

### Marriage: As Long As We Both Shall Live

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, July 7, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Last week I was watching a Phillies game and Kay said to me, "Listen to this article about marriage." "Quiet!" I said, "Eisenreich's up." Unruffled, she went on, "The two most important ingredients in a lasting marriage are respect for one another's opinions and good communication." I said, "That's stupid! I don't want to talk about it." I was reading an interview Cher Bono gave to the National Enquirer about what makes for lasting marriages. She said that "husbands are like fires. They go out when unattended." Marriage counselor Nigel Stapley of Wales in the United Kingdom has his unconventional ideas as to how to make marriages last. He advises women, "Marry an ugly, overweight man; then in thirty years' time, you won't notice the difference as much."

On a more serious note, I know a woman who has very definite ideas as to why her marriage has lasted over fifty years. For nearly ten years she has visited her Alzheimer's stricken husband in a nursing home every day. She holds his hand. She feeds him. She kisses him good-bye. Never once has her husband acknowledged that he knows who she is. Someone asked her, "Why do you do this?" She said, "I made a promise - in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live."

I think of another couple. On their honeymoon the bride dove into a mountain lake, hit her head on an unseen tree stump,

and broke her neck. She'll be paralyzed from her neck down for the rest of her life. That was ten years ago. Her husband, still young, strong, and healthy has stayed with her. They can never enjoy normal sexual relationships. Most likely they'll never have children. Why does he stay? He says, "I love her and, besides, we made promises."

Why should those two stick themselves with a commitment for life under those circumstances? Why should anybody make a life-long commitment when none of us has an inkling of what the future holds for us? According to the World Book about two and a half million Americans will make lifetime marriage commitments this year. Most of them expect to keep their commitments. Almost half of them will split within fifteen years. The figures discourage us. But, look at it another way. I'm impressed that half of them will stick with their marriages through thick and thin.

This year I've married three couples. Each of them made a lifetime commitment. Each of them were convinced that nothing will ever destroy their marriage. They swore to be loving and faithful as long as they both live. Fools! They have no idea what they've gotten into? So much can happen later on. So many things are beyond our control. I hope and pray those couples make it. But the big question is why should the church require them to make promises to stick together for life? How unrealistic can you get? Why doesn't the church work up more reasonable vows like "I'll stay with you unless you get stomach

cancer." Or "I'll be with you as long as you stay thin." A lifetime commitment doesn't have escape clauses.

So - does a lifetime commitment really make sense today? Lifelong commitments once made sense when the average life-span was thirty or forty years and many women died in childbirth. But do lifelong commitments make sense today? After all, married couples change. They change physically, emotionally, intellectually. They often change in ways that create conflict. Lewis Smedes quotes a husband who says, "I've grown a lot since we've been married, but Jean just hasn't kept up. Now she's holding me back. I know that she has to grow at the pace she thinks is right for her. But we can't grow together anymore. We can only grow apart. So the decent thing for me to do is leave her." Do lifelong commitments really make sense anymore? After all, we switch jobs. We trade in cars. We change from Baptist to Presbyterian to Methodist. Why not do the same with marriage? Why not a six month trial marriage like a six month subscription to a magazine to see if you like it? Why not a four year marriage lease with an option to renew?

Why should a couple start their married life together with a promise to make it last forever? Well, for one thing, we need to keep our promises because we need to trust each other. When we love someone deeply - when we give love to someone - and, especially, when we make love with them, sexual love, - we allow ourselves to be very, very vulnerable. We need to keep promises because the sadness of being left alone after we've given such a sensitive part of ourselves away can be chilling (Smedes). Can

you imagine what life would be like if your lover could never give you a promise more firm than "I'll try to be there for you, but don't count on it." We need to keep our promises because we need to trust someone to care for us during the low periods in our life - when we're too weak, too tired, too depressed to take care of ourselves. We need to know when we're down and out our spouse will be there to keep their promises (Smedes). We need to hear our spouse say, in the words of Elizabeth Barrett Browning,

I love thee with the breath,  
Smiles, tears, of all my life!

We also need to make lifelong commitments because our children need to trust us. When you make a commitment to a spouse, you also make a commitment to whatever children you bring into the world. Archibald Hart says in his book Children of Divorce, that when children lose one of their parents to a divorce, they feel it the way a parent feels a death in the family... they feel caught and wounded in the conflict... they fear what will happen to them next... they have a guilty hunch that it's their fault. But the good news is that children of divorce usually survive and often succeed despite the hurt and grief they feel (Smedes).

And there's another reason we need to keep our commitments. "Marriage is for the welfare and happiness of humankind." Our community needs to trust us. Many people relate rising crime, drug abuse, physical and sexual abuse, and poverty directly to the break down of families. Our communities need to trust people to make lifetime commitments and keep them (Smedes).

But are there no exceptions? Yes! There are exceptions. A spouse who's being physically and emotionally abused needs to get out of that relationship. The Church recognizes that marriages sometimes die. Adultery and abandonment can kill a marriage. We recognize divorce and the possibility of remarriage after divorce. Our church welcomes divorced and remarried couples. Our church would be in bad shape without the gifts divorced and remarried men and women share with us. We're blessed with single parents who juggle their commitments to work, family and church. So the church recognizes exceptions to the rule, but let's not forget the rule. The rule is that marriage involves a lifetime commitment of husband and wife to one another in plenty and in want, joy and sorrow, sickness and in health as long as they both shall live.

Maybe, as a church, we should celebrate marriages that last. Throw a big party once a year for every couple celebrating their first, their twenty-fifth and their fiftieth wedding anniversary. We need to be more supportive of married couples. That's why Skip and Joanne Cheek organized a group to view a series of video tapes entitled *Loving Relationships*. We'll meet next on July 19 at our home. I hope more of you will attend. If you have young children, hire a baby sitter. Go out to an early dinner with your spouse - come to our house to view a video and discuss it afterwards.

The times may be changing with regard to lifelong commitments. A New York Times article says that growing numbers of secular marriage counselors now believe they ought to try

harder to keep marriages together. The article quotes Michele Weiner-Davis, a marriage therapist, who writes, "In the 60's and 70's people really thought that the cause of their unhappiness was their spouse, and if they could get rid of that person, they'd be happy." Instead, she says, "divorce creates wounds that never go away."

Christians are a people whose ideas about marriage are shaped continually by the Biblical story - especially those betrothal stories like the one I read this morning about Rebekkah and Isaac. And those love poems like the one I read from the Song of Solomon. The Biblical stories were shaped within a patriarchal culture which oppressed women - allowed polygamy - promoted a double sexual standard - looked upon women as possessions of fathers and husbands - but we believe that those stories also challenge and reshape culture in ways that lead to the kingdom of God. We especially believe that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and his relationship to his church shows us most clearly the meaning of love and faithfulness in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and health.

And, in the words of Matthew Arnold, in his great poem, "Dover Beach",

Ah, love, let us be true  
To one another!

Let us pray: God of grace, enrich with your grace all people, single, married, or divorced, parents and children, that loving and supporting one another, they may serve those in need and be a sign of your kingdom. Grant that the bonds by which all your children are united to one another may be so transformed by your Spirit that your peace and justice may fill the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.