

“What God Has Joined Together” (Mark 10:9) Pentecost 18, October 4, 2009

An older couple is booking a cruise for their anniversary. The travel agent is a sweet young thing, and she asks, “So how many years have you been married?” They answer, “Fifty.” “Fifty years?!” she exclaims, “Wow! I can’t imagine being married to the same man for fifty years.” “Well then, honey,” the wife replies, “let me give you a bit of advice. Don’t get married until you can imagine fifty years.”

Marriage is a serious matter. God means it to be a lifelong matter. So it’s important to go into marriage as fully prepared as possible. You know the old saying, “Marry in haste; repent at leisure.” There’s a lot of truth in that. And I would just add that haste isn’t merely a matter of time. However long a courtship may last, a couple isn’t ready to get married until the man and the woman can say “yes” to a few key questions:

- Am I willing to commit to this person as they are, not as I would change them to be?
- Am I willing to stick with this person “for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health till death do us part”?
- Am I willing to work through our differences, however hard that may be?
- Am I willing to work on myself to become the best spouse I can be?

Being able to answer “yes” to these questions is very important! And not just before you get married. Afterwards, too! Because what these questions really test is your willingness to be faithful – faithful in the fullest sense. By this, I don’t just mean sexually faithful – though, of course, that’s essential. In fact, when we cover this in Confirmation, I tell the class that if someone cheats on you before you’re married, chances are they’ll cheat on you after you’re married. Cheating even once should be a deal-breaker. But that said, there is more to faithfulness than just sexual faithfulness. Short of adultery, there are things that can “adulterate” the relationship – that is, dilute it, pollute it, tear it down. Some examples would be lying, manipulation, selfishness, irresponsibility, physical, mental, and verbal abuse, or refusal to communicate. Faithfulness requires steering clear of these things, too. By the same token, there are things that can purify a relationship – that is, cleanse it, heal it, build it up. Some examples here would be honesty, loyalty, forgiveness, respect, attentiveness, and patience. Faithfulness grows through cultivating these qualities. So faithfulness covers a lot of territory – true faithfulness, I mean. And it doesn’t just happen. It takes work, it takes perseverance, it takes grace and lots of it! So what I would like to focus on today is how to protect and nurture “**what God has joined together.**”

Now, before I go any further, let me just admit up front that in choosing this topic, I am kind of taking the chicken’s way out. How so? Well, with all the sexuality stuff that’s been going on in the ELCA, I took one look at today’s lessons and thought: *Good grief! How am I going to preach on these?* If I preach on Genesis 2 – God’s intention that marriage be the union of one man and one woman – that could fire up folks who favor same-sex unions: *“You’re just pushing your opinion!”*

And if I preach on Mark 10 – God’s intention that marriage be for life – that could fire up the folks who are sensitive about divorce: *“Just who do you think you are? A single man can’t possibly understand our situation!”* Part of me would like to point out that Jesus, too, was a single man – and that these are His Words, not mine. But even so, given the circumstances, it seems more prudent to take a different tack. And what should that be? Well...since both lessons emphasize that marriage is a God-given union, marriage must not be treated lightly but must be preserved and nurtured. So I think it makes sense to look at how to protect and nurture **“what God has joined together.”**

And having said that, let me also admit something more personal. When it comes to marriage, I am an outsider looking in. Sometimes an outsider’s perspective can be helpful. At any rate, here is mine. If you are married, God has given you something precious, something I have not been privileged to enjoy for even one second of my life. So when I see people treating this gift carelessly, even recklessly, I have to wonder: What are these folks thinking? Ignoring each other’s needs, putting each other down, complaining about each other, even threatening divorce when they get mad – what I call “dropping the D-Bomb” – that is no way to treat a treasure! A marriage deserves better than that! God’s gift should be honored! And that’s another reason why I want to look at how to protect and nurture **“what God has joined together.”** So let’s dive right in.

If a couple is serious about strengthening their relationship, the place to start is showing each other **mutual respect**. Forgive me for bragging, but this is one place where my parents really shine. They may tease each other, but they are each other’s biggest fan, and it definitely shows in the way they treat each other. Small wonder they are going on 60 years, more in love than ever! Compare that, though, to a couple from my former church. The husband thought it was “cute” to make little digs at his wife in public, humiliating ones at that. And as if this were not bad enough, he would try to enlist others to join in. As you can imagine, these put downs had a corrosive effect on this couple’s marriage. There may not have been any affairs, but this lack of mutual respect “adulterated” the relationship. Small wonder their marriage was not a happy one!

So, to me, this is non-negotiable. Couples need to show each other mutual respect. That doesn’t mean you always like what your spouse does. It doesn’t mean you always like your spouse. But put-downs, snide remarks, personal digs – there’s no place for such things. And they’re counterproductive. Why would you want to work on a relationship with someone who treats you like dirt? On the other hand, if your spouse listens to you, values your opinion, recognizes your worth, treats you with esteem – of course you’ll want to work on your relationship! So it’s just common sense, and you won’t get very far without it. Showing mutual respect is one way to protect and nurture **“what God has joined together.”**

Another way is **mutual effort**. Now, this probably sounds obvious, but it isn’t always. Not by a long-shot! Oh, people may think they’re making a mutual

effort. I've seen wives treat their husbands like home improvement projects – and call it mutual effort. I've seen husbands send their wives off for counseling – and call it mutual effort. I've seen both husbands and wives talk out their problems with other people – friends, neighbors, their moms (a big no-no by the way) – and they call it mutual effort. But it's not. Folks, it really is not!

Mutual effort is mutual! If we have a problem, the problem belongs to both of us. Solving it is up to both of us. Working it through depends on both of us. And pouting, hinting, talking to others doesn't count! I will never forget a counseling appointment I had early in my ministry. After the woman ticked off a long list of her husband's failings, I asked her, "What did your husband say when you talked to him about this?" She got this funny look on her face. "My husband? I could never talk to him about this! He'd get mad. He wouldn't understand." And I remember thinking, "I'm not the one you need to be talking to about this!" I didn't say it like that, of course. But it's true! When two people marry, it's up to those two people to work on the marriage. Outsiders may be able to offer support, but there's no substitute for mutual effort. Pick the right time to talk about issues. Discern together what's really going on. Decide as a couple how to go about dealing with things. But don't play "Lone Ranger," and don't let your spouse do that, either. Marriage takes two! And, in fact, working on things together, in and of itself, helps strengthen the relationship. So mutual effort is another way to protect and nurture "**what God has joined together.**"

And as a couple puts in this mutual effort, they may discover something else is needed: **mutual confession and forgiveness**. Sadly, that's often easier said than done. How well I remember this woman in Torrance complaining about something her husband had done years before. Naturally, I said she needed to forgive him. And she said, "I would if I thought it would do any good. But I doubt he would see any *need* of forgiveness. Not once has he ever admitted he was wrong. Not once! There's always an excuse. Never an apology." Now, knowing him, I have to say that was probably true. But knowing her, I think I understand why it was true. I don't want to play amateur psychologist, but I can tell you that his problem was not arrogance, it was insecurity. And her problem? Putting him down; rubbing things in – often at the worst possible moment. I remember a dinner party, for instance, where she just launched right in: "Remember the time..." I'll spare you the bloody details, but suffice it to say he turned bright red and hardly said a word the rest of the evening. Now, given what his wife was likely to do with any admission of guilt, why on earth would this guy give her ammunition? Yet, the more he defended the indefensible, the more his wife *looked* for ammunition. Talk about a vicious cycle. And maybe they are an extreme example, but in their case and many others, there's only one way to break out of the cycle. Practicing **mutual confession and forgiveness**.

What needed to happen was for *both* of them to own up to their shortcomings. Both of them. Her way of treating him was every bit as bad as the things she held against him. So they both needed to own up to these things. They both

needed to repent of these things – turn away from them; try to change. And they both needed to forgive each other – from the heart.

That is so important! When I do a wedding, couples often want 1 Corinthians 13 for their Scripture reading – which is fine, but I often put in a plug for Colossians 3 instead, because it encourages something the “love chapter” does not: forgiveness. Paul writes, **“Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”** Folks, this is where the rubber meets the road. A healthy marriage cannot endure without forgiveness. Grudges “adulterate” the relationship. Little by little, they poison the relationship. You can’t hold onto a grudge and a relationship indefinitely. Either one goes or the other. Forgiveness is vitally important. Now, bear in mind that forgiving something isn’t saying it was okay. It wasn’t – but forgiving it means we’re okay. And forgiving something doesn’t mean we don’t work through it *first*; look for ways to understand why it happened, why it was wrong, and why it mustn’t happen again. But once that’s done, it’s done. The grudge, I mean. It’s done and done away with, never to be mentioned again. This is so important for a healthy relationship: practicing **mutual confession and forgiveness**.

And here is one more way to protect and nurture **“what God has joined together:” mutual prayer**. When I counsel a couple before marriage, we often talk about this. I know how much mutual prayer has meant to my parents’ marriage, so I try to pass the recommendation along. But it’s interesting how some react: “Oooh, I don’t know. That’s awfully intimate!” I have to laugh! You’re going to be sharing a bed, but prayer is too intimate? Give me a break!

But true, mutual prayer is intimate – and that’s a good thing. Couples who pray together know how beautiful it is to hold hands and hear your beloved lifting you up to God, asking His help, inviting His blessing. It’s beautiful! It’s helpful, too. The goal of marriage is for the two to become one. Often, people are physically one, emotionally one, financially and socially one – but not spiritually. And that’s a pretty significant area of life not to share. What’s more, if you’re looking for help to strengthen your relationship and deal with your challenges, who better to turn to than God? He stands behind what he has joined together. He wants your marriage to succeed. So if a good marriage needs grace and lots of it, prayer is the obvious way of seeking grace. It’s just smart to protect and nurture **“what God has joined together”** with **mutual prayer**.

In closing, I’ll tell you something. The easiest wedding sermon I have ever written was for a couple that got married on Friday the 13th. My theme: a good marriage is not just a matter of “luck.” And it isn’t! But it is so worth striving for! There are many tools for building up a marriage – among them mutual respect, mutual effort, mutual confession and forgiveness, mutual prayer. I invite you to take these tools home with you tonight. The benefits will be sweet for the couple that uses them to protect and nurture **“what God has joined together.”**

