

CHRIST - COVENANT - COMMUNITY

IDEAS AND INSIGHTS FOR THE FULL LIFE FOLLOWING JESUS

FAITH AND FAMILY

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THE MARRIAGE OF A LIFETIME

A MARRIAGE FOR ALL SEASONS

Building a marriage that will go the distance is the goal of this marriage preparation work. The intent of this material is to help you as a couple, explore significant matters together so as to provide a solid foundation for your relationship for the many seasons of your love.

This work is not for my benefit, but yours. Much of this material is not even conversation for me to be a direct participant. My role is to encourage you in this discussion between the two of you. You may have already considered many of these matters together, if not; I trust this will help to frame your discussion about what your relationship is and what you will craft it to be.

Pastor Dan Rusmisl

GOD'S GIFT

From scripture we understand that the home is ordained of God and that marriage is the most sacred of all human relationships. "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). It is for this purpose too that a woman leaves her mother and father and unites with her husband in creative activity.

It is the God-given privilege of those who have been attracted to each other by the power of love to create a home for the expression of that love. A home so established on love increases joy, comforts pain, and unites prayer. It is a place where two people join with God in creative activity. It is a place where a man and a woman express and seek each day the respect, the devotion, and the love of each other.

Paul in writing to the Corinthians tells us that love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful;

it does not rejoice in wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, and endures all things. Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:4 & following).

If you will nurture in your hearts this kind of love towards one another, your marriage relationship will grow stronger and more beautiful each day and the home which you shall establish will abide in peace.

These words name hope that enables. They are too filled with anticipation and promise. They are often a part of the instruction given a man and a woman on their wedding day. But these words must be understood and applied to every aspect of the couple's married life for them to be of ongoing value. The article that follows develops and interprets these truths that empower married life.

FAMILIES

Families as a segment of society reflect the needs and crises of that society. No family is then an island which can escape the demands and pressures of that society around it. Yet we in this society live with the mistaken idea that all that needs to be done to redefine our world is to strengthen the family. This mistaken perception asks too much of the family and adds to the burden of family life without providing the necessary context, health, and well-being for enlightened family living.

God calls persons into a covenant community that informs the lifestyle and relationships of all those who live that call of God. In the scripture the direction of social life is set within the framework of the covenant community (Exodus 19-24). Without this larger fellowship, the family would find it very difficult to cope with the demands of everyday life.

In the New Testament, Jesus sets marriage in the context of the kingdom of God (Matthew 19),

which establishes the character and structure of marriage. The stability and vitality of marriage and family is the responsibility of the community of faith that defines and provides the primary nurture and care for people involved in these relationships. The health or lack of it in a marriage reflects the health or lack of it in the primary support group that the couple maintain contact with and find sustenance from as husband and wife, parent and child, brother and sister. These relationships inform and direct life as it is lived together within this support system.

The call to renewal and the strengthening of the family first comes to the faith community chosen to provide the nurture and care for the family. This community witnesses to the character of life. At the heart of this relationship is the God-given love for one another and ourselves. This love reflects an unwavering care and trust for one another and requires a continuing self-giving to the other. This love is exemplified by Christ who demonstrated such love for us.

Growth comes for the individual when one has the security of knowing unconditional love by another. When our relationship is bound by Christ, we feel accepted, loved and cared for. Love promotes growth. Jesus' life thrust was toward growth; he looked at people in terms of what they could be and were become. Growth experiences are needed today in our inner lives, our marriages, our churches, and our world. Jesus said his purpose in coming was to enable us to find life "in all its fullness." (John 10:10 NEB)

Our relationships can be authentic only when we honestly and openly share with one another our true thoughts and feelings. We have been called to speak the truth in love. There is a risk in personal honesty and in openly facing our faults and feelings; when we begin to see and acknowledge our own shortcoming, we similarly become more accepting to others. At this point, we can truly begin a relationship free from barriers of mistrust and deception. Our relationship can then be rooted in the wholeness and perfection that Christ has brought to us.

We become free by knowing that Christ is alive within us and by choosing and receiving this bond of togetherness. For the Christian, authentic relationship with others has its roots in Christ. True sovereignty comes in the recognition of our



relationship to God and our interdependence on each other. Freedom is accepting who we are, and whose we are in Christ. We must acknowledge that we are called not to be perfect, but to strive for Christ like perfection in our relationships. At the same time, we must know that God's total and unconditional care and love for us is ever present. Only as we accept this gift of love can we truly pass it on to those around us. As individuals, as partners in marriage and as a community of believers once rooted in Christ, we can serve one another and God.

For freedom, Christ has set us free; stand fast, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 5:1). When we recognize this dimension of life, we will avoid another pitfall, namely, retreating from the family or marriage which experiences crisis. If we truly follow the model of Jesus, the one who gives to the other in time of need, we will not back away from those who experience alienation in marriage or family life. Tragically the church can reinforce the feeling of rejection that families experience in crisis by separating itself from those who already feel hurt. Or the congregation and its representatives might come in at the last moment to proclaim all participants guilty of sin, again reinforcing the sense of alienation and loss that persons have in crisis. Unless we have been with one another in the fullness of relationship, we are in compromised position to support or confront at a time of difficulty. The faith community is called by God to provide the context of nurture for personal and family life. Without the day-by-day caring for one another we will not be able to minister to one another in times of crisis in marriage.

We affirm that all creation is good. We further affirm that human beings have been created in the image of God. Therefore, we have the capacity to live in growing and meaningful relationships with others and with God. To do so is to fulfill the purpose of our creation. To have been created male and female with possibilities for creative union is a precious gift from God.

COVENANT

We are a covenant people. God's covenant is evident throughout biblical history. Covenant is made personal to Christians in Christ. In our covenant relationships with each other, we are



bound together by agreement and by the blessing of God. For the Christian, marriage is intended as a lifetime commitment to intimacy and continuing growth for both partners. The creative marriage has an enduring and covenant quality. Marriage as a lifelong commitment has the potential of being that arena of life in which the central truths of the Gospel of Christ may be discovered and lived out.

When lived to its fullness, marriage is a relationship of creative growth, mutual support, communion and fellowship, dedication and commitment - that place in which both partners come to a realization of their full potential as created in the image of God. As such, it is possible for two people in marriage to know the most creative, productive, empowering, and exciting association of all human relationships.

It is recognized, however, that marriage is not the only meaningful relationship where persons can be encouraged and sustained. In family units, friendship circles, and marriage, what one person does affects the other, so that there is need for commitment freely given and contracts clearly understood.

In our day of rapid change in societal systems and social relationships, there is also a need for continuing (perhaps frequent) renewal of that commitment and understanding. In making a social-legal bond, two persons agree on the terms and conditions, and are bound by these until they mutually agree to change them. If however, marriage is only a legal contract, it follows that it can be altered or revoked easily and with little struggle or questioning. For the Christian, marriage is seen from a deeper perspective, one where covenant and purpose has to do with the very soul.

In the faith community, a legal contract is widened and deepened to include this soul level commitment that names lifelong meaning. In such a marriage, the fulfillment of each partner is dependent upon creative interaction and growthful interdependence. Possessiveness and dependency are destructive of intimacy, and wholesome marriage cannot be achieved apart from the participation of each partner in the wider community. There is need in marriage for interaction between friends, groups and events outside of the marriage.

Forms and phrases that denote paternal possession, inequality of genders, and a narrow

view of relationships should be deleted from the Christian's concept of marriage. It is time to claim for marriage a wider vision of fidelity than that which focuses only or primarily on sexual expression.

We need to think of fidelity in the biblical image of justice, as faithful and responsible commitment to one's covenant with another and with God. Fidelity in that sense would be open, honest, responsible, and caring action in relation to the uniqueness of the other and of the relationship. The faith community, the couple's primary support group, can and must play a significant part in supporting and challenging individuals within the marriage.

The faith community is to provide that place in which assessment and renegotiation of the relationship can be achieved with a minimum of pain and hurt. The wedding service should incorporate and encourage the participation of the community of faith in the life of the couple. The congregation affirms its continuing relationship and involvement, establishing a climate in which the marriage can develop and grow.

There are several essential ingredients of a healthy marriage: trust; maturity; respect and equality (shared decision-making); commitment, devotion and loyalty; nurture; freedom, flexibility and autonomy; clear communication, including open and honest confrontation and expression of positive and negative feelings; sexual pleasure; creative conflict; and joy, fun, and excitement. In a sense, these are the conditions within which it is possible for two people to grow into intimacy. Within these conditions, each partner is free to negotiate the problems that arise over the use of money, the use of time, role expectations, differing value systems and the impingement of outside persons and activities upon their common life. Wholesome marriage is a dynamic, changing, growing relationship, characterized by movement and vitality, by pain and struggle, and by reconciliation and peace.

OBSTACLES

There are two major obstacles to marital health to which the congregation can relate. The first is the taboo of privatism; a "protective" device that prevents a married couple from disclosing for the purpose of guidance, even to another caring



couple, what is going on inside their marriage. The resulting frustration commonly leads a man to talk to men, a woman to women, about how unreasonable their mates are. Such sharing, even in organized groups, may tend to make the issues bigger or less manageable.

There are understandable reasons for adhering to the taboo of privatism. Marriage is an intimately personal relationship. However, strict maintenance of the taboo deprives couples of the help and support they might receive from one another. Often couples feel enormous relief to discover in the context of a caring and supportive community of couples, that other couples experience many of the same anxieties which they had felt were uniquely their own. Consequently they are freed to face and work on those issues in their relationship.

The second and perhaps the most critical obstacle to marital health today is the myth of naturalism, which has deceived many into believing that people who marry "just naturally know how to live together happily." Naturalism obscures the fact that marriage is the most complex relationship any two people will ever have, for which they usually receive less preparation than for driving a car, and to which they usually give less creative attention annually than they give to their job weekly. In many fields, our nation is proud of its continuing education, refresher courses, and on-the-job training. Naturalism has kept us from education in marriage for creative use of conflict, ability to communicate, and knowledge of human sexuality. Marriage relationships are as intricate as machines and as difficult to keep in running order. Because of the myths and taboos surrounding marriage the support and education for married and engaged couples is often lacking. Congregations have been as negligent as our schools and the society at large.

CRUCIAL PERIODS

There are crucial periods in the establishment of a stable marital relationship. In the initial period of a relationship, a couple must learn to carry out a new set of responsibilities and to achieve enough competence in them so that the needs of each are met. If they fail to understand these responsibilities, fail to make mutual decisions about them, are unwilling or unable to enact them effectively, then the marriage is never firmly



established. Sometimes because the two persons "go their separate ways," an unhappy marriage appears to be a reasonably happy one. If such a marriage takes care of physical comforts and community responsibilities, the couple may be content to maintain a marriage with which they are neither fully satisfied nor actively dissatisfied; they may not even think much about ending the marriage.

The idea that marriage is a dynamic, constantly changing process of interaction has never occurred to many such husbands and wives, nor has the concept of "growing" their marriage to make it more vital.

There are numerous other factors that warrant careful attention by a couple to build and maintain a growing and vibrant marriage:

- In the span of a typical marriage, couples move through a number of distinct stages that are characterized by special issues and tasks warranting attention.
- These stages have led to crisis of various intensities when unaddressed, so a couple must be proactive in acquiring grounding, tools, and information.
- Couples must act with care as western society has failed to fully realize the importance of self-esteem and personhood in marriage.
- Crisis points have been thought to be reasons for escape from a relationship, while they are really better seen as opportunities for growth.
- While these moments are best used as a means for growth of the relationship, this society has fostered avoidance and denial.
- Many have failed to expect a mate to change through the years.
- Conflicting interpretations of the scripture on the man-woman relationship have led to difficulty for many couples.
- People are living longer, and spending more years in marriage; there are fewer children, and less attention is diverted to child care. Some of these factors have contributed to difficulties that previously were not present for most couples in the later married years.

If a couple will nurture in their hearts, the kind of love our Creator intended toward one another, a marriage relationship will grow stronger and more beautiful each day and the home established will abide in peace.'

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