

# LOVE AND MARRIAGE

[I Corinthians 7:29-31](#); 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in ordinary time, b

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There is either a divine irony or godly sense of humor about the fact that two weeks from yesterday, Idlewild will be hosting the Presbytery of the Mid-South meeting. Nothing exceptional there, but here's the irony. That Saturday happens to be February 14, Valentine's Day, and one item we will be voting on will be about marriage: changing the Book of Order's definition of marriage from "a man and a woman" to "two people."

Whether we like it or not friends, this issue is before us, and not just in the church. Social historians tell us that there has *never* been a reform movement that has moved as quickly as the issue of same gender marriage in the history of our country. Think of it: Ten years ago there was only one state that offered same gender marriages, Massachusetts in 2004. In 2013 the United States Supreme Court struck down The Defense of Marriage Act in *The United States v. Windsor*, which had limited marriage to a man and a woman,. Now 36 states and the District of Columbia allow it; 70% of Americans live in a jurisdiction where same gender couples can legally marry. For the past two years, national polls have shown that a majority of Americans support legalizing it. And the United States Supreme Court this month decided to take it up and their decision should be forthcoming around late spring or early summer. Like it or not, it is before our nation.

And like it or not, it is before the church. At the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) last summer, two actions were taken pertaining to this. First, it adopted an Authoritative Interpretation that gave teaching elders (ministers) the freedom of conscience in our interpretation of scripture as we provide pastoral care to members, including conducting same gender services of marriage where they are legal without violating our ordination vows or facing the threat of judicial action.

The second action was a proposal to change the constitution of the PC(USA) as I described earlier. It passed the General Assembly by a vote of 371-238. Not a landslide, but a substantial majority. Now it goes to the presbyteries, where ½ of them have to approve it before it becomes a part of our Book of Order.

The easiest thing for me to do today would be to ignore it...to not even touch it from the pulpit. After all, Idlewild has studied this or related issues pertaining to the full equality of gays and lesbians for the past 15 years.

For I realize that there could be a cost of speaking out today. Over the past 5 years or so there has been a cost to the denomination with a number of churches leaving the PC(USA), including 1/3 of the churches in our presbytery. Here at Idlewild I have treasured the conversations I

have had with so many of you...some supportive, some greatly concerned, fearful and even angry, about the dizzying pace of change and my stance or the stance of the church. I know it has been painful for some, and I have appreciated your honesty and trust, and I hope that we can stay in communion. It has been suggested that I step back, be patient, let things unfold, provide some breathing room. It is a divisive issue for the church, as we try to build up shaky foundations of diverse Presbyterians under the unifying banner of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

So there could be a cost of speaking out, but there is a cost of keeping silent, and with a full awareness of the burden it will impose, I believe it is time for the church to speak a gracious word about marriage that might be outside the norm based upon the biblical witness, which is centered upon Jesus Christ. For the cost of silence has been crippling to many.

There have been far too many people that I have known or counseled with who have been driven away from the church, lesbian and gay brothers and sisters, children of God who have passed through the waters of baptism, who have heard repeatedly over the course of a lifetime that there is only one way they can ever be acceptable to God and to their fellow Christians. They must become a kind of person they are manifestly unable to become.

And the church's quiet complicity in the status quo now serves to undermine the credibility of the Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

Why do I say this? Because the loudest voices out there, the ones getting the attention, are those who proclaim a message of abomination, exclusion from the Kingdom of God, , and even hate in the name of Jesus and scriptures. Please don't get me wrong. Faithful Christians can and do disagree on this, but our silence leads many reasonable outside observers, including many who *want* to be in church, to conclude that Christianity is about hate. This is what young people are telling us, through the Pew research study and other surveys. It is time to speak a message of grace.

We hear voices in the church calling for us to get back to *the* biblical understanding of marriage. But that is something we might want to be cautious about extolling.

Marriages in biblical times had little to do with romance and love. They were usually arranged by the bride's and groom's fathers. It was a business deal negotiated by the heads of families. If love was present at all, it usually came later as a secondary outcome. Love in marriage certainly wasn't needed for the building of a basic social network for society.

The woman whom we call Eve, according to Genesis, was created to be a *help mate* (*ezer*) to the man. Notice that it doesn't mention that she was created to be his lover or soul's companion. Marriage was the means to a stable society; a social structure for family and children.

One thing that was very clearly stated about marriage was the requirement of fidelity. The seventh commandment, "Thou shall not commit adultery," was bedrock to the life of Israel and

a part of the covenant. But the fact that it had to be underscored meant that the alternative existed as well.

It is hard, if not impossible, to find a marriage in the bible that any of us would want to emulate. The most passionate expression of love is found in the Song of Songs, where a couple whisper and speak to each other in erotic and passionate ways, but nowhere does it say that the couple is married, only that they are burning with desire for each other.

Now it was different times to be sure, but a quick survey of marriages in the Old Testament do not exactly inspire us or provide us with models which to emulate. Abraham had only one wife, but several concubines; and there was that awful business about Hagar and their child Ishmael, whom Abraham fathered in order to fulfill God's promise of children.

David, the greatest king, the sensitive musician, had more than six wives, (and in order to get one of them conspired to kill her husband), 10 concubines, and apparently his heart was deepest for Jonathan, whom the Bible said David's love for him exceeded that of a man for a woman.

Wise Solomon had to use every bit of his wisdom, I am sure, to keep 700 wives and 300 concubines happy. And on it goes in the Old Testament.

So when we hear references to the "biblical definition of marriage between a man and a woman, we might turn to the New Testament and ask "So what is that biblical definition?" There is no passage which says "The official definition of marriage is xyz."

When Jesus talked about marriage in Matthew, he quoted Genesis 2, which concludes with a reflection on the consequences of human creation as male and female.

*Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.*

He is pointing to the regular, traditional, and customary pattern for God's ordering of human life. But the question becomes whether the existence of that pattern means that God automatically rejects or condemns lives that are ordered differently from that pattern.<sup>2</sup>

Test case number one is Jesus himself. This quote comes from a savior whose own life does not conform to that pattern! Jesus does not leave his mother and father to cling to a wife, nor does he recognize any personal obligation to be fruitful and multiply, which was in scripture.<sup>3</sup>

So if we believe that Jesus' life provides us with a picture of what God intends human life to be, as Colossians states, then it is very hard to claim that the union of male and female in marriage is *the* only acceptable pattern of God's will for human beings. The Savior's own life departs from that traditional, and some would say, God-ordered, pattern.

As did the Apostle Paul's life, who unlike Jesus provided us with all sorts of advice about marriage. It appears in what is the lectionary text from the epistles today in I Corinthians 7. I didn't read the whole chapter a little while ago, but in a nutshell he says not to marry at all if it can be avoided. "I wish that all were like I myself am," he said somewhat immodestly. The reason was because he was convinced that Christ would be coming soon and weddings and marriages would detract from getting ready and being prepared. No time for choosing bridesmaids and ushers and photographers and venues for receptions, and certainly no time for arguments about what color to paint the living room or how to make ends meet when time should be spent on weightier issues, like the end of time.

Paul also had no patience for divorce, with a strong patriarchal view of marriage. "Wives, be subject to your husbands," he wrote, something I have never suggested to young couples I counsel, and something that I have not insisted upon in my own marriage. (Probably one reason I've been married for 37 years!) He did say that a husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does, whatever that means.

There is one interesting line from Paul in First Timothy that gives a little hint as to other dynamics that were going on in the early church. He makes the comment that if one is to be a bishop in the church, he must have only one wife, which means that there must have been early Christians who had more than one wife.

All of which is to say that if we are looking to the Bible as a comprehensive guide on marriage, it falls short. We have to filter what we read through the times in which it was written. We simply cannot look to the letter of the law for advice, any more than we can look to the letter of the law in scripture on what to do if a son disobeys his father. (Leviticus calls for death by stoning.)

So what we need to do is to look at the *spirit* of scripture. And the starting place for that is by looking at the very nature of God. As we saw earlier, God clearly blesses the marital union of male and female as God's *ordinary* arrangement for structuring human life. That's the starting point. That's a given. But the question is, might God ever embrace *other* arrangements, or routes that might lead to a similar destination of honoring God? Those that might depart from the customary and ordinary patterns of God's will.

And thanks to some biblical work by Mark Achtemeier, an evangelical professor of theology at Dubuque Seminary, I found a fascinating description about how God goes outside the expected norms and traditions in order to bless. Some of you remember that one of the defining episodes in the history of Israel was when the Babylonians leveled Jerusalem, tore down the temple, and brought the Israelites back to Babylon to serve as slaves in that foreign land.

Well, seventy years later, a pagan ruler named Cyrus the Persian, became an instrument of God's will by allowing the people to return to the promised land of Israel and rebuild the temple. They wanted to get it right this time. They wanted to be the light to the nations God had called them to be. But there was a problem. Way back in the days of Moses, God had warned the men of Israel not to marry women from the surrounding pagan tribes. Why? The

people needed to stay focused on the God who had brought them out of Egyptian slavery and into the land of promise. They did not want to risk diluting or corrupting worship by mingling with foreign cults or pagan deities.

But centuries later, as they began to restore the city and the temple, it came to light that many of those hopeful returnees had in fact married foreigners. The Book of Ezra, chapters 9 and 10, records the nation's response to this crisis. There were those calling to adhere to tradition and the word of God in scripture to separate themselves from all the foreign wives and children.

Enter Malachi the prophet, who brings a word from the Lord that first of all reiterates the command to marry within the tribes of Israel. But then, in the second chapter, he delivers a blistering condemnation of the decision to divorce the foreign wives and children.

*The Lord was a witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.*

Here's the point: In the face of irregular marriages contracted in direct opposition to the divine command, God elects to bring blessing anyway. God rejects in the strongest terms possible the peoples' pious attempts to force their marriages back into God's original plan.<sup>4</sup>

So let me ask: Is this the kind of God who would consider bringing blessing to other kinds of marriage that stand outside the traditional norms?

And is this the same God who stepped outside the traditional norms and expectations when a young, unwed woman turned up pregnant long before her marriage was to be consummated. If Joseph would have simply turned to scriptures, the letter of the law, he could have had Mary stoned to death. It's all there in Deuteronomy. Being a righteous man, he decided just to send Mary off to fend for herself., which would have probably meant a lifetime of begging or prostitution.

According to Matthew, an angel intervened before Joseph could carry out his plan, but can you imagine a more striking sign of God's intention to work outside the traditional biblical laws and customs, and identify with the sexually marginalized? God comes to us, deliberately and scandalously...outside the norms and structures of God's original intention for marriage!<sup>5</sup>

So what is the Spirit of scriptures? It begins with a God who creates us lovingly, who has expectations in all of our relationships whether we are single, married, divorced, partnered, gay or straight, that we live lives based on mutuality, forbearance, forgiveness, equality, fidelity, and yes, love...a love which gives to the other unconditionally and serves God by serving others.

And a God who delights in bringing life and blessing into situations that might stand *outside* the regular norms and bounds of traditional expectations.

It is not a biblical scholar that I want to close with, but a conservative New York Times columnist that I greatly respect, David Brooks. Several years ago he made the case that he hoped conservatives would embrace. ‘

“We are not animals whose lives are bounded by our flesh and by our gender. We’re moral creatures with souls, endowed with the ability to make covenants, such as the one Ruth made with Naomi (incidentally, outside the biblical norms and traditions because Ruth was a Moabite, not an Israelite): “Where you go, I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried.”

He goes on: “The conservative course is not to banish gay people from making marriage commitments. It is to expect that they make such commitments. We shouldn’t just allow gay marriage. We should insist on gay marriage. We should regard it as scandalous that two people could claim to love each other and not want to sanctify their love with marriage and fidelity.

When liberals argue for gay marriage, they make it sound like a really good employee benefits plan. Or they frame it as a civil rights issue, like extending the right to vote.

Marriage is not voting. It’s going to be up to conservatives to make the important, moral case for marriage, including gay marriage. Not making it means drifting further into the culture of contingency.”<sup>6</sup>

We make this moral case, and I believe we will not only be faithful to the God of scriptures who was continually “making all things new,” and obedient to our Savior Jesus Christ who upset the traditional patterns of ordering life, but I also believe with all my heart that this message of grace will enable all sorts of people who have been hearing a word of hate and exclusion about who they are, to come into a church with open hearts and open doors, and find a home.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> The price of not speaking out, and indeed much of this sermon, is indebted to Dr. Mark Achtemeier, an evangelical Presbyterian who is a professor of theology at Dubuque Seminary. His mind has changed on this, which is documented in his recent book, *The Bible’s Yes to Same-Sex Marriage: An Evangelical’s Change of Heart*. Westminster/John Know Press, 2014. Most of the citations in this sermon are from an address he gave to the Covenant Network Regional Conference in October, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> A point Achtemeier makes in his book (p. 129) and his address.

<sup>6</sup> David Brooks, “The Power of Marriage,” *The New York Times*, November 22, 2003. Notice that this was written a decade before the Defense of Marriage Act was struck down by the Supreme Court.