

Marriage

Song of Songs 8:6-7, Ephesians 5:25-33

Center Church, Hartford

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One of my all-time favorite movies is *The Princess Bride*. Because the theme today is marriage, I was very, very tempted to begin this sermon saying, (as in film) “Mawidge!” If you have not seen the film, it is not a huge spoiler to say that in the end of the movie, the brave young man and the woman he loves save each other and come together in a passionate kiss (according to the screenplay, the most passionate of all time!). The film tweaks all the usual stories of fairy tales in some hilarious ways, but essentially it ends like all those stories do: the two lovers ride off into the sunrise, ready to start a new life together. And that’s the end we get.

So many weddings are designed to follow a fairy tale motif, with families spending thousands of dollars on fantasy, which is lovely, but then the honeymoon ends and life goes on. Some couples make it past the fairy tale and into life. Some don’t. For some, the fantasy leads the way into a loving and joyful daily life, despite struggles that come. For others, when real life does not continue to resemble the fantasy, it is just too hard and painful and the relationship has to end.

In a culture where at least half of all marriages end in divorce, and when the current young generational cohorts are putting off marriage with its commitments altogether, it is fascinating to read Paul (who as far as we know never married) comparing the relationship between Christ and the Church to marriage. It would not seem to be a positive metaphor! But I believe we need to reclaim marriage from reality TV and the negative experiences so many people, including some in this room, have had with marriage.

This passage in Ephesians, one of the places Paul uses this metaphor for the church, is rarely read today because of the verses

at the beginning, which I skipped. That's the famous "Wives be subject to your husbands" line. Most people get to that and skip the rest of Ephesians. Which is a shame, because the next verses, instructing husbands, are utterly beautiful, as you heard. Paul calls a husband to love his wife as he loves and cares for his own body, like Christ loves us. Which means being willing to sacrifice for her, nourish and tenderly care for her, become one body with her, and Paul makes pretty clear here he is not referring only to sex, but to a meshing of souls, bodies, spirits, minds which creates a new community of love as a gift to the world.

What a wonderful thought! That spouses of any gender identity or sexual orientation would love each other this fully and dearly and tenderly. And that this kind of marriage would be the model for how the church should live its life.

In many ways, that is the fantasy of the church for Paul. It has not really come true. As one theologian wrote: "Jesus came announcing the Kingdom of God, but what happened was the Church." (Wilhelm Dilthey quoted in Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, p. 283). What was Paul thinking and how does it help us?

First, I think it is a good reminder to those who are in committed relationships about how those relationships might be strengthened. Love and respect, Paul says, are the foundations of marriage. Every once in a while, I believe, all couples ought to assess their marriages with love and respect as the goal.

Second, Paul is trying to tell us that we cannot be Christians without understanding that Christ's love for us and desire to be one with us is as powerful as that deep human bond of love. Christ is committed to us, body, mind and spirit. When we take Communion, we remind ourselves that Christ seeks to be one body with us. Do you really believe that God loves you so much and seeks to empower you to love so much, too? It is true! More than any human relationship, married or not!

Then, Paul is also saying to this little church in Ephesus, just pulling its life together, that you do not need to be a Christian alone, and, in fact, you are not created to be alone, whether or not you are married in the eyes of the law. Paul says that two people committing to one another in marriage is a mysterious thing! How does this happen, that we find another person who is not from our family and commit to be with them for life? That's a huge thing and a bit crazy if you think about it! That powerful love is a mystery, Paul says, and then he adds "And I am applying it to Christ and the church." He doesn't say he is applying it to Christ and the individual Christian. He says we are called into communities of people who understand *their* bodies, minds and spirits to be one with Christ in order to become the body of Christ on earth today. The Church, with all its flaws, and the people who are part of it, with all their flaws, is not the Kingdom of God, but a place where we unite with one another to seek out and strengthen that Kingdom wherever we get a glimpse of its nearness. Rachel Held Evans writes that "Like it or not, following Jesus is a group activity, something we're supposed to do together. We might not always do it within the walls of church or even in an organized religion, but if we are to go about making disciples, confessing our sins, breaking bread, paying attention and [sharing the good news], we're going to need one another. We're going to need each other's help." (Evans, 255) We are here to practice loving one another and the "others" out there like Christ loves us. Together. Sometimes we get it right; sometimes we don't, but the key is to keep trying.

Remember, Paul says in Ephesians that a person who loves their spouse this way also loves themselves! Joining with others to seek the Kingdom of God and try to live as Christ has called us and discovering anew, every time we need it, that God loves us most passionately is a gift to us! We can't change our lives or the world alone. Most days we can't get through the struggles of a single day alone. What Paul calls the "mystery" includes the wonder that people who, for the most part, are not related to us, who often are not part of our lives outside of church activities, who are strangers, others, in every way, become one body with us, not by physical

contact, but by soul joining in seeking God, in learning how to love again and again and again, in trying to infect the world with the virus of love.

Wouldn't it be interesting if, when new people join the church, we shared vows like couples who marry do? What if new members said to us, and then we said back to them, these words: "I give myself to you to be a member of this body of Christ. I promise to love and sustain you in the covenant of discipleship from this day forward, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as we live." And what if we placed a ring on our Communion table and we said each week "by this symbol of covenant promise, Gracious God, remind us of your encircling love and unending faithfulness that in all our life together we may know joy and peace in one another." And perhaps our benediction each week should be these words said near the end of a wedding: "We have committed ourselves to each other in this joyous and sacred covenant. Become one. Fulfill your promises. Love and serve God, honor Christ and each other, and rejoice in the power of the Holy Spirit!"

Well, we just did all these things. The idea is to enter into the mystery of love and make it more than a fantasy for the movies. The idea is to live into the mystery, find the deep joy, what C.S. Lewis called "the deep magic," and make love real, tangible, holy, everywhere. The funny priest in the Princess Bride describes love as "that dream within a dream." And so it is, our dream encircled by God's dream for us. But we need to be awake in this world, and let our love be tender, sacrificial, mutual, respectful and holy, with everyone. It's hard work, sometimes, like all human relationships, and filled with mistakes. Persevere, friends, like God perseveres with us. Amen.