

Love and Marriage...and Children

The Rev. Debbie Cook, Grace Church in Haddonfield

The 18th Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 22, Year B

October 4, 2009

Growing up, I remember a steady supply of magazines and other reading material always being present in our house. Life, Reader's Digest, and Consumer Reports were standbys (well, while Life was being printed), but I also remember McCalls and the Ladies Home Journal. Being a voracious reader, I would pick up and read almost anything available. One regular feature I remembered from the Ladies Home Journal as "Can this marriage be saved?" Why it fascinated me I don't know (other than the fact that I loved reading about relationships and psychology)—but it was always interesting. Each month a different couple, often with disguised names, was featured: her story was told, his was told, and then the counselor would diagnose and help the couple work through their problems. Often the ending was happy, or happier—though sometimes that wasn't the case.

What I did learn from reading month after month of this feature was that marriage is a complicated relationship. Of course, observing my parents (who have been married to one another for 49 years now) was a lesson in that by itself! And my own 25 years of married life has been illuminating as well. Marriage is a relationship based in love, but all sorts of other things come into play as well—clashing needs and desires, leftover issues from our childhood and adolescence, possible conflicting values or role expectations. We are complex emotional creatures, and so that often makes for an interesting ride in any relationship of such intensity. Working it out takes work.

In the past, marriage was not seen as it is in the Western world today—a relationship of equals, finding that special someone. It was more of a social arrangement, even a financial

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transaction—and each person had certain and defined expectations of the other based on their culture's norms. But today in 21st century America, marriage is seen as partnership, and there is often much to be worked out as roles and expectations are not as clearly defined. And that can be a wonderful thing, allowing for the full personal growth of each person in the relationship. But it can also lead to conflict-- such as arguments over whose contributing more or less to the relationship, who is more committed, more loving. Roles and duties—who is responsible for what where—often overtake us, and can twist us in knots. We truly count that love will conquer all—and it will—but not if we don't allow love to carry us through the dark times of struggle as well as the happier times. We forget that love—the love that is spoken about in the gospel—is not so much about a feeling but about commitment, about covenant.

This what Jesus was referring to when he answered the Pharisee's question about marriage and divorce. You see, they were hoping to publicly trap him into a definitive response so that they could either discredit him—or point him out to the King who was in a questionable marriage so that the King would deal with Jesus as he did John the Baptist. But Jesus knew better, and he also knew that their question, based on what was 'lawful', was not the right one. For the Pharisees were more concerned with Mosaic law rather than God's will and intention. And truth be told, Mosaic law does not forbid remarriage except in very specific circumstances. Jesus was fully aware of this—and fully aware that often this one-sided law, allowing a man to divorce his wife for any number of reasons—was abused, causing much suffering to the women of 1st century society.

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But Jesus, ever focused on God's will vs. Mosiac law, returned the discussion to God's original intention for marriage, for covenant relationship. Marriage, he indicated, is less a partnership of two individuals than the merging of two lives into one. It is a relationship that is to model covenantal love, a relationship that puts the love, the relationship itself, at the center. A love of self-giving, self-sacrifice, a love that is less concerned about whose turn it is to do the dishes or take out the trash or pick up the kids and more concerned about the health and welfare of the other and of the relationship itself. Ideally, it is not about my needs being met, but our needs being met. This does not negate the fact that in this covenantal relationship that there are two complex emotional persons who will grow and change over time, each having need of love and support, understanding and acceptance of the other. However, it does mean that sustaining our own personal individuality is less important than the integrity of the marriage itself. In our highly individualistic society, this is a tough thing to process or perhaps accept. It seems, if we look at it through God's eyes, that marriage is less a social or legal arrangement but more a calling—a call to model in this covenantal relationship, as much as humanly possible, the type of love that God models to God's people. A high calling, indeed.

This covenant type of love that God shares with God's people is a love of promise—and God, unlike us, never breaks God's promises. No matter how many times God's people, then or now, have turned their back on God and gone their own way, God is faithful to God's word and commitment. This is why the story of salvation, from the beginning to the end of our canonical scriptures, is more a love story than anything else. No matter what God's disappointment in humanity, God does not wholly give up and walk away—but instead keeps the door open for

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repentance and return, finally ripping the door off its hinges entirely in the death and resurrection of our Lord.

But this love that God share with us is not, and never will be, a relationship among equals.

Indeed, in our relationship with God, we are like children—dependent and vulnerable. Jesus reminds us of that when he welcomed and blessed the children. He did not hold the children up as an example because children are so innocent—but because they are often open, still in formation, still learning, as we are called to be. Children are dependent, vulnerable, and trusting of their parents or loving guardians. We too are called to be trusting of the One who loves us most, to be open to being led and shaped by the work of the Holy Spirit. We are to acknowledge and even rest in our dependence on God—again, a difficult thing to do in our culture of being fiercely independent. God asks us to live in God’s love, out of God’s love, a love so strong that it breaks the bonds of death and can restore any relationship. However, we don’t often do that, instead trusting in our own resources, and that’s when we most likely fall into trouble.

Our committed relationships are to be lived out of God’s love as well—for it is that love that can hold us together even when we have drifted apart. There are times when the foundation of a relationship has been irreparably damaged—and in those times, there is nothing to do but bring the house down and start over. The intended covenant is not only no longer active, it may not have been present in the first place. But in a relationship based on and grounded in covenant, we need to remember that it is God’s love that can hold us together when we fall apart. And that no matter what, for God, that our relationship with our Lord is always one that can be saved.

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Amen.