

Sermon for Sunday, February 21, 2010
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IT'S A LOT LIKE MARRIAGE
Romans 7:1-4, Genesis 2:23-25, Ephesians 5.25-32

Today quite a number of pastors are troubled, even overwhelmed by marriages on the brink of break up. They grieve as they see their people disconnect from their marriages, even despair over them. We suspect that the current economy is a factor. This recession has hit the work of men especially hard - finance, construction, manufacturing. Seventy-five percent of all jobs lost in the last two years have been lost by men. This winter, almost twenty percent of all men between twenty five and fifty four, the prime years, are unemployed. Unemployment is unsettling for men, for marriages.

Another factor: When love grows cold, couples often stay in a marriage for its secondary benefits: Children, social status and financial security or prosperity. So people often stay in disappointing marriages because they have children. They may not be happy as husband and wife, but they love their children. They enjoy the roles of mother and father. Besides, some think it's their duty to stay married for the sake of their children.

Other people stay married because there is still a social stigma attached to divorce. Yes, divorce is now common, but polls clearly show that most people think it is good to be married – a sort of proof of success or maturity. Finally, people stay married because marriage gives them healthier finances – a higher standard of living – homes, cars, vacations – and more security.

You finish the thought. The stigma of divorce is fading. With the recession, marriage may have fewer financial benefits. Of course, men and women are equally responsible for the success or failure of a marriage. But women tend to see failure more clearly; they initiate sixty-five percent of divorce proceedings. In this environment, there are fewer reasons to hesitate. So the agony is growing.

In important ways, the assault on marriage is nothing new. Marriage has been a foundational part of God's plan from the beginning. God created one man and one woman; they loved and married each other and had children. Since that time, marriage and family has had a central role in God's plan.

Good families also become nurseries of the faith, schools of the faith, even military academies of the faith, graduating warriors equipped to fight for God's cause. Long ago, Isaiah wrote this about Jesus and the disciples (Isaiah 32:1-2):

See, a king will reign in righteousness and rulers will rule with justice.
Each man will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm.

Jesus is the king who reigns in righteousness. As we follow him, we can become rulers who rule with justice. And as we lead others, especially in our home, more can become a shelter from the storms of this life. If marriage can do this, we expect the adversary to destroy God's plan for marriage if he can.

1. In the beginning – a structure for marriage

In the beginning, God created one man and one woman. They loved and married and had children. When Adam met Eve, he broke into poetry. "Now, at last, this is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh" (Genesis 2:22). Here is the companion for whom he longs (2:23). The woman, bride and wife, is man's helper suitable because she is of his flesh, yet distinct from his flesh. He rejoices and marries her and they complete each other. Next Genesis states the three fundamentals for a good, strong marriage.

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame (2:24-25).

Leave - "A man will leave his father and mother" means the bond between husband and wife trumps all others, especially the bond between parent and child. Some cultures deny this; they say a child's first duty is to his or her parents as long as they live.

A strain of Americana doubts this too. Especially if a marriage falters, parents are tempted to subordinate their relationship to the children. A couple may not be happy as husband and wife, but they are good parents and find solace there. Don't fall for it! It's a trap! Put the marriage first; work on it. In wedding ceremonies the father takes his daughter's hand and gives it to the groom for good reason - to show that the daughter leaves his house and starts a new one with her husband.

Be united - "A man will be united to his wife" means husband and wife stick together in their new life. They don't give up. They create companionship that's meant to last for life. They create structures so they can grow in affection and faithfulness. No matter how many people give up around them, they work, they tend their relationship both in great trials and in the normal up and down of life.

The first year of marriage was the hardest for Debbie and me. We were young and immature. We probably should have waited a few more months. Debbie was wrapping up college; I had a modestly demanding job but was preparing for grad school by studying Greek and Hebrew in my spare time. I wasn't giving her enough time. And we had very little money, earning two ticks more than the minimum wage.

We came from very different families. Debbie wanted to clone aspects of her parent's marriage. I knew what I didn't want: the chaos of my parent's marriage. I wanted love and togetherness but didn't know how to create it. I didn't know how women *worked* - why they cry. I asked a wise man for a clue. I was absolutely serious: "Can you tell me why she cries *at random*, say on Saturday afternoon?" He stared at me, looking startled, offended – "Why do you expect me to know?"

Some days were tough; some weeks were unhappy, but we had no thought of giving up. The word for it is troth, a professor said. Like ancient wedding vows - "I pledge you my troth." Troth is staying power. Lifelong endurance.

Endurance is essential. No one loves anything every day. I do not use the word "hate" but everyone is disappointed and frustrated with himself at times. Also with his job, her friends and his or her spouse. How can it be otherwise? Put two sinners in the same place long enough, it's inevitable. So we need endurance. Perseverance is more than gritting teeth and holding on. Endurance means working to find pleasure and meaning together. And we do find it again. Here is a poem by Wendell Berry called *Wild Rose*:

Sometimes hidden from me / In daily custom and trust
So that I live by you unaware / as by the beating of my heart
Suddenly you flare in my sight / a wild rose blooming at the edge
Of thicket, grace and light / where yesterday was only shade
And once again I am blessed, choosing again what I chose before.

One flesh - "The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame." We know what this means, especially since God told Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply." Yet we notice that this statement doesn't mention children. We conclude: God blesses sexuality even apart from procreation.

Listen: Christians so stress one idea here that they miss another. We stress: God intends physical union to follow marriage for a reason. We give our bodies to seal a commitment of mind, heart, emotions and will. It is safe and good to give the body after the risk of exploitation is gone. It is safe to risk children after we have promised to stay together for the next fifty years or so.

Physical intimacy expresses and seals love, but it also deepens and rekindles love when husband and wife grow apart. We are whole persons. Union of heart and will leads to union of bodies after a couple marries. But it's also true that long afterward the physical union reunites heart, mind, and emotions.

When couples separate from each other in anger and frustration, to punish or exercise control, they do so at real peril. They are depriving themselves of joy and comfort. It's one of the ways God chose to keep husband and wife together. This is the plan; what went wrong?

2. What went wrong? ¹

Again: Marriage is such an important part of God's plan, so powerful a force for good, that we expect Satan and evil men to attack it. And he does. For centuries in many lands, marriage was an institution that served men - male power and privilege. In many places, the male head of the home owned his wife and children. Woman was viewed as man's cook and housekeeper. She had to obey him and bear his children. If she failed, she could be divorced or set aside. Some cultures said women were inferior in strength, intellect and will.

A double standard flourished. Women were supposed to be chaste for their honor and to guarantee legitimate offspring. But men? Demosthenes said men should have "mistresses for our enjoyment, concubines to serve our person and wives for the bearing of legitimate offspring." ² Powerful men often took several wives. These wives were often cloistered and lonely. And there were no wives for lesser men. Often, men could divorce as they pleased; women had no right to legal protection or to divorce. This was the most common perversion of God's plan for marriage.

The church has its own problems. Monastic movements declared celibacy to be superior to marriage. Communities sprang up where men and women lived separately and pledged to live in celibacy. Yet a few cults promoted polygamy.

The communists, in their nefarious wisdom, understood that the family could stand against state power. So they weakened marriage. Russian communists briefly experimented with the abolition of marriage. The result - chaos. The Chinese said party loyalty comes first (for party members, not general population). So husbands and wives lived in separate barracks, with perhaps one day a week together. Displays of affection toward spouse or child was a suspicious sign of insufficient zeal for the revolution.

The contemporary American problems are familiar to us. They have four parts: First, people get married ever later. Second, people cohabit before marriage. Third, physical intimacy is no longer linked to marriage. People start before they get married. Then, making matters worse, some stop after they get married. Fourth, people divorce freely – more than in any large society, ever.

Quite a cluster: Get married late, play at marriage beforehand - cohabitation, get sex and marriage backward, then get a divorce. But there is more.

American has very high rates of both marriage and divorce, number one of the western nations. We hold marriage in high esteem. Surveys show that we see marriage as part of the good life, part of true adulthood. Almost everyone who marries says they intend it to last for life. Still we have the highest divorce rate of any major nation. Even cohabiting relationships break up faster here. Why? Because we have two contradictory sets of values.

¹ Andrew Cherlin, *The Marriage Go Round*, pages 3-111, especially 26-32

² Demosthenes, Orations 59, pages 18-22. A *Wedding oration*

Surveys show that we still have some Judeo-Christian values: Marriage is the best way to live one's life. It should be a permanent and loving relationship and a sexually exclusive partnership. Divorce should be a last resort.

On the other hand the American individualist values say each person's "primary obligation is to oneself rather than to one's partner or children. Individuals must make choices... about the kinds of intimate lives they wish to lead. A variety of living arrangements are acceptable" and "People who are personally dissatisfied with [their marriage] are justified in ending them." This has been the "expressive divorce" – divorce for my growth, my feelings, my development.

Christians don't always help the cause. A few years ago an evangelical said, "Marriage is a contract." We usually think of marriage in terms of love and romance, but it's a legal contract, like a sales agreement or job contract. "Marriage is a legal contract between two people... and the state." So much for Valentine's Day. The state, he says, specifies contractual obligations regarding domicile, community property, respect. ³ Marriage is a "bilateral contract, voluntarily formed, maintained and dissolved by two individuals."

The marks of a contract: They are typically made for a limited period of time. They deal with particular acts; not global. They're conditional. Each party must perform its obligations or it's terminated. None of this sounds like a biblical marriage to me. It's global in scope, unconditional in promises. ⁴

Contract is the wrong model. There is indeed a legal aspect to a marriage, just as there is an economic aspect to marriage. But marriage isn't essentially a business. Nor is it essentially a legal arrangement regulated by the state. Philosophically speaking, we should understand there is a legal aspect and there is an economic aspect to every higher order human institution or activity. The Boy Scouts, the church, and the book club all have an economic aspects (bills to pay, expenses to watch), but that doesn't make them essentially a business. They all have legal aspects (you can't run ten photocopies of a book), but they are not essentially legal. So marriage has a legal aspect, but that does not mean marriage is a contract.

The contract people say a Christian wedding is a veneer of religion that decorates an essentially legal event. I say God and the gathered friends are more essential than the papers. They witness and support the promises made and the love declared. A Christian marriage is not a contract. It's a sacred bond between a man and a woman. It is instituted by God and witnessed by God. Malachi says, "the Lord is... witness... of your marriage covenant." There are three people in the room, not two. The power to declare man and wife comes first from the church, then the state.

This is a real difference with real consequences. If marriage is a contract, then my personal fulfillment is the ultimate good, then I should be able to design marriage to meet my preferences, or at least our preferences - for security or prosperity or love. And then anything goes. Easy divorce, polygamy, same sex unions. If the arrangement will satisfy us and the state protects vital rights, what more can be said? While we're at it, let's declare that selfishness is a virtue.

If we are autonomous individuals with a right to be happy and choose our own life, anything can and will happen. In the grocery store, approaching the check-out, in the final seconds as we pass the junk food and junk magazines, we have fifteen seconds to catch up on the latest celebrity romances; have you noticed how many relationships last ~ two years? When the thrill wears off, the relationship ends.

³ Grunlan, *Marriage*, pages 128-33

⁴ Andreas Kostenberger, *God, Marriage and Family*, pages 83-85; Chapman, *Covenant Marriage*

Here is some good news: God doesn't end His relationship with us when the thrill wears off. And His love for us is the model for true love in marriage.

3. Learning from Jesus

At best, marriage is a picture of God's love. Paul: The husband should love his wife as Christ loved the church. This is the standard: "As Christ loved the church." Christ's love is the antithesis of selfishness. It consistently seeks what is best for us. And the spirit, the inner person comes first. Paul says Jesus "washes the church with his word, to present her to himself holy and blameless."

Husband and wife cannot save each other as Jesus did, yet we should care about each other's holiness and virtue. Ephesians means that in marriage the first concern is not to "fix" our spouse – lose weight, stop interrupting, chew with mouth shut, put away your clothes.... The goal is not to get your spouse to do what you want. The first concern is not horizontal – techniques and patterns to find peace or happiness. Some techniques are fine – it is good to pay compliments and hold the criticisms, for example. But techniques lead us to manage, even manipulate, instead of loving.

In Christian families, we live the gospel together. We let the gospel lead us. For example: Are you worried? Ask a gospel question: If God loves you enough to send his Son for you, is he likely to stop now?

Have you offended each other? See it through the gospel. God loved us and graciously forgave us when we sinned (past) and when we sin (present). We live the gospel when we forgive each other and nourish each other - broken and undeserving as we are. So gospel grows in us and slowly manifests itself in every sphere of life. Let me name some.

A good marriage begins with emotions - affection. Mind and heart are agreed and committed on the great principles of life. That leads to a physical union, then to a small society: husband, wife, perhaps children. We work together, arrange finances together, fashion a home, sort out tastes together: What is good? What is beautiful? What is fun? What do we believe? How shall we behave? How shall we see the world? Day by day we create a history together, till death do us part.

4. Glory. No marriage in heaven

Jesus: "In the resurrection [we] neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" Matthew 22:30. Marriage does not cease because intimate relationships will end. On the contrary, relationships will be closer than ever. Sin makes relationships cold and distant and sin will cease. We are wary of being open with people because we have learned that some people abuse our trust. If we share a hope or a fear, they may share it carelessly, even use our hope or fear to entertain others or to get a laugh. But there will be no betrayals, no broken trust, in heaven. We will be perfectly open with everyone. As a result, the intimacy and trust that is unique to marriage will be universal. So the need for marriage disappears. We are the bride of Christ and close to everyone we know.

Let me tell you I came to this theme in the middle of Romans. Marriage is on my mind; then I read Romans 7. Paul's theme in Romans 6-7, is the freedom of the Christian: Anyone who has died to sin has thrown off the tyranny of sin. Jesus "set [us] free from sin" (6:18, 22). Once, sin reigned in our mortal bodies; we used to "obey its evil desires" (6:12). No more! No more! Therefore, we should offer our bodies to him "as instruments of righteousness" (6:13).

This is our true nature, our heritage. We no longer obey our evil desires. We resist them; we serve God. We can and we should! We don't drift along aimlessly, content that we are saved, waiting to die and go to heaven. We have energy to offer to God; it should make a difference. Romans 7:4 says God raised [us] from the dead, "that we might bear fruit to God." We should bear fruit in our marriages.

How? Follow God's design: Leave and be united, in one flesh. See how powerful, how important marriage is, how much a good marriage can do, how much a bad one can spoil. Therefore be ready for attacks, deceptions: It is not a contract, it's a covenant. It doesn't exist to make you happy or fulfilled. See it as a picture of Christ's love for you and enough good will follow. And when you don't love as you should, remember that Jesus did and find grace and hope in that.