

Marriage Between the Times

When I was beginning my first pastorate in North Carolina, my very first wedding ceremony presented a dilemma. The groom was a good Presbyterian who had fallen in love with a good Roman Catholic. That was not the problem because I considered myself very open-minded. I knew the Catholic priest in town. We both belonged to the ministerial association; and I loved conversation with him. We would simply officiate together. However, conversation with my priest friend was entertaining because of his Irish brogue. Being Irish Catholic 50 years ago meant there was no way, not in the world of the 1970's, that he would participate in any form or fashion in a mixed wedding ceremony. It was forbidden by his culture; forbidden by church law. In the end, I performed the wedding by myself.

That story reminds me of the changes that have taken place in my lifetime in the way we understand the institution of marriage. The very words, "mixed marriages," are out of date. The marriage license issued by the state of Virginia no longer asks the religion of the bride or groom. Identifying your race on the license is optional. One's religion, race and sexual identity have become irrelevant to the state. If the couple comes to the church for a wedding, the pastor can only hope and pray they come expecting a Christian service. Not every couple comes with a Christian background. I find that pre-marital counseling today includes some education about the language of a Presbyterian wedding. I have to explain that "those who abide in love, abide in God..." is not new age; it's actually a verse from the Bible.

Another change: A dear friend of ours is a boiler maker. He makes and services the boilers that provide heat for homes and offices and also the boilers used in brewing beer. He's a good mechanic and business man. A few years ago, he sat down at his computer and was ordained as a minister. It took him only a few minutes. Those few key strokes qualified him to officiate at a wedding in Georgia. I'm sure he did a very good job.

Those examples of how marriage is changing are only the simplest changes facing the church of Jesus Christ. It's not just pastors and churches who must re-think marriage. We all do. My granddaughters take a secret pleasure in trying out on me the new vocabulary of sexual identity. Words such as non-binary, transexual, and gender identity are difficult for me to grasp. Those words are entering the mainstream as we re-define the kinds of marriages we encounter.

Whether we like the changes or not, marriage in the twenty-first century is in flux. We live with marriages that are between the times. What marriage will look like a hundred years from now, no one can say. Of course, it's not only marriage changing.

Many things are between the times. And, that is precisely the point Jesus is making to the Sadducees in Matthew 22, those Sadducees who are so eager to test his interpretation of the scriptures. Moses says in Deuteronomy that when a man dies childless, his brother shall marry the widow. If she marries one brother after another until she has had seven husbands, asks the Sadducees, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? It's a crazy scenario, but quite within the realm of possibility. So, "Tell us, Jesus, if you can. What does the resurrection mean for that widow and her seven husbands? To whom is she married for eternity?"

Let's leave aside the fact that it was a trick question. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. This is a trap to catch Rabbi Jesus in an awkward interpretation. Jesus avoids the question and seizes a teaching moment by asserting that they simply don't understand the power of God, the God "not of the dead, but of the living" (Matthew 22:32).

The power of the living God was doing something new in first century Palestine. Jesus has come to announce the presence of the Kingdom of heaven. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (4:17). "Repentance" requires change, literally re-thinking ourselves, re-thinking our behavior, re-thinking God who became human. Can we really do that? Imagine how hard it was for the Sadducees, re-thinking the resurrection of the dead. Even for Jews who had read past the books of Moses and who hoped in the resurrection, Jesus' message demanded a lot of re-thinking.

For Jesus the power of the resurrection, the power of God's kingdom was not somewhere far off in the sweet bye and bye. It did not mean for the Messiah to conquer Roman oppressors. The kingdom has come near, despite corrupt leaders, despite ordinary citizens beset by ordinary sins, despite disease and unemployment, and despite wealth inequity. The kingdom is near. Jesus makes this confrontation with his enemies into a teaching moment about what God is doing. The kingdom of heaven is here in some respects, but not fully here in other respects. And, that is true of marriage. The full meaning of marriage is beyond our complete comprehension.

Steven Charlton, a Choctaw elder and an Episcopal Bishop, tells this story. Native Americans believe that the creator gave each tribe in creation a special gift. The bears have strength. The eagles have wisdom. The running deer have grace and beauty. The human beings, however, were not as strong, wise or beautiful as the other animals. But they were given one thing special: vision, the ability to see both what is in the present and the ability to imagine what is coming to be. (Christian Century, 12.30.2020)

We cannot predict the future. However, we can envision a different future. Jesus envisions the kingdom of heaven. A kingdom coming near, but not completely. A kingdom Jesus sees clearly, but one we see only by faith. The resurrection of Jesus is the sign of **how** near the kingdom had come to our world. Jesus will rise from death.

“In the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus teaches, “they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (22:30). In other words, marriage is good, a wonderful goodness. But it is provisional, in some respects marriage is a temporary good. It is the very best relationship between two people that we can understand in the present time. We do not yet know the very best that marriage can be. Our idea of marriage is between the times. It’s between the time of the present, between this imperfect world and the time of the kingdom of heaven, the time which is surely coming.

Jesus’ example with the Sadducees is that God’s power is not bound by customs and laws. That a widow should marry her late husband’s surviving brother had a purpose in the primitive tribal culture of the Middle East. It could provide a family to take care of the widow’s old age. It would re-populate the tribe and ensure that the tribe would live into the next generation. **But** that custom or law was not forever. At any rate, the Sadducees were missing the point. God’s covenant love for Israel was not dependent on keeping the laws and customs of Moses’ time. God’s love is beyond our imagination. It endures forever.

God’s love, described throughout scripture, is the lasting template for the love we offer to one another. Do you remember that funny Old Testament prophet called Hosea? The book by that name tells us that God’s covenant with the people of God is so durable that God takes us back, even when we have been unfaithful. Hosea illustrates the power of that love by marrying a prostitute. I cannot imagine what that marriage did to Hosea’s life and to his reputation. His faithful marriage to a prostitute is an unforgettable symbol of the strength of God’s hold on us all.

We may roll our eyes at the marriage commitments we see around us. I certainly have wondered about some Presbyterian marriages I have seen. I have come to believe that every marriage is an exercise of hope. Every marriage can become a means of growing in grace. I believe the church of Jesus Christ has a crucial role to play as the institution of marriage continues to evolve.

I know that’s been true for Debby and me. The grounds for our commitment have shifted under our feet over the years. By the grace of God there are new and better whys and wherefores, different motivations, a happier logic steadying our resolve to make our marriage better. The example of other Christians and the teachings of our faith continue to strengthen us. Some of you have been part of that strengthening. Thank you.

Here’s more good news about marriage, news that surprises me on occasion. For one thing, people want to get married. People of all sorts want to make a commitment to another person, a commitment symbolized, stamped and sealed by marriage in church. Of course, not everybody wants a church wedding. However, you should know that many of this new generation are taking advantage of the changes in the way the Presbyterian Church sees marriage. Gays and straights, couples who have

been living together without marriage, even transgender and non-binary persons hunger to make the most important relationship in their lives official in a Christian marriage.

The community of believers in Jesus Christ has a role to play in their lives. I confess that I did not always believe that was true. I've always believed the importance of a church family for folks like me. It took me years to understand that the values of love, the values of the Ten Commandments, the values of forgiveness and reconciliation, and the example of God's love still have currency today, especially for people not like me. That's why people with different life styles keep showing up in our sanctuaries. They have been here before. We just did not recognize them.

Do you know what changed my mind? It started when a gay man wanted me to pray with him. It continued when a gay couple with a child wanted to come to worship. I had to prepare for those conversations. I had to ask myself what I would pray about with that gay man; and how I would describe this couple to my congregation. I also had to confront my own lack of faith in the power of the gospel. I prayed with that man much the same as with anyone asking about God. We prayed for forgiveness and reconciliation with people he loved. For peace. And especially for his acceptance of God's unfailing love for him. I hope I conveyed that unfailing love to the gay couple. Aren't those the things we all want? I had no choice except to see them all as children of God, created in God's image, and therefore those for whom Christ died, people for whom Jesus' announcement of the kingdom of God was very real.

I celebrate the fact that the church has an important role to play in marriages in today's world. You and I as followers of Christ have a task in and out of church, a witness to make. Because the church, at her best, knows the power of God's truth, God's faithfulness to us, God's love. A love that overcomes all our weak attempts at faithfulness and love.

By God's grace, we live between the times of the coming kingdom. We are waiting for the fullness of Jesus' reign on earth. It's not quite here yet. It's coming. So, I leave you with a question to ponder: How shall we live between the times? Our arrangements for marriage today surely leave us filled with questions and doubts. We probably need to ask those questions and test our understanding of relationships much like the Sadducees were questioning Jesus long ago. There are a lot of things we haven't got right yet. But there are a lot of values we know will endure because Jesus affirmed them with God's love and the power of resurrection. How shall we live in these in-between times?