

The Marriage of Disciples

2nd Weekend after the Epiphany – Color: White – January 15/16, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages (NRSV)

Genesis 2:18, 24-25

¹⁸Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”

²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

Hosea 2:16-20

¹⁶On that day, says the LORD, you will call me, “My husband,” and no longer will you call me, “My Baal.” ¹⁷For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be mentioned by name no more. ¹⁸I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. ²⁰I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD.

Hebrews 13:1-5

Let mutual love continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor by all, and let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers. ⁵Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.”

Today we continue our series, “Loving for life.” We consider the biblical understanding of marriage and its relationship to our lives as disciples.

Some Pharisees once came to Jesus asking him about the rules of divorce (Mark 10:1-12; Matthew 19:1-12). The Pharisees, like most of us, were inclined to turn their faith into a rules-making exercise. But Jesus would have none of it; endless lists of rules had led the Jews away from their covenant with God, not toward it. Instead, quoting from Genesis 1:27 and 2:24, Jesus pointed the Pharisees to the larger picture, to the creation and meaning of marriage. And so that is where we will begin.

God creates

The opening chapters of Genesis are foundational to all that follows. In them we learn that God created everything and created humans in his image. We learn that he created the humans in two genders, male and female, so that each might not be alone, but have a partner. And we learn that God created them husband and wife, to be joined in sexual union, to be of one flesh. This is before Jesus, before Moses, before Abraham, before the flood. Even sin had not yet entered the picture. This is the Garden of Eden, a world in which all is right. This is the world into which Jesus draws the Pharisees.

The union of one man and one woman, which we call marriage, is part of God’s created order. It is more than a convenience or a means of managing finances. Marriage is God’s gift to us. Marriage is God’s grace at work. And it is God’s gift to all people. It is important to see that marriage is not part of God’s Law brought to the Israelites by Moses. Marriage is a gift bound up with the very creation of humanity. It is a gift even to those who do not know God.

Do we all get married? Of course not. Do we all stay married? Hardly. Jesus did not marry. The apostle Paul understood his own singleness to be a gift from God, enabling Paul to devote all his

energies to the service of Christ. Marriage does not complete us as persons, yet all of us have a stake in marriage. Our families marry. Our friends marry. Indeed, most of us get married. Yet, many of us do not take marriage nearly as seriously as God does. I know that for many years, I didn't.

A startling metaphor

About 750BC, the Israelites had turned away from God yet again, as they had so many times before. This time, God brought forward a prophet named Hosea, who would use the most startling language and word-pictures to describe the relationship between God and his people. In a nutshell, by chasing after other gods, the people were committing adultery against the LORD God. The covenantal relationship between God and God's people is cast as a marriage. God is the spouse who is being cheated on! God is angry. God is hurt. The Hebrew in the book of Hosea is R-rated at times. Yet God does not abandon the covenant. Instead, God says, "And now, here's what I'm going to do: I'm going to start all over again. I'm taking her out to the wilderness where we had our first date, and I'll court her. I'll give her bouquets of roses. I'll turn Heartbreak Valley into Acres of Hope. She'll respond like she did as a young girl, those days when she was fresh out of Egypt." (Hosea 2:14-15, from *The Message* paraphrase).¹ Could there be a more strikingly personal image of the relationship between God and his people? Centuries later, the prophet Malachi would write, "So look to yourselves, and do not let anyone be faithless to the wife of his youth" (2:15b).

There are a few keys so far: (1) marriage is the union of a man and a woman, (2) marriage is a gift created and given by God, and (3) God uses our marriages as a metaphor for God's covenantal relationship with his people – with you and with me. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that the church has always held marriage to be sacramental, covenantal, and bound up with our discipleship.

Love and Marriage

Last week, we saw the vast gulf between the secular and biblical meanings of love. In the NT, the best synonym for love is sacrifice. Love is self-giving, never self-seeking. We learn what love is from the cross.

The marriage of disciples then is not so much about the feelings of love, as wonderful as they may be, marriage is about the *practice* of love. We do not marry to meet our own needs nor to help us be fulfilled. Marriage is two partners, each seeking good for the other, each sacrificing for the other, each living out a deep and abiding covenant that endures the inevitable difficulties. This is God's hope for us.

Philip Yancey writes, "I went into marriage thinking love would hold us together. I learned instead that it required marriage to learn what love means . . . a unity sealed by God, which enables us to face economic pressures, relocation, illness, and the loss of family and friends, as well as the delights that attracted us to each other in the first place."

Marriage as an aspect of our discipleship

In the biblical view, marriage is a covenant between husband and wife and it is a covenant before God. The UMC affirms "the sanctity of the marriage covenant that is expressed in love, mutual support, personal commitment, and shared fidelity between a man and a woman." As disciples of Jesus Christ we are called to a way of life in which marriage is a covenantal commitment and a witness to others. The writer of Hebrews urged disciples to honor their marriage, mirroring God's faithfulness in their faithfulness to each other. The apostle Paul urged married disciples in Corinth to stay with unbelieving spouses so that the unbeliever might come to know Christ (1 Cor 7:12-16). Paul urged husbands to love their wives just as Christ loved the church and to love their wives just as they love themselves (Ephesians 5:25-33).

In a sermon for the wedding of two friends, Richard Hays, an ordained pastor and preeminent NT scholar, wrote:

"Thus, in making the covenant of marriage, you make a covenant to love one another as God has loved you – that means to love one another unconditionally, freely, sacrificially. In making the covenant of marriage, you promise to become servants of one another in love. In making the covenant of marriage, you form a union that reflects the love of God and stands as a *sign* of God's love in the world. Marriage is a sacrament in the true sense: it is both sign and vehicle of grace."²

¹This passage continues with today's Scripture passage on page 1, Hosea 2:16-20.

²From Hays' chapter, "Divorce and Remarriage," in his 1996 book, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on the biblical understanding of marriage)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Mark 10:2-12 The Pharisees confront Jesus about marriage and divorce</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 19:3-12 This is a parallel passage to Mark 10:2-12. Read it closely and see how they differ. Matthew probably had Mark in front of him as he wrote his own gospel.</p>
<p>Day 3 1 Corinthians 7 Warning! Parts of this chapter are easily misunderstood. Paul does not intend it as a list of universal rules. A good study Bible or commentary will help.</p>	<p>Day 4 Revelation 19:1-10 Heaven rejoices over the marriage of the Lamb (Christ) and his bride (the church).</p>
<p>Day 5 Ephesians 5:21-33 From one of Paul's household codes</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Upcoming Sermon and Teaching Series

Beginning Feb 13: The Lenten series, "The Last Words of Christ"

Beginning April 3: A five-week series on the Apostles Creed

Beginning May 8: A four-week series on Methodist beliefs

January Book Recommendation: *Jesus and His World* by Peter Walker

We are using this book for two Bible Academy classes: *Meeting Jesus* and *The Gospel of Luke*.

This book is an excellent introduction to the life, the times, and the world of Jesus. Walker is obviously a student of N.T. Wright, whose work I have used extensively in these Background Studies. And it has lots of great maps and photos!

Available at *Inspiration*, the St. Andrew bookstore.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Marriage can be difficult. I know, I've been divorced. And it is tempting to focus on the difficulties in staying married or the challenges posed to marriage by our society's often cavalier attitude toward marriage and divorce. But perhaps the place to start is by asking ourselves what marriage is all about. How might we guide our children as they contemplate a serious relationships or living together or perhaps marriage? Whether you are a parent or not, imagine that your child came to you and said he or she was very committed to another person, wanted to live together, but simply didn't see the point of marriage. What would you say? What if your son or daughter were a believer? If not? Would their age matter? How?

As you read through this week's study, in what ways did the biblical understanding of marriage presented here differ from your own? from the secular world? How does being a disciple of Jesus change our perspective on marriage? In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul urges the Corinthian Christians to marry only other Christians. Why do you think he would say this? What do you think of this advice/instruction? What might Paul be saying to us about the marriage of a disciple? Is this advice you would give someone you love? If not, why not? Paul also instructs the Corinthian Christians that they are to stay married to spouses who are unbelievers. Why would Paul urge to them to stay in such a marriage if he also urges them to avoid marriage to an unbeliever?

How would you begin to reeducate Christians about the nature and meaning of love and of marriage? We expend much energy talking about divorce. What if we spent as much energy relearning marriage?