

Genesis 2: 21-25 "THE COVENANT OF MARRIAGE" Ellesmere United
John 15 9-12 April 24, 1988
Matthew 19 4-6 Gordon Laird

Reasons for the topic of this sermon:

I have three reasons why I felt that I should depart from the lectionary readings for today and to give a topical sermon on Marriage:

1. The Report "Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation Lifestyles and Ministry" has brought lively conversations and controversies to Ellesmere. We have had the first Special Congregational Meeting, during my seven years here, on a topic other than issues of buildings or equipment. The Special meeting on March 23, 1988 heard two resolutions. At that meeting I expressed what troubled me most about the Report was the way it dealt with the Covenant of Marriage. As your Minister I felt that the response to my comment was so lacking [no one commented in the meeting or afterwards] that I am still puzzled.
2. This coming Saturday Marilyn and I are involved in the marriage of the first of our five children. Anne is our eldest daughter and she is marrying Steve Harvey at 4 pm Saturday at the Interfaith Chapel of the University of Victoria. The Rev. Clare Holmes, Chaplain of the University of Victoria will officiate. I have a position of honour - Father of the Bride - second only in my life experience to the one we will commemorate the next day.
3. Next Sunday, May 1 will mark 34 years since the day when Marilyn and I stood before the Rev. Matthew Stevenson in Ryerson United Church, Vancouver, and pledged to love and honour each other and to keep only to each other until death us do part. That was my finest role - to be accepted and loved as husband and life-partner. It is still my finest role.

When I was Called to Ellesmere United Church in July, 1981...

[The Call form reads: A call to An Ordained...Minister is a Covenant of Mutual Support and Respect Uniting Presbytery, Pastoral charge and Minister in a sharing of Common Purpose in the Service of Jesus Christ within your Community and Beyond"]

...one of the duties you expected of me was to receive and interview couples wanting to be married in your Sanctuary.

You appointed Anna Enkelmann as your Secretary and together we established forms and procedures for the various interviews which would be required. We also established contacts with agencies which offered more extensive marriage counselling, if that was requested or required.

My general procedure was to meet with each couple 3 times, then share a rehearsal and then the wedding itself.

One thing I noticed at the outset, as I had noticed in my previous congregation, was that even though the marriage services are written in the expectation that the couple will be a "Church couple" and will be familiar with the hymns and forms of the Church, that almost none of them were.

I also noticed that, quite contrary to the experiences of my youth, the majority of them had been living together for a matter of months or years before coming to be married. When we went to the Rev. Matthew Stevenson for marriage preparation the question would not occur to him or to us whether or not we had been living together before marriage. Times were different.

I don't think that should surprise most of you here. In my visits with you I have come to realize that among your extended family - sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, and various in-laws, that you have experienced the phenomenon of couples living together outside the bonds of holy wedlock.

Two-thirds of the couples I have married in the seven years I have been at Ellesmere reported the same current address at the time of the marriage. I dare say of those who did not show the same address, some were using the address of a parent, brother or sister. A colleague in Bellingham has reported that in his experience the percentage of those coming to him who were living together before marriage is 100%

I had a number of options in responding as your Minister to these couples:

1. I could have, as a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, told them they have disobeyed God's Will and therefore are not entitled to be married in a Church. That had already happened to some who came to the Ellesmere Minister's Study for marriage when they asked to be married in another Church.
2. Tell them to live apart for six months and then we would see about marrying them. That had also happened to at least one couple.

3. Use the occasion to lecture them on the penalties of disobeying God's Law, then go on to marry them.
4. Or, as I did, express my delight that they have chosen marriage, assure them of the joy of their families, the whole community and the Church in their marriage and get on with plans for the wedding.

During the ceremony itself I read the following words to the whole congregation:

"God established marriage that man and woman might have life-long companionship, that natural instincts and affections might be fulfilled in mutual love, that children might have the benefit of family life, and that society might rest on a firm foundation. The apostle Paul compared married love to that of Christ for his Church. Thus he gave us a new vision of what marriage ought to be, a life of self-giving love.

and to the persons being married:

"Your marriage joins you for life in a relationship so intimate that it profoundly affects your whole being. It offers you the promise of a love that is true and mature. Such a love requires that you commit your lives to one another freely and without reserve, for the sake of a deeper and wider life together. Seek to become one in mind and heart as well as one in body. Trust in the living Christ, and he will guide and support you on your way.

Notes:

1. it is somewhat ironic that we use the quotation of Paul, yet ignore his advice to the unmarried to remain unmarried and that only if they are lacking in self-control they should be married. [I Cor 7:8] This is one of the many cases we find of selective use of passages of scripture.
2. In 1974 the General Council responded to a challenge to the permanence of the wedding vow. It was a time when some thought there might be wedding covenants for a stated period or until something other than death broke the relationship. The General Council reiterated its opinion that "a vow expressing life-long intention should be included in a service for Christian marriage."

A lot of what I believe about marriage is shaped and enhanced by the experiences within my own Covenant of Marriage and the experience within the Minister's Study of Ellesmere United Church and within your Sanctuary as I take part in the Marriage Ceremony.

The Report

I would like to take a few moments in this sermon time to comment on what I see as the weakness of the Report.

I believe that the Report of the National Coordinating Group has given a limited view of the Covenant of Marriage at a time when people are studying the words of a Church report more closely than any other time in my experience. I believe it was important to have a complete, well-balanced theological statement regarding the Covenant of Marriage in the report itself. It was not sufficient to refer to previous reports of previous General Councils, because these are not fresh in the minds of people at this time, and are not very accessible to most Church people.

When a representative of the NCG was challenged on this point he responded that they were not asked to give a comprehensive view of the Covenant of Marriage.

Yet the words of the request to the Divisions from the 30th General Council in Morden, Manitoba read as follows:

Recommendation 2 p. 99 That the study include an attempt to understand homosexual orientation and practice as well as a theological understanding of marriage and creation.

I believe that the report fails to presents an acceptable "theological understanding of marriage and creation" in the following ways:

1. By describing marriage as a "human-shaped institution", [Report p. 41] and then using arguments which infer that it is ONLY a human-shaped institution - that is, at least by silence, denying that it is God-Given, God-Shaped or God-supported.

It is intriguing the way they have used an important passage of scripture - Jesus' teaching about the Sabbath:

"They are, [family and marriage] to paraphrase Jesus' teaching about the sabbath, made for us and not we for them." Report p. 42

The inference they leave is that we, not God, created Sabbath. That is not the meaning I get from Jesus' words. I interpret Jesus' words to mean, not that we created Sabbath for ourselves but that God created the Sabbath for humankind.

I believe that God created the Union of woman and man for us. We did not create it for ourselves.

2. I believe the NCG referred to a statement of the 26th General Council, 1974 and altered its meaning.

Report p. 44

"In 1971, the Committee on Christian Faith of the United Church of Canada was asked to study the question of the permanency of Christian marriage. Based on a paper by David Lochhead, "The Permanence of Christian Marriage," the 26th General Council, 1974:

affirmed the necessity for christian marriage to be lifelong in its intention and directed that in any service for Christian marriage a vow for life-long intention be included.

The NCG then built a case entirely on word "intention" and then asserted that the focus had shifted from the marriage itself as permanent to the "intention" of permanence.

They then called it [Report, p. 45] a "shifting to the "intentional" as a marker.

But I believe that in picking up and using the word "intention" they left behind the word "vow". Their quotation from 1974 read: "that in any service for Christian marriage a VOW [my capitals added] for life-long intention be included."

The NCG don't deal with the word "vow" at all, yet it is, I believe, of utmost significance regarding marriage.

To intend can have a very internal and subjective meaning. "I intended to go for a walk, but then it rained."

A vow is a "solemn promise or engagement, especially in the form of an oath."

I am sure that many couples, gazing up at the stars, have talked of sharing their lives together FOREVER.

That is NOT the same as saying the same words as a promise in a public place in the front of witnesses, sealed by the exchanging of rings and the signing of documents.

When the NCG, [NOT the 1974 General Council] shifted the importance to the word "intention" it allowed them to suggest that what was important in a relationship was the "intention to permanence". This allowed many of the extreme conclusions to be reached.

To summarize my objections to the Report "Toward a Christian Understanding of Sexual Orientation Lifestyles and Ministry" as it portrays the Covenant of Marriage:

1. I believe the Divisions were asked by the 30th General Council to provide "a theological understanding of marriage and creation" and what they produced was a very partial understanding, which was not theologically comprehensive.
2. I believe that the NCG described Marriage as a "human-shaped institution" and denied God's creative role and participation in the Covenant of Marriage.
3. I believe the NCG found in the 1974 Report to General Council "The Permanence of Christian Marriage" what was not there - a shift in the Church's thinking to the "intention to permanence" being the significant matter, rather than the "vow for life-long intention".

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I am now not sure how I understood the vows I took in 1954. I had only the words - "for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, in joy and sorrow". We had only experienced at that time, I now can see: better, not worse - richer, not poorer, - health, not sickness - and much more joy than sorrow. It was quite easy to say those words, because the words were not yet filled with experience.

Nor, when we vowed to "love and to cherish until death us do part" did we have any idea of the temptations which might come our way. We needed the strength of more than an "intention" - we needed a VOW to remember - a public vow, in front of family and friends, before God, signed and sealed.

I like the words of Dr. A. M. Watts in talking about "Intimacy and Accountability in the May 1984 Issue of Touchstone" pp 3-5

Dr. Watts was commenting upon the Statement on Human Sexuality prepared for the Division of Mission in Canada for submission to the 30th General Council 1984:

"This report gives a much stronger affirmation of the need for commitment and fidelity than was found in the first report. However, "missing from the report is a well-developed recognition that marriage and fidelity are needed precisely because our feelings are not steadfast. We need covenants because sexual love is a volatile thing. We need promises because we are inconstant creatures. Marriage, then, exists because of human sin, so that we may move beyond impulse into the maturity of commitment. If our affections settled on one partner and remained secure for the rest of our lives, there would be no need of promising to love and cherish until life's end. Marriage is not the kingdom of heaven; it is not even a bit of heaven on earth, It is a way of ordering our lives so that both intimacy and some measure of accountability are possible. It is not a perfect arrangement. The same sin that makes marriage necessary can make some marriages hell, and will make all marriages from time to time miserable.

Marriage is not an "ideal" of relationships. It is a very good, practical, working model, not, of course, in every case.

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It is a great thrill for Marilyn and me to have our first and eldest daughter decide to take the "vow for life-long intention". We were beginning to think it would never happen with any of our children.

Our children respect our marriage of 34 years. They have never said anything which would indicate that WE were wrong or naive in having such a marriage or continuing in such a marriage.

But some of them have explained to us how difficult it is for people of their

generation to imagine achieving such a marriage. They see so many short marriages - so many divorces among their friends that they don't view the prospects very positively. It seems like very "risky business" indeed.

I am glad that Anne and Steve have decided to take that "risk".

I look forward to with a very thankful heart to the events of this week:

1. I am thankful that there are Chaplains at our Universities, who are there for students and staff as a non-judgmental reminder that God loves those in the market-place and the University. It is only through our M & S dollars that this is so - and their budgets are always under siege.
2. I am glad that Anne's office was next door to the Chaplain's office and she got to have a waving acquaintanceship with Clare and May Holmes. I am glad that Clare respected that "waving" acquaintanceship.
3. I am thankful that Anne and Steve, though not Church-goers, wanted the blessing of the Church in their marriage.
4. I am thankful that Clare did not dwell on Anne and Steve's lack of Church attendance but showed the welcoming love of God to them as they requested marriage.
5. And over all, I am thankful for the companionship and love of my Wife, Marilyn, of 34 years who shared with me a "vow of life-long intention". I am thankful we were allowed to be stewards of God's grace for our children and that we were able to raise them in the Covenant of Marriage.