

Til Death Do Us Part

A sermon based on Song of Songs 2:10-14 and 8:6-7

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A fledgling clergyman, faced with his first wedding ceremony, sought counsel from a more seasoned minister, who told the young man several things to consider and made one final suggestion. “If you ever forget what you’re supposed to say,” he advised, “just quote Scripture. It’s always appropriate to quote Scripture.”

The wedding day arrived, and though the young clergyman was just as nervous as the bride and groom, he did a great job in conducting the marriage ceremony until he got to the part in the ceremony in which he was to pronounce the young couple “husband and wife,” at which point his mind went blank! He couldn’t remember what to say! And then, recalling the advice he was given, he quoted the only Scripture verse that came to mind: “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Ralph Milton, who will be in Ottawa this fall to lead a workshop on the “Art of Storytelling,” says that his first real journey of risk was marriage! Milton writes, “I lay awake the entire night before (my) wedding arguing back and forth with myself. I now know I did the right thing for all the wrong reasons.”

The gifted writer, Madeleine L’Engle, reflecting upon her marriage to actor Hugh Franklin, says, “Neither of us knew the person we had promised to live with for the rest of our lives. The first bitter lessons of marriage consisted in learning to love the person we had actually married, instead of the image we wanted to have married.” (The Irrational Season)

The Pain of Marital Failure

Not only does marriage require some initial adjustments—depending upon whether our ideas of marriage or knowledge of our prospective spouse has any connection with reality—it requires continual adjustments. As we develop in mind and body—some of us for better, some of us for worse—and as the seasons of life change us and the circumstances of life shape us, it is a challenge to keep a marriage relationship sufficiently elastic to meet all of those challenges, yet sufficiently solid to weather them!

There is no such thing as a perfect marriage or a perfect family. Some of the Christmas letters we receive pretend to portray perfect families, but they are usually more humorous than insightful. There are also marriages and families in which everyone plays it safe—never discussing misunderstandings, never revealing hurt feelings, never airing frustrations or asking difficult questions—but they are only perfect on the surface, not in substance. Unresolved conflicts eventually erode a relationship. Little packets of resentment, if not dealt with, become big, heavy parcels of resentment, giving growth to detachment and distrust, if not anger and bitterness. It happens in marriages. It happens in families. It happens in friendships.

We may manage to cobble together a good marriage, but there are few if any perfect marriages and families. Adam and Eve didn’t have one; one of their children murdered

the other. Abraham and Sarah didn't have one, Abraham at one point posing as Sarah's brother so that he wouldn't be killed, though the fact that she might end up in Pharaoh's harem didn't seem to bother him as much. Isaac and Rebekah's relationship was full of deceit, treachery and envy! Even Joseph and Mary's marriage had its rough spots, particularly at the beginning!

I don't find it easy to preach the kind of sermons I've often heard that offer helpful hints on how to reflect the perfect love of God in the imperfect, intimate, human relationships of marriage and family. In fact, as I look back on twenty-four years of preaching, I realize that I have not preached a lot of sermons on marriage and family. There may be various reasons for this. In my better moments, or perhaps my cockier moments, it seems to me that in the Christian view of life one's word can be trusted. If you promise to be true to another person for life, that word is trustworthy. If you set your hand to the plough (Luke 9:62), then you plough with that plough, and not with the one beside it!

In my humbler moments, I have resisted being too cocky about family values because I realize that there, but for the grace of God, go I! Any one of our marriages can fail. Adulterous impulses can come upon any one of us. None of us enjoy immunity to the forces that erode, if not destroy the trust a relationship requires to thrive.

Perhaps another reason I have not beaten the "marriage and family values" theme to death is that the destructive effects of a marriage break-up are only too self-evident. Rare is the person who can walk away from a marriage without some measure of pain and suffering. Unless one considers a spouse, like a product off the shelf, disposable—unless one is in heavy denial, selfish in the extreme, or mentally unbalanced, the failure of a marriage affects us at the core of our being. The corrosive effect upon trust, upon confidence, upon one's spirit, are only too evident, and I have no wish to compound the pain of those who have suffered in this way.

Those are my reactions in my cocky moments and in my more empathetic moments. In my mournful moments, it saddens me deeply that in the last two years four people have found mates at OMC at the expense of marriages already in effect. Adultery is still within the purview of biblical commandments. And although many of us have shied away from a legalistic implementation of biblical injunctions concerning divorce and remarriage, we dare not do so at the expense of a relationship that in the biblical scheme of things is sacred.

Now, I suppose one can yield to an attitude of determinism and say, "These things aren't supposed to happen," as if we didn't have any choice in the matter, and to those who would so yield, there is help from genetic research. Scientists in Atlanta, Georgia, experimenting with mice, have found that by altering the contents of a single gene, a lecherous mouse can be turned into a devoted mate. Genetically altered mice who received a strand of DNA from a monogamous rodent, showed twice the rate of "bonding behaviours"—defined as romantic grooming, sniffing and quiet cuddling with their mates—as normal mice, which, apparently, are considered the notorious playboys of the animal world! ("Gene swap turns lecherous mice into devoted mates," Ottawa Citizen, August 19, 1999)

Failure, Forgiveness, Hope, and Trust

The strange ways of "mice and men" notwithstanding, we make choices, and in the Christian view of life we value human freedom—the freedom God has given us to

exercise our will by making choices, for better or for worse. Marital misunderstandings need not lead to marital failure.

Madeleine L'Engle, reflecting upon 29 years of marriage in a piece entitled, "To a long-loved love," marvels at the longevity of her marriage. It's a "good" marriage, she believes, but, she says, "I've learned something...about family and failure and promises: when a promise is broken, the promise still remains. In one way or another, we are all unfaithful to each other... We do break our most solemn promises, and sometimes we break them when we don't even realize it... I can look at the long years of my marriage with gratitude, and hope for many more, only when I accept our failures." "No long-term marriage is made easily," she writes, "and there have been times when I've been so angry or so hurt that I thought my love would never recover. And then, in the midst of near despair, something has happened beneath the surface. A bright little flashing fish of hope has flicked silver fins and the water is bright and suddenly I am returned to a state of love again...." (The Irrational Season)

Marriages can be submerged in utter darkness, but they don't necessarily stay submerged. Each time something is learned, something is gained, something is deepened. That something good and satisfying and enduring can be built on countless failures is a mystery—and a gift. Somehow or other, through grace, our failures are forgiven, redeemed and transformed into even deeper love and trust.

The Beauty of Faithfulness

If this is your first time in our church this month, I should explain that this is the last in a series of sermons on the biblical theme of faithfulness. In the first sermon I encouraged trust in God's faithfulness, stressing that in the biblical scheme of things human trust and confidence is derivative of trust in God. In the second sermon I invited us to become clusters of faithfulness, a community of faith built upon mutual trust. Throughout the series I have used saskatoon berries as the symbolic fruit of faithfulness, and while this image has worn a bit thin for anyone not born on the prairies, the high fibre content, sweet taste, and hardiness of these berries remind me of similar characteristics of the spiritual fruit of faithfulness.

Hardy though they may be, saskatoon berries can have a bad season, and there are insects and diseases that can damage them. Be it the saskatoon budmoth (*Epinota bicordana*), the saskatoon sawfly (*Hoplocampa montanica*), various other insects, or various fungi and bacteria, these delicious berries are vulnerable to damage. Similarly, relationships as intimate and vulnerable as a marriage relationship can be severely damaged by the distrust caused by the blight of unfaithfulness.

I'd like to suggest that the times when we feel tempted to taste the fruit of unfaithfulness may be the time to take an interior audit, to embark upon an interior, spiritual journey, but it may be much easier to acknowledge its need than to do it. Perhaps our marriages are better served by appealing to the beauty of faithfulness than by berating its inferior alternative.

A young man who wanted to learn all about jade went to study with a famous teacher, an elderly gentleman who put a piece of jade into the young man's hand and told him to hold it tight. Then the old man began to talk of philosophy, men, women, the sun, and almost everything under it. After an hour, he took back the stone and sent the young man home. The same ritual was repeated for weeks, causing the young lad no little

frustration. "When would he be told about jade?" he wondered, but he was too polite to interrupt his venerable teacher. Then one day, as the predictable ritual began, the old man put an ordinary stone into the young man's hand. Instantly the young lad cried out, "That's not jade!" He now knew the feel of jade, and could not be fooled by a substitute or a counterfeit.

Just as the beauty of God's holiness is more appealing than the fear of God's judgment and wrath, so too it behooves us as a community of God, rather than berating the poison fruit of unfaithfulness, to appeal to the beauty of faithfulness. Just as the sugar content of saskatoon berries increases slowly as the fruit matures and then accelerates markedly before ripening, so too, perhaps, the sweet and attractive flavour of faithfulness increases with experience and age.

It's rather ironic that the beauty of faithfulness should be discovered in a marriage made in Hollywood, to a man known on the screen as Superman, but who is, in reality, a very broken man. No doubt you know of the horse accident several years ago that left the actor, Christopher Reeves, a quadriplegic. Reeves has written about the events that took place after his tragic accident, for it wasn't long after the accident that he found himself thinking, "Why not die and save every one a lot of trouble?" He remembers making eye contact with his wife, Dana, and mouthing his first lucid words to her: "Maybe we should let me go." Dana started crying, and said, "I am only going to say this once: I will support whatever you want to do... but I want you to know that I'll be with you for the long haul, no matter what. "Then she added the words that saved my life," writes Reeves, "You're still you. And I love you." (Christopher Reeves, Still Me)

The moving beauty of faithfulness can also be seen in the story of a man who daily visits his wife who suffers from Alzheimer's disease. The spouse of another Alzheimer's patient watched him as he faithfully fed her every bite of food, bathed her, and dressed her. She says, "I cannot describe the tenderness and love that man shows for his wife (even after eight years). She is unable to recognize anyone, including him. ...I observed him when I parked my car beside his the other day. He sat in his old pickup truck for a few minutes, ...patted down what little hair he had, straightened the threadbare collar of his shirt and looked in the mirror for a final check before going in to see his wife. It was as if he were courting her. They have been partners all these years and have seen each other under all kinds of circumstances, yet he carefully groomed himself before he called on (her)...."

The Old Testament love poem, Song of Songs, may appeal to us when we are young, when its descriptions of a lover as a "gazelle" or a "young stag" may have some basis in reality. (2:9) Song of Songs also describes love, however, as a "seal upon our heart." "Love is strong as death," says Song of Songs, "passion (is as) fierce as the grave... Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it. If one offered for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly scorned." (2:6-7)

I watched, this summer, as my brother-in-law tenderly nursed his dying wife. I watched this free spirit tied down by illness, but subjecting to it without grumble or complaint. It's the second time he's lost a wife to illness, and I don't imagine it's any easier the second time around. It was painful to see a humble man suffer such loss, but it was incredibly moving to be a witness to the beauty of faithfulness. No doubt you too can think of men and women whose deep sense of faithfulness has endured either death or an eternity in life.

This summer Rob Hilkes preached on the theme of goodness, and suggested, among other things, that we only increase in goodness as we are willing to become vessels of God's goodness. A profound insight, and no less applicable to faithfulness. We need to offer ourselves and our marriages as vessels of God's faithfulness.

The vows exchanged at a wedding—for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish “till death do us part”—may seem all but impossible to keep, but by holding fast to each other in trust, in patience, in hope, and by holding fast also to the One whose faithfulness inspires our own, the beauty of faithfulness emerges and becomes sweeter and sweeter.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.