prays. A theologian is one who prays. St. Paul taught us that we do not know how to pray as we ought, we have to ask for the spirit's intercession. Prayer is an essential part of The Simpsons. Bart Simpson teaches us a little bit about prayer.

The set-up for this is In Bart Gets an F, in 1990, Bart has nearly failed out of school. He's going to have to repeat the fourth grade, I believe, unless he can pass a history test. This is his prayer the night before that happens.

Video: Well, old-timer I guess this is the end of the road. I know I haven't always been a good kid, but if I have to go to school tomorrow, I'll fail the test and be held back. I just need one more day to study, Lord. I need your help.

Prayer, the last refuge of a scoundrel.

A power failure, a blizzard, anything that'll cancel school tomorrow. I know it's asking a lot, but if anyone can do it, you can. Thanking you in advance, your pal Bart Simpson.

Hallelujah. Hallelujah. Hallelujah.

Brendan Ryan: In Philippians we hear, "Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your request remain known to God."

In the prayer we just saw, Bart does most things that a praying Christian should do. He speaks directly and personally to God from the heart. He confesses his powerlessness, admits his sinfulness, voices faith in God's ability and power to grant his petition. And also expresses gratitude before and, we didn't see it, but also after his petition is requested.

The prayer of The Simpsons is honest and it is personal and it is addressed to God, who interacts them often immediately but also personally and comedic-ly.

Family prayer is an important part. This is a Thanksgiving dinner in Bart Versus Thanksgiving

Video: Dear Lord, we're especially thankful for nuclear power, the cleanest, safest energy source there is except for solar, which is just a pipe dream. We'd like to thank you for the occasional moments of peace and love our family's experienced. Not today. Because you saw what happened. Oh Lord, be honest, are we the most pathetic family in the universe or what?

Amen.

Brendan Ryan: So honesty in prayer is important. The Simpsons always pray altruistically. It's not necessarily about a relationship, it's usually seeking something from God or in time of crisis.

Religious diversity is a pretty subtle, but also in-your-face theme in The Simpsons. We have Herschel Shmoikel Pinchas Yerucham Krustofski, the son of Rabbi Krustofski, also known as Krusty the Clown. Ned Flanders is an Evangelical

Christian. Apu is Hindu. Lisa flirts with Buddhism. Reverend Timothy Lovejoy is the Protestant Pastor of the First Church of Springfield, who's often used as sort of a foil for the writers to point out some issues with organized religion.

Organized religion is an important and helpful thing in the lives of its characters. We have all these things. The Simpsons uses satire to highlight the hypocrisy and flaws of those who preach and practice it in modern day America. Reverend Timothy Lovejoy is often the subject of that. This is an episode on the Movementarians. It's a sect that temporarily seduces most of The Simpsons family. Here we go. This is Lovejoy's reaction to the Movementarians.

Video: This so-called new religion is nothing but a pack of weird rituals and chants designed to take away the money of fools. Let's say the Lord's prayer 40 times, but first let's pass the collection plate.

Slim pickings today, Reverend.

Oh, Lord. Try the emergency plate, Ned.

I don't think that's going to do it.

Brendan Ryan: So they set up this Movementarian sect to show, kind of, sometimes the ridiculousness or the unexplained reasons or the blind faith with which people often follow organized religion. Homer's not immune to that. These diverse attitudes come together in an episode called Homer to Heretic, where Homer doesn't want to go to church, basically, so he comes up with a reason not to. This is the result.

Video: God?

Thou hast forsaken my church.

Kind of. But-

But what?

I'm not a bad guy. I work hard and I love my kids. Why should I spend half my Sunday hearing about how I'm going to hell?

Hm. You've got a point there. You know sometimes even I'd rather be watching football. Does St. Louis still have a team?

No, they moved to Phoenix.

Oh, yeah.

You know what I really hate about church? Those boring sermons.

I couldn't agree more. Lovejoy really displeases me. I think I'll give him a canker sore.

Give him one for me.

I will.

So I figure I should just try to live right and worship you in my own way.

Homer, it's a deal. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to appear in a tortilla in Mexico.

Brendan Ryan:

In that clip we see a lot of things. We see Homer complaining about what the purpose organized religion is. Why does he have to go to church if he's a good man and tries to do what's right? But we also see God for the first time that God makes an appearance. If you notice closely and think about these things, what the writers are telling us about God are a few things. The first, God is anthropomorphic. God walks with us and appears as a human. God is faceless in The Simpsons except for a few episodes. I think the purpose of that is intentional. That there is no particular image or person. God can be as people want. Traditionally, you'll show the basic God.

Other things. God is not omniscient. God doesn't know whether or not St. Louis still has a football team. God is not omnipresent. He has to excuse to excuse himself in order to go to Mexico to appear on a tortilla. And also God is vindictive. God gives Flanders a canker sore as a way to get back.

God gives permission to Homer to miss mass. Homer has a grand time. Not mass, I'm sorry. Church. My bad. Hard-wired to think of.

Anyway. God gives permission to Homer. Homer has a grand old time skipping church while his family is there. He doesn't really see the point of it. If he can skip church and still have a great time, what's the purpose? He has this conversation.

Video:

I can't believe you're giving up church, Homer.

Hey, what's the big deal about going to some building every Sunday? I mean isn't God everywhere?

Amen, brother.

And don't you think that the Almighty has better things to worry about than where one little guy's spends one measly hour of his week?

Tell it, daddy.

And what if we picked the wrong religion? Every week we're just making God madder and madder.

Testify.

My husband is by no means perfect, but he's a kind, decent man. Please show him the error of his ways.

Marge, come to bed.

He doesn't meant to be sacrilegious Lord, he just likes to sleep in on Sundays.

Marge, come to bed, Marge.

[inaudible 00:21:32]

Brendan Ryan:

Next Sunday while Homer's asleep at his family's house on the couch and his family's at church, there's an electrical shortage and Homer's house is set on fire. Homer automatically thinks this is his punishment for skipping church. Until the volunteer fire department shows up. That's Krusty, who's Jewish, Ned, who's Christian, Apu, who is Hindu, and Reverend Lovejoy, who's Christian. They rush and they come to put it out.

Homer questions the value of attending church and his answer is kind of right there. His house is on fire. Until he sees, I believe the clip will show it, he sees Flanders' house is also on fire.

Sorry. We didn't get that part. Anyway, Flanders' house is also on fire. Homer thinks, Flanders is a good, church-going person, why do I have to go to church?

But just as Homer utters these words, a cloud forms over Flanders' house and water pours down, extinguishing the Flanders' house fire. But leaving the Simpsons' fire burning. Then we see this vignette.

Video:

I have a feel there's a lesson here.

Yes, the lesson is-

No, don't tell me. I'll get it. Oh! I know, the lord is vengeful. Oh, spiteful one, tell me who to smite and they shall be smoted.

Homer, God didn't set your house on fire.

No, but he was working in the hearts of your friends and neighbors when they went to your aid. Be they Christian, Jew, or miscellaneous.

There are seven hundred million of us.

That's super.

You saved my life when you could've just left me to fry like the proverbial pancake that I am.

Homie, I'm so glad to hear you say that.

Now, would you give church another try?

I'll be there next Sunday, front row, center.

Brendan Ryan: There we go. Homer gives church another try. Reverend Lovejoy replied that it's the charity of the fire department and not God's anger that is the lesson to be learned. The house is saved, so is Homer's faith, but I think the writer's are making a subtle distinction that it's Homer's faith in humanity that's saved, that's kind of incarnated God's faith in humanity.

Homer, in all these, is kind of caricaturing the American spiritual wanderer as some would call it. People who are questioning what the value of organized religion is, what do they get out of it, what's the purpose of their being there. They're culturally connected to some religious tradition, but they're willing to look elsewhere when it suits their needs and when times get tough or when they find something better to do it, that's often the first thing that goes by the wayside.

Now, Mike.

Michael Wode: So that's Jasper, he's laying down the rules at the school because there's a teacher's strike. He's a substitute teacher. I'm going to lay down some rules or at least tell you why I landed on the topic I did.

When Brandon and I were deciding what to talk about at first, I was thinking that I'd just talk about The Simpsons and religion. Surely, there couldn't be that much to talk about in this 22-minute animated situational comedy. Even though I'm a fan of the show I didn't realize the scope of the topic and have concluded that I could spend an entire semesters talking about The Simpsons and religion.

Because of that, I have relegated myself to talking about the marriage of Marge and Homer and even then I think I have too much.

These are some ... Anyone know their catechisms? These are quotes from the catechism talking about Catholic marriage or Christian marriage. I think basically what you can get from this is that marriage is a good thing. It's good to have a partner or someone to go through life with, depending on what your calling is, if that is your calling. I would say that although I'm a good Catholic and I read my catechism, I am a bad Catholic and you should know just personally that I would extend this to all types of marriages. Wink, wink.

I really love the idea of the domestic church. You can go to church every Sunday, but it's all that time at home with family that will give you a good foundation for your sense of morality. The Simpsons do spend a lot of time together at home, even though they are informed by what they learn in church.

Let's get into some clips shall we? The following clips are going to break down two episodes that focus on the realities of marriage, specifically in the context of infidelity or fidelity.

Video: I want you to meet your new coworker Mindy Simmons. I think she has a degree in engineering or something.

Hi, how's it going?

Pleased to meet you.

Ditto.

Hi.

What's the matter?

Ain't you never seen a naked chick riding clam before?

Gotta go. What the hell was that? I probably shouldn't have eaten that packet of powdered gravy I found in the parking lot.

Michael Wode: All right, go to the next clip.

Video: [inaudible 00:27:10] it fits. You got it in my size and it has my name on it. It's really for me.

\$17.50. Enjoy it my darling.

Michael Wode: Here we have two clips that show Homer and Marge being infatuated with someone else besides their spouse, which is not the best thing, but it's also may be closer to reality than you may know. I don't think a lot of you are married, but the ones who are maybe get this.

We'll keep moving through and we'll see.

This is Homer's reality and you're going to see Marge's reality.

Video: Ah, home to my loving family. What more could a man ask for?

Hi, Homer. Don't kiss me, I'm all stuffed up.

Ew.

Hi, dad.

Hi, son, how are you-

Dad, look! I made fish sticks. They're burnt on the outside, but they're frozen on the inside so it balances out.

Yeah, good.

That raccoon stole my lamb chop!

Let's have a little quality time together, just you and me.

Oh, that's sweet. Guess what, there's a new place at the mall, they'll put your picture on a T-shirt. I got \$2 off because mine got smeared.

Happy birthday!

What?

Here's your birthday breakfast.

Isn't this nice?

It's my birthday?

No.

It's my birthday? What'd I get? I love birthdays.

No Homer, it's mine.

You don't even know your own wife's birthday?

Of course I know, sure. You really thought I forgot didn't you?

Oh right, what did you get her, dad?

Yeah, what did you get?

A very thoughtful gift. But it's a surprise. You know, it's such a beautiful morning, I think I'll take a little stroll around the block.

He forgot, mom.

Michael Wode: I think those are more extreme examples of when the home life isn't going all that great, but when you are with somebody all the time it's not always going to be fun or romantic. I think that is interesting.

Now we're going to move into, they each have a subsequent fantasy about the person they are infatuated with.

Video: Hello, hotline? I'm very tempted by another woman.

Homer Simpson? [inaudible 00:30:04] to do with Marge.

Who are you?

Homer, I'm your guardian angel. I've assumed the form of someone you'd recognize and revere, Sir Isaac Newton.

Sir Isaac who-who?

Oh, very well.

Colonel Klink! Did you get my letters-

I'm not actually Colonel Klink. I'm just assuming his form.

Did you know Hogan had tunnels all over your camp?

Homer. That's not why I'm here. My job is to show you how miserable life would be if you married Mindy instead of Marge.

Ooh, I would live in a big mansion?

I'm so happy darling.

I, as well. Are you happy Jeeves?

Yes sir, quite.

Then we're all happy.

Let's get out of here.

Sure, life is good for you, but what about Marge?

Marge lives here?

Madam President, your approval rating is soaring.

This dream is over.

Hey, you, get out of my office.

I've been waiting for you, come in my captivating one. May I have this dance?

Sure.

You certainly have a lot of bowling trophies.

I like you so much. They're not for bowling Marge. You're so naïve. They're for love-making.

Oh.

Champagne?

Please.

There, my darling.

Thank you.

What cosmic force brought us together Marge?

Destiny.

Yes, some divine pin slotter must have placed us side by side.

Like two fragile bowling pins.

[inaudible 00:32:39]

Until inevitably-

We must stop.

Michael Wode:

What's going to happen? Are they going to cheat on their spouses? I think the Bible probably gives lots of insight into what should happen, which is not always reality. That's a lot of words. You don't have to read all that.

Basically, I like what it says in First Corinthians about you can be tested but it'll never be something more than what you can handle. I think that's just really interesting and spend a lot of time talking about that but I'm not going to at the moment. Hey, where you going?

I don't know. What do you guys think? Are they going to cheat on their spouses?
If you never saw the show you might not have any idea.

Crowd: No.

Michael Wode: All right, let's see what happens.

Video: Well, I guess you'll want to come in.

OK.

OK.

This is a really nice night, Homer.

Yeah, yeah.

What's wrong?

Oh yeah, like you don't know. We're going to have sex.

Oh, well, we don't have to.

Yes, we do. The cookie told me so.

Michael Wode: A fortune cookie told him he'd find love.

Video: Cookies aren't always right.

But they're so sweet.

Homer, you don't have to do anything you don't want to.

Well, maybe I would do. But then I think about Marge and the kids. Well, not
the boy, he drives me [inaudible 00:34:32].

Homer. You know how I feel. So it's up to you. Look in your heart. I think you'll
see what you want.

Oh, baby.

This was a wonderful idea, Homie. Hey, there's a turkey behind the bed.

Marge.

Michael Wode: This clip is broken. Sorry, this clip got broken. Let's see if I can give it here. Let's see right.

Oh, his butt.

Oh, here we go.

This reference might be lost on a lot of you.

Video: Marge, what a lovely surprise. You're here to see me, right?

Of course.

Way to go, Homer. Way to go!

Like a boss.

Tell them I'm going to the back seat of my car with the woman [inaudible 00:37:26]. And I won't back for 10 minutes.

Michael Wode: I really love those two episodes. I think it shows marriage in a really real sense. I know I'm not talking specifically about theology or God like Brendan did in the context of the show, but I think these things are a really important part of theology and a part of marriage.

Love wins in the end. In both cases, they choose to stay with one another because they know the fantasy is not as great as the love of their spouse. I think they demonstrate some great virtues here.

I also keep coming back to this phrase, that there's forgiveness at no cost. When Homer calls Marge to the hotel room or Marge goes into the power plant, both of them don't question them being there. It's just more of a, "Hey, you're still in my life. We're going to make it. We're going to do OK." They really could just hold it over their head and I think that would be problematic.

I want to say that this is not always the right thing to do and necessarily stay with somebody. I know that there are sometimes marriages that break down in ways that we can't imagine. I think as far as showing what a healthy relationship can look like. Yeah, they had infatuation. I think in the end they made the right choice. I don't know, it just makes me think about a lot of stuff.

Next slide.

This is from the homily Father Charlie Gordon gave this past Sunday. Just take a second to look through that and read that. He's talking about how kings and bishops and prime ministers and artists can afford to be humble in our society because they are great men and women. They can be humble because they're

not going to lose anything by being humble. Whereas an ordinary person who is humble with other people could lose a lot.

I think that Homer and Marge show a lot of humility throughout those episodes and with one another as a married couple. I think that speaks volumes to the show of The Simpsons. I think that they're very real people in the show that show us humility in all sorts of virtues. They also show us a lot of vices, I get that. But I guess when the show came out and it was so divisive like Brendan said, I don't know if those people who were so mad were really watching the show. When I watch that I see a really beautiful relationships between those people.

I want to talk a little bit about the fantasies. This is actually not from The Simpsons, but from a movie called High Fidelity. Father Charlie will appreciate this. I love how they each had a fantasy sequence in their episodes. The clip from High Fidelity expresses my views on these fantasies nicely. I think, in the end, Homer and Marge understand it also. Let's check this out.

Video: [inaudible 00:40:49]

Michael Wode: Oh no, it's very quiet.

Video: [inaudible 00:40:54]

And they always seem really great because there's never any problems and if there are, they're cute problems like, you know, we bought each other the same Christmas present or she wants to go see a movie that I've already seen, you know? And then I come home, and you and I have real problems and you don't even want to see the movie I want to see, period. There's no lingerie and-

I have lingerie-

Yes, you do. You have great lingerie, but you also have the cotton underwear that's been washed a thousand times, and it's hanging on the thing. And they have it too. It's just I don't have to see it because its not in the fantasy. Do you understand? I'm tired of the fantasy because it doesn't really exist. And there are never really any surprises, and it never really-

Delivers?

Delivers.

Michael Wode: All right you can just stop it right there.

Anyways, basically what he's saying is that we have fantasies, but fantasies aren't reality. If you're in a relationship and the context of that relationship you can be tempted by other people, but you're only seeing all the best parts of

those people. You're not seeing everything that goes along with it. I think that's really important. I think if you especially thought about it in terms of young men in our society always thinking all these fantasies or maybe about like, "I'm going to get oh so many women this weekend," or "I'm going to have all this sex, blah, blah, blah." But it's all fantasy. That's not really part of relationships. I think that's really important. But that's a side-point, it's a tangent.

Let's go to the next clip. Hopefully we can hear this clip and if we can't, it's fine.

This is about choices. I love how they choose one another. In this clip, a Catholic priest had fallen in love with a woman and the older pastor is giving him some advice.

Video: The truth is, you can never tell yourself that one thing could be, if you're a priest or if you marry a woman it's the same challenge. You cannot make a real commitment unless you accept that it's a choice that you keep making again and again and again. I've been a priest over 40 years and I fell in love at least once every decade.

You're not gonna tell me what to do here, are you?

No. God will give you an answer.

Michael Wode: I don't know I really love that clip, just talking about choice and the choice to ... in terms of vocation, to be a priest is something that you choose every day. You continually have to say yes to God. I think that Homer and Marge have to keep choosing one another even though things come up in their lives and I think that's really beautiful. I think the way he says this better than I could say it.

I talked a lot about the context of the marriage in a very literal sense of just man and wife having a marriage. I think for me the connections to theology are pretty obvious with that is that if I were teaching a Christian marriage class I would definitely talk about how marriage is not just fun and games. Yeah, it can be a lot of fun. It can be romantic. But it's also, you got to get up at six in the morning with your kid who just threw up everywhere. I think that's really important. I think that's really tangible theology.

We can also think about it in a broader sense. This is mainly for Dan Parish. Hi Dan. Save me [Jebus 00:44:58].

If we think about Jesus as the bridegroom of the church, and we are the church, then in a sense we are married to God. We are called to be in a relationship to God, right? I think that if we put ourselves in the shoes of Homer and Marge, at the least the versions who are infatuated, but think of it in the context of church, Homer and Marge ... It's too many words.

The Homer and Marge who accept each other without asking anything in return are God. The Simpsons is essentially showing us what our relationship with God can be. It's really wonderful. God never asks for anything in return. He always asks us to come to him and to choose him even if we're tempted. He never holds it over our heads. He provides forgiveness without any cost.

I have a few more clips that kind of bring home the point. Think of it in the literal term. With these clips, I want you to think of it in the literal terms of marriage, but also think about it in those terms of your relationship with God and the greater church. This one is Homer does a [inaudible 00:46:11].

Video: Don't worry Marge, by the time you read this, I will be gone. You deserve all the finest things in the world, and although I can give them to you, they will be repossessed and I will be hunted down like a dog. Also, it has become clear that your family doesn't want me here.

Shut up with that pen scratching down there.

I will send every cent I earn for the baby, but you will not see me again until I am a man.

Michael Wode: Homer doesn't feel like he's good enough for Marge. He just doesn't feel worthy. But this is Marge's reaction. I love it.

Video: What?

My husband by my side.

You want fries with that? Marge? Marge! Holy cow, you're as big as a house.

Homer, come home with me.

No, Marge. I just can't. I mean look at me. I'm a trainee. They won't even tell me what's in the secret sauce. I can't buy you a decent wedding ring.

Any ring is fine as long as it's from you.

Marge. Pour vous.

Would you mind if I took it off now? The oil is burning my finger.

Oh, sure.

Homer, do you know why I married you?

Because I knocked you up?

Because I love you. Come home soon.

Michael Wode: In this clip I really love that Marge loves Homer, that's why she wants to be with him. God loves us. That's why he wants to be in a relationship with us. He's not asking anything from us. You don't need to give things to God. You just need to love God. And you need to accept God's love in your life.

I have one last clip. This may be more of a stretch, but it's still fun to watch.

Video: Hi honey. How's the marriage retreat going?

I came to this retreat because I thought our marriage was in trouble. But I never for a minute thought it was in this much trouble. How can you-

Marge you don't know what this fish means. This fish represents a better life for both of us. This fish makes me a champion and a hero.

To who?

To those weirdos in the worm store.

All the fish represents is just how selfish you are.

If that's the way you feel, I'm going back.

Oh yeah, sure.

What? I did it. I gave up fame and breakfast for my marriage. I fought it for six hours. It says one word and I toss it back. And you're telling me our marriage is in trouble? Come here, baby.

Oh, Homer.

Michael Wode: I just love that clip.

Brendan Ryan: The Simpsons is a show that divides America. People have strong opinions on one side or the other whether they're for it, whether they're against it. Whether theology needs it, whether theology doesn't need it.

I think the reason it's so divisive is because it taps into a nerve that's near and dear to our hearts. That's how we worship God and how God loves us in return.

I think through all of it, through all the funny clips, through all the serious moments, through what we've learned about marriage, what we've learned about ourselves, I think the message of The Simpsons is relatively simple. It's a family who's trying hard to figure things out, trying to love each other. Along the

way comes figuring out the best way to relate to God. I think the message for all of us might be that we just shouldn't take ourselves too seriously.

Michael Wode: I know for me, one thing that Brendan and I kept talking about was if theology is to know God, I guess for me why theology needs The Simpsons is because I watch The Simpsons and I love The Simpsons and I watched movies and I love movies. I watch media and love media. And look, I haven't read the whole Bible, my wife has. I go to church too, but it's not really where I find God. I have found God through things like media. I think that theology needs things like The Simpsons because it's a way that normal, average Americans can see God and see God in context is what we kept coming back to.

Brendan Ryan: Yeah mediates God.

Michael Wode: Mediates God. So there, that's our jubilation.

We're open to have questions now. And if you need to go, just go, it's fine. Appreciate you coming.

Brendan Ryan: Yeah, thank you all for coming.

Michael Wode: Anybody have any questions?

All right, I have one last clip and it's just because it's funny. It's one of my favorite jokes in the whole series. Then, have a nice night.

Video: Well, you see marriage is a lot like an orange. First, you have the skin. Then the sweet, sweet innards.

I don't understand.

If I wanted to see a man eat an orange, I would have taken the orange-eating class.

The eating of an orange is a lot like a good marriage.

Just eat the damn oranges.

Michael Wode: Have a good night everybody.