

About two months ago my sister told me in a letter that her beloved minister and his wife were getting a divorce. That afternoon one of our boys told us that a friend's parents were breaking up. Later I was shocked to read in *Christianity Today* about a well known Christian writer who was getting a divorce. She's written several books on how to have a happy marriage. Then I came across a news article about a Californian woman 100 years old who was divorcing her husband because he wouldn't stop chasing girls, and he was 103. Yesterday I read an article on the first page of the Buffalo News about a woman who put a classified ad in the paper to sell her husband.

In the light of all this bad news about marriage what is the good news? What is the Gospel? This morning our Scripture lessons deal with marriage. ~~The Genesis passage speaks of the institution of marriage. The~~ Psalm pictures a happy family. The Gospel lesson is about divorce. The epistle, though not directly related to marriage, speaks of Jesus as our brother in the family of God. This morning I'd like to take a closer look at the Genesis passage and the Gospel lesson. My sermon has three points.

1. The purpose of marriage.
2. The permanence of marriage.
3. The parable of marriage.

First, the purpose of marriage. In our OT lesson God says, "It's not good for the man to be alone." Now this is really a remarkable statement. Adam *wasn't* alone. He was living in a close, personal relationship with God. He walked and talked with God in the Garden. Yet God says, "It's not good for the man to be alone." Adam needed something more than a relationship with God. He needed a relationship with someone who was bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh. This says something profound

about the purpose of marriage. The first purpose for marriage mentioned in the Bible is companionship between two equals.

Think of that! God didn't create Eve simply to satisfy Adam's sexual appetites. That's how some people view the purpose of marriage. They see men or women only as sex objects. Sex is an important part of marriage but that isn't the primary purpose of marriage. The primary purpose is companionship, the companionship of equals. This is something Adam couldn't have with the animals who were below him or with God who was above him. God took Eve from Adam's side so that he'd see this person as an equal and a friend. In a recent survey in *Psychology Today* the question was asked, "What keeps a marriage going?" The top reasons given by both men and women were, "My spouse is my best friend. I like my spouse as a person."—One of the great jobs of the church is to help married couples to learn to enjoy one another's company. To help them to be, not only lovers, but friends.

It's not good to be alone. That's true whether or not you're married. Of course we all need time to be by ourselves. Jesus went off on his own to pray. Some of us need more time to be alone than others. But a solitary lifestyle isn't good. We're created for relationships, not only with God, but with one another. That doesn't mean everybody should get married or that being married is superior to being single. But it does mean that whether you're married, single, divorced, or widowed-- it's not good to be alone. We need one another. If I might say it reverently, not even God is enough. We need someone who is bone of our bones and flesh of our flesh.

That's why I believe that every Christian needs to be a part of a small group within the local church. We need to come together to worship in large groups but it's absolutely essential for Christian growth to be a part

of a small group of fellow Christians where you can support and help one another. Married couples, singles, widowed people; divorced people *especially* need the support of brothers and sisters in Christ in a small group where you can study the Scripture, pray, and share your burdens and joys with one another. It's not an option, it's a necessity for spiritual growth. It's not good to be alone.

Secondly, our Lord spoke of the permanence of marriage.

Someone once asked the wife of Billy Graham if the two of them had ever considered divorce. Mrs. Graham quickly responded, "Divorce? No! Murder? Yes!" Some pharisees asked Jesus a similar question, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus says that there shouldn't be divorce for any reason. I think we'd all agree with that. There shouldn't be divorce. But we know in reality divorce happens and it happens to Christians. And I believe an important function of the church is to provide the supportive, accepting relationships that are so much needed by those suffering the painful grief of divorce. It takes a long time for divorced people to work through their grief and anger and guilt. It takes even longer where the church isn't there to help. *

If your husband or wife *dies* there's a funeral. Your friends come by to comfort you. The pastor leads a service of remembrance. The next Sunday prayers are offered for the bereaved. You remember your loved one every year by placing flowers in the church in his memory. But when a marriage ends in divorce people so often bear the weight of loss alone. The church has no service for the divorced. No prayers are offered; no flowers of remembrance. Too often the church offers no support for the divorced person.

The church that takes the marriage covenant seriously will teach the

* This is one of the most difficult verses in the Bible. It has been used by the church to heap up a sense of guilt on the hearts of divorced people who have remarried. That is not what it was intended to do.

permanence of marriage but at the same time support those whose marriages have failed. The church needs to come alongside people who hurt, and offer them the redemptive, healing grace of God. As Henri Nouwen says, we need to be committed to membership in a community of "wounded healers." This can happen only where there are growth groups within the church. Small cells provide relationships necessary for leveling with one another in love for the purpose of Christian growth; relationships where we call one another to commitment, and where we encourage and support one another and bear one another's burdens when we fail.

We've talked now about the purpose of marriage and the permanence of marriage. Now, thirdly, let's look at the parable of marriage. - Jesus so often spoke of marriage as a parable of his relationship to his people. Jesus is the bridegroom and the church is his bride. I believe Jesus had this in mind when he spoke the words in our Scripture lesson. He knew he was headed for the cross. He knew his own people would betray him, spit on him, mock him and turn him over to be killed. He knew that he had a right to turn his back on his bride, and divorce her. But he didn't. God had brought them together and nothing was going to put them assunder.

Think of that. Everyday there are so many areas that we reject the authority of Christ; in our lifestyles, in our national priorities, in our personal lives, and in our very thoughts. But Jesus hangs in there with us. He doesn't get rid of us. He puts up with us. He still loves us. What a parable of marriage that is. What a magnificent parable of God's love for us.

In a few moments we'll sing,

O love that wilt not let me go,
 I rest my weary soul in Thee;
 I give Thee back the life I owe,
 That in Thine ocean depths its flow
 May richer, fuller be.

Human love fails. Sometimes marriages fail. But God's love never fails. His love never lets us go. We need so much as a church to grow in the knowledge of that love and experience it in the depths of our beings.

Love so amazing, so divine,
 Demands my soul, my life, my all.

Let us pray: Lord God, you have placed us all in families. Help us learn to live together in love and truth. Strengthen weak Bonds of love, where separation threatens move in with forgiving power. Help ~~also~~ men and women whose marriages break up to know that you are faithful. Restore confidence, bring understanding, and ease the hurt of separation. If they marry others, instruct them in better love so that vows made be said and kept with new resolve. Help us all whether we are married, single, divorced or widowed to live together as a close family with Christ our older brother, and you as our faithful heavenly father. Through Christ we pray. Amen.