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## A Word about Marriage

Matthew 22:23-33

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Northway Christian Church ~ Dallas, Texas

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It was the third occurrence of cancer that proved fatal. In 1982 Mirth Vos, a psychotherapist and the wife of a Christian Reformed minister up north, had had an ovarian cyst removed that turned out to be malignant. She survived that scare. In 1990, Mirth had a radical mastectomy to deal with a diagnosis of breast cancer. When she hit the five year survivor mark, Mirth thought that she was home free. And then in 1996 she received the devastating news that her breast cancer had turned up in her lungs, and that it was going to eventually, inevitably kill her.

As Mirth started down that long, hard road she began to keep a journal that has now been published under the title Letters to Myself on Dying: A Journal of Hope, Pain and Courage (Baker 1999). It's an insightful and spiritually sensitive book; brutally honest and ultimately hopeful. One of the things that Mirth struggled with mightily in the days of her dying was what would happen to her marriage. For some forty years she had partnered with a good man she loved more than anyone else in the world. And the thought of the loss of that intimate relationship that had defined her and sustained her left her sad and confused. She agonized over what her dying would mean for her relationship with her husband. And her spiritual struggle finally came down to what she called "*loving in the right order*" (122). Would she love Christ more than she loved her husband? Could she value her relationship with Christ more highly than she valued her relationship with her husband? Mirth talked about this spiritual struggle as a sacrifice, "*the sacrifice of her husband's privileged place in her heart.*"

It was at a Minister's Conference where Dr. Mel Hugen, a professor of theology at Calvin College, was talking about Christianity and sexuality that this struggle finally began to resolve for Mirth. "*He stressed the universality of a human's longing to be fully known in relationships of intimacy. The creation structure of marriage attempts to fill this longing, he said, but really it is in union with Christ that we are fully known, and in that union we are also known to each other... He noted that the Bible uses the same word for "union with a marriage partner" as it does for "union of the church with Christ".... (And then) he concluded that this is why there will be no marriage in heaven and no sexual relationships for persons with glorified bodies. The church's union will be with Christ.*" (146-147).

And Mirth said that as she carefully took her notes on what Dr. Hugen was saying, that a surprising peace came over her heart in its struggle with the thought of her separation from her husband by her impending death. *“The relationship I treasure so much,”* Mirth explained, *“is just a stand-in, a glimmer of a far more satisfying relationship: union with Christ”* (147). And understanding this changed everything for Mirth.

Marriage has been called *“a prophetic symbol”* (Lawler 1). When you read the books of the Hebrew Prophets you will see them occasionally act out a word from the Lord. For example, the prophet Jeremiah was told by God to take a pottery vessel and to dash it to the ground in the presence of the people of Jerusalem as the visible sign accompanying his words that the Lord was about to break them (19:1-3). And the prophet Ezekiel was told by God to take a brick and draw on it a profile of the city of Jerusalem, and then to put it on the ground in front of him so that he could mound up piles of dirt around it as a sign of the siege that was coming and the judgment of God that was about to befall them. To make vivid God’s point of view, God’s prophets sometimes used props as visual aids.

And in the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New, no image gets used more frequently to describe the relationship between God and God’s people than does the image of marriage. To describe God’s longing for us and to illustrate the meaning of God’s very special covenant relationship with us, it is to the human institution of marriage that the Biblical authors return again and again. There are lots of texts that we could turn to this morning in defense of this claim, but none, I suppose, quite like the Song of Songs.

If you haven’t read the Song of Solomon recently, then you don’t know what you’re missing. It is the book of the Bible for mature readers. A love poem with an appreciation for the physical aspects of male and female attraction, affection and attachment, the Song of Solomon is a book in the Bible that never mentions God, or prayer, or faith, or salvation, not even once. When our Jewish fathers were debating what books should be in their Bible, there was a serious question about the Song of Songs. What business does a book of love poetry, especially one as graphic as the Song of Solomon is, have being in the Bible, the collection of God’s words to us?

Well, the argument that carried the day and got the Song of Songs finally included in the collection was that it had to be read in two ways, on two levels. It’s celebration of human love and the appropriateness of sexual expression and even celebration in the context of the covenantal bond of marriage is an affirmation of the foundational Biblical idea that God created us, male and female God created us, and that it is very good (Genesis 1:26-31). Biblically there is no shame in our sexuality and no guilt in its expression so long as it occurs in the proper context: a committed, monogamous and permanent relationship, in other words, marriage. And if that’s all there was to the Song of Songs, the only way it could be read, then I suppose that it has its place in the Divine scheme of things. But there’s more.

You see, both Jewish and Christian readers of this book have always thought that there was more to it than just its description of the love of a man and a woman. They have found in its accounts of passion and pursuit a powerful picture of God’s love for us. In the way that the beloved is sought by her lover in

the Song of Songs, they have argued that we have a glimpse into the very heart of God, so that when the poet cries out “*I am my beloved’s, and his desire is for me*” (7:10), we are not just talking about the union of the hearts on a human plane, but the union of the hearts on a divine plane, God’s and ours.

Joseph Aldrich in his book on Lifestyle Evangelism argues that one of the greatest forces for effective evangelism in the world today is a healthy marriage (21). And that’s because a healthy marriage is a prophetic sign. It always points to a reality so much bigger than itself, our relationship with God. In the marriage relationship of a man and a woman we have a sacred analogy of the relationship between God and ourselves. This is why in some Christian traditions marriage is regarded as a sacrament; an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible reality. But no matter how highly we think and speak of the spiritual dimensions of marriage, we must never forget that it is at best a sign, and as such it is always going to be less than that to which it points.

I’ve been truly blessed with a good, solid marriage. Mary Lynn and I have been husband and wife now for nearly 31 years. There is no one I know better or love more in this life than I do Mary Lynn. But Mary Lynn hasn’t made me perfectly or permanently happy. She can’t. Mary Lynn has made me happier than anybody else ever has, or possibly could, but there is still a certain degree of incompleteness in my life even though I am loved by this good woman. And I’m not alone. What I’ve just said of me in my relationship with Mary Lynn can be said of Mary Lynn in her relationship with me too, and of all of us. We’ve got an itch as human beings that not even marriage can scratch.

Now, when some people discover that their husbands or wives are not going to be able to make them fully or finally happy, they make the mistake of thinking that the problem is with their partner. And some decide to make a change in that imperfect, incomplete relationship thinking that they will be able to find somebody else who will make them truly happy. The problem is that nobody and nothing in this life is ever going to be able to finally or fully complete us. There is a discontent planted by God somewhere deep in our souls. This is what St. Augustine was talking about when he said that God made us for Himself, and that our hearts will be restless until they rest in Him. Marriage is the most fulfilling earthly relationship of which we are capable as human beings, but even it will leave us longing for something more.

I think this is why Jesus told us in our Scripture lesson this morning that marriage is just not a meaningful category for thinking and talking about what we will experience when we get to heaven. Now, I don’t think that this means that the relationships that have filled our lives with such meaning and joy here will be of absolutely no consequence there. In heaven I think that I will know that Norm and Jean were my parents, that Diane and Dana were my sisters, that Mary Lynn was my wife and that Anna and Danny were my children. I can’t imagine that the people I’ve known the best and loved the longest in this world will “*become more distant*” in the world to come (Alcorn 336). I don’t believe that those significant relationships of intimacy that were begun here on earth are going to get lost in heaven. But neither do I believe that they will be merely continued. Instead I believe that they will be transformed, fulfilled. In the marriage of Christ with His bride (and that’s us - the church) I believe that we will find our true identities

affirmed and we will experience the completion of all of our significant relationships. And that means that things in heaven will not just be the same for us as they were here on earth; they will be better, so much “*more than we can possibly hope or imagine.*”

In a rather provocative argument about heaven, C.S. Lewis once talked about a little boy who was told that the greatest physical pleasure in this life was what men and women felt when they got romantic and started hugging and kissing each other. Hearing this, that little boy asked, “*Are they eating chocolate at the same time?*” And when he was told “*no,*” that little boy became terribly confused. You see, at his age he couldn’t imagine a higher pleasure in life than eating chocolate. And so he was reluctant to believe that there could ever be anything better, even though we who have been hugged and kissed know that there certainly is. And we who have known the delight of being hugged and kissed by someone who is absolutely committed in love to us might easily conclude, just like that little boy with his chocolates, that nothing could ever be better. But something is, and marriage is its sign.

Here and now we can’t conceive of anything better than the union of a husband and wife in the loving bonds of holy matrimony. Those who don’t have it seek it. Those who have it always wish it could be better. Those who have had it and lost it grieve it. And those who have never had it wonder about it and what they’ve missed. Because we are made for intimacy, we instinctively long for the companionship, the affection and the understanding that marriage promises. But even when a marriage delivers all of this, there are going to be some gaps, and I believe that those gaps are just God’s way of keeping our loving in the right order.

A good marriage is a great gift, but you know, even at its very best it is still far less than what God has in store for those who trust Jesus Christ as their Savior and who follow Him as their Lord. Regardless of your marriage status here this morning, it is Christ’s great desire to have you be His bride. The intimacy that we all long for here, and occasionally catch glimpses of in our imperfect relationships of depth and trust, will have its fulfillment there in our union with Christ. As somebody has said, “*The purpose of marriage is not to replace heaven, but to prepare us for it.*” (Alcorn 336).

## Sources

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