

## “Are Marriages Made in Heaven?”

Romans 12:1-2, 9-18

Desert Palm United Church of Christ

August 10, 2003 – The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

A few weeks I got to attend a wedding at another church. After the vows and rings were exchanged, the minister offered a prayer of blessing for the marriage. He prayed that the bride would be submissive and obedient to her husband, who was to be the spiritual head of their new household. -Obedient. Up until that word I was praying right along with the minister. At that word I lost track of whatever else he was saying. The gentle person who was seated next to me was thankful, I believe, that I did not make some inappropriate though involuntary reaction at that moment. Or that God didn't make any audible reaction at that moment. I have personally never counseled with a bride or groom who would use the word **obey** in a wedding vow.

The incident caused me to go back and look at the various resources I **have** used when I have conducted a wedding ceremony. I wanted to make certain that the word **obey** had been exorcised from everything. It was.

Most of you probably understand that ministers don't actually **marry** couples. I'm already married, and marrying a couple more people would detrimentally affect my personal health and well-being. Marriages are made by a covenant between a community and two people who are willing to promise before witnesses to spend the rest of their lives together. Clergy simply preside or officiate when those two people decide to do this. They do the “marrying”; we bless it. Sometimes we even bless a marriage that was created

in some prior civil ceremony. Difficult as it may be to believe, clergy have had very little to do with weddings until relatively recent history- around 1000 years ago. Before that, weddings were a secular—a civil—ceremony.

Almost all of our wedding traditions come either from the Roman Empire or from English common law. From Rome we get the declarations of intent—the “I will” statements- plus the joining of hands, the banquet, the cake, and the gifts. From other cultures we get all the property-transfer symbolism- the father escorting the bride and “offering” her in marriage to the new property owner. Virtually none of the motions we go through in the modern wedding ceremony actually come from the Bible, and it's problematic as to whether any of them were actually dictated by God. Unfortunately that isn't what we've been saying in the ceremonies. Here's a common one: [PC(USA)]

**God** created us male and female, **and gave us marriage** so that husband and wife may help and comfort each other, living faithfully together in plenty and in want, in joy and sorrow, in sickness and in health, throughout all their days.

**God gave us marriage** for the full expression of the love between a couple. In marriage two people belong to each other, and with affection and tenderness freely give themselves to each other.

**God gave us marriage** for the well being of human society, for the ordering of family life, and for the growth and nurture of children.

**God gave us marriage** as a holy mystery in which a man and a woman are joined together, and become one, just as Christ is one with the church.

In marriage, people are called to a new way of life, **created, ordered, and blessed by God**. This way of life must not be entered into carelessly, or from selfish motives, but responsibly, and prayerfully.

I'm not certain where and when God did all those things. Marriage has mostly been a secular institution. Marriage probably began as a socio-anthropological arrangement, not a religious one. Marriage may have begun as a primitive society's way to guarantee the protection of women and children by males- males who might otherwise run off into the jungle like bull elephants to spend their non-procreative time in extended male bonding exercises such as tusk-growing, ritual bellowing and mortal combat. Sometimes it even seems that the institution of marriage may have originally been introduced by females who got together and went on strike. If there's an anthropological reason for a primitive male to participate in marriage, it may be an attempt to convince himself of the statistical probability that his wife's children are actually his. The rest of nature does not seem to support universally the human pattern in these matters.

Those who are quick to defend a "Biblical" concept of marriage have a smorgasbord of options from which to choose. The first couple were of absolutely identical genetic make-up- they apparently didn't even have belly-buttons, nor any other kinds of buttons- and they cohabited their entire lives without benefit of clergy. Here are some

other formulas for marriage found in the Bible:

First of all, nearly all marriages were **arranged**, and arranged by males, generally within the **same tribe** or at least the same ethnic group.

There is the **patriarchal extended family**, ruled by a man, including generations of grandparents, children, and servants. This is Abraham's household.

There is **polygamous marriage**, in which one presumably powerful man chooses life with several wives and their children- Jacob, Esau, David, and Solomon. There is even a sub-category that includes the presence of a man's **concubines** as an integral part of the household, and their children. This also includes Abraham and Jacob. It keeps the men from stepping out at night.

There are a few **matriarchal** families, ruled by a woman- Rahab of Jericho, for one.

And there are **single-parent** families- the widow of Zeraphath and Jesus' mother Mary, among them.

There is the intriguing practice of **Levirate marriages**, where a man marries and sires children by the widow of his dead brother, and raises these children on behalf of his brother.

There are marriages between a man and his father's brother's daughter. In other words, marriages between **first cousins**. The "kissin'" cousin, in fact, was considered **the ideal mate**. It kept the inheritance intact. Most of the clan of Abraham seems to have preferred this relationship.

There were a few **same-sex households**, although there is no particular mention of any sexual contact between members.

There were **trial marriages**, which did include sexual intimacy- Ruth and Boaz, particularly.

There were adult **siblings sharing** the family home- Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

There were even some **celibate single** persons- John the Baptist, and perhaps Jesus and Paul, although there is no Biblical record—just tradition—saying that Jesus and Paul were single. If they were, they were special cases, because celibacy was considered to be socially irresponsible. It took years for the early church to determine that celibate singleness could be a virtue that should be practiced by its clergy. But it wasn't particularly Biblical, and hundreds of years of practice has not yet made it perfect.

There was some major **house-sharing** within early Christianity- actual Christian **communes**- as in the Book of Acts.

There were some **dual-career** marriages- as in Priscilla and Aquilla.

Finally—at last—there were **monogamous heterosexual marriages** in which the woman works inside the household.

There is no single model. The institution of marriage in the Bible varies within the contexts of history, and the Bible itself treats marriage as a secular institution with which it must contend. The Bible says almost nothing about the character of wedding ceremonies. Other than the story about serving wine at Cana, Jesus' parable of the ten foolish bridesmaids, and some bad apocalyptic advice that Paul gives about not getting married, there's not much to guide us. The Bible cares very little about the character of the wedding ceremony; it cares **very much**, however, about the character and quality of marriage itself.

And the governing issues that cover every single category of marriage we find in scripture is simple. Marriage is primarily about love, and secondarily about sexuality.

The sexual ethics which are expressed in the Bible are often contradictory, and they change over time. Many of the rules are connected to conditions that don't even exist in our culture- the notion of the female as property, or the regulation of specific sexual practices as they relate somehow to the irrelevant purity codes about participation in certain ritual animal sacrifices that were offered in a temple building that was obliterated 2000 years ago.

If human sexuality **was** regulated in the Bible **it was almost always the woman's sexuality**. Let me quote the Christian ethicist James B. Nelson and the Biblical scholar Walter Wink: "There is no systematic, coherent biblical sexual ethic as such. The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly being brought to bear on whatever sexual mores are dominant in any given country, or culture, or period."

Even on such a major issue as sex between unmarried consenting adults, there is no explicit prohibition of it in either Old or New Testaments. Those famous biblical words- **adultery** and **fornication**- refer to property crimes and wanton irresponsibility.

Of course there's the word **abomination**, which has a wonderful sound, but it refers to that now defunct Temple in Jerusalem- the one whose practices we would define as "pagan" today. Those are the regulations which form the basis of the persecution of uncircumcised men, people with tattoos or trimmed beards, meat-eaters, physically handicapped people, people

who swear, thieves, alcoholics, children born out of wedlock, homosexuals, or anybody who disobeys their religious leaders. Those are all, equally, abominations!

So the Bible leaves it up to us today to figure out how to acknowledge the love and commitment of men or women who are homosexual. The rhetoric about the sanctity of heterosexual marriage has been rampant this past month, and I am convinced that the newspaper editors are in some cynical heaven because of all the impassioned stupidity that shows up in their in-baskets from both sides of the issue.

I personally fail to understand how the marriage of two same-sex partners is going to destroy the human family. And I fail to understand how the Supreme Court decision of *Lawrence et. al. v. Texas* is going to unravel the fabric of the heterosexual marriage. Heterosexuals have been doing a pretty good job of doing that for centuries. And I fail to see how the formal legitimization of homosexual relationships is going to give license to child molesters, since most of them are heterosexual males.

And what is the traditional family anyway? Statistically, the so-called traditional nuclear family of a husband working outside the home—a wife working within the home, 2.3 children, ¾ of a dog, and a fish named Nemo—only represented 5% of American households in the 1990 census. The other 95% must therefore be non-traditional households- single people, trial marriages, live-ins, single-parent families, blended families, empty nests, childless couples, multi-generational families, and pseudo-families of roommates who are simply friends- not even blood relatives or sexual partners. They, too are evidently part of the

“traditional American family.” And they’re all in the Bible, too!

What about the inability of lesbian and gay couples to give birth to children together? Is that what marriage is about? Jim Nelson, again, reminds us of this:

“In the seventeenth century, a number of Christians—especially among the Puritans, Anglicans and Quakers—began to teach, preach and write about a new understanding. It appeared to them that God’s fundamental purpose in creating us as sexual beings was not that we might make babies, but that we might make love. It was love, intimacy, mutuality—not procreation—that was central to the divine intention for sexuality. Some Puritans, for example, declared that if children were born to a marriage, that was an “added blessing,” but not the central purpose of marriage.

Most heterosexual Christians—even, despite the Vatican, most Catholics—believe that God intends people to make love far more often than they make babies.

What about the old male-female archetype- that males and females must balance each other in every way to make a solid relationship? For centuries the church joined ranks with the “sappy love song” establishment in suggesting that men are incomplete without women and vice versa. “We were only half, now we’re whole.” That is the co-dependent model of heterosexual love. Jesus’ model was that we are called to be whole- **all by ourselves**. In marriage we are called- not to seek fulfillment in the other person- but to discover our **mutual** fulfillment together. That other old myth about dominance and submission- or of obedience, has too long been quoted out of context.

Spousal “obedience” belongs not to the Bible, but to the realm of abnormal psychology.

So- should we legislate gay marriage? Fine with me. Or should we just broaden the definition of marriage beyond the heterosexual constraints? That’s fine with me, too. A survey we took here at Desert Palm two summers ago indicates that most of our younger members- under 60- support marriage between people who are homosexual. Among folks over 60 the vote was almost evenly split, but a clear majority would support it if we used some title other than *marriage*.

Should government provide for the joining of two men or two women so that the same legal benefits of inheritance, joint tenancy, insurance and dependency apply? -If our government still pledges to secure the rights of the minority against the whims of the majority- it should! Should government establish the legal identity of “family” to committed gay and lesbian partnerships so that they may be treated as next-of-kin in terms of survivorship, hospital visitation, and being in positions to make medical decisions for their partners? Absolutely!

What about the church? Should we bless those relationships, whether or not they are presently called marriages? I think so. I’ll do it. No, I won’t say “by the power vested in me by the State of Arizona, I now pronounce you...” because Arizona doesn’t give me that power at this time. But will I witness their vows and I will bless their covenant. Absolutely. It would be, after all, a Holy Union. That’s all I ever do. In fact, I don’t actually do weddings at all. Apparently only an agent of the government can do that, and I’m not one of those. I’m just an agent of the Church, hopefully an

agent of God, so I really just do Holy Unions of partners who may be straight, or who may be gay or lesbian.

And what constitutes a Holy relationship? –Love, commitment, mutuality. Such relationships are just, they are self-liberating, they are other-enriching they are honest and faithful, they are unashamedly erotic, and they epitomize the kind of love God has for us all. (paraphrased from James Nelson.)

Marriages are not made in heaven. They are made right here on earth. But heaven can certainly touch marriages, and no human words can prevent that from happening.

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