

Why the Battle?
Module Five – Marriage
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In tonight's class, we seek to argue that the doctrine of marriage is at stake in this controversy.

We live in a time when marriage seems besieged on every side, whether by the whims of demands for personal fulfillment on the one hand, or a sense that in the 21st century we have outgrown the institution on the other. Yet with those and many other assaults, marriage continues to survive and endure and remains the building block for all healthy societies the world over. It remains the best means by which to nurture love and care, to heal and learn, as well as to provide children for the future and helpful citizens to serve the common good of society. The family, in sociologist Christopher Lasch's unforgettable phrase, remains the very best "haven in a heartless world."

In order to explore the Christian theology of marriage we are going to take a radical step in the true sense of the word radical, which comes from radix—which means roots. We are going to go back and consider the opening on the marriage liturgy in the 1559 Book of Common Prayer:

DEARELY beloved frendes, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of his congregacion, to joyne together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable state, instytuted of God in Paradise, in the time of manes innocencie, signiflyng unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Churche: which holy state Christe adourned and beautified with his presence and firste myracle that he wrought in Cana of Galile, and is commended of saint Paul to be honourable emong all men, and therefore is not to be enterprised, nor taken in hande unadvisedly, lightly or wantonly, to satisfye mennes carnall lustes and appetytes, lyke brute beastes that have no understanding ; but reverently, discretely, advisedly, soberly, and in the feare of God, duely consideryng the causes for the which matrimony was ordeined. One was the procreation of children, to be brought up in the feare and nurtoure of the Lorde, and praise of God. Secondly, it was ordeined for a remedy agaynste sinne and to avoide fornication, that suche persones as have not the gifte of continencie might mary, and kepe themselves undefiled membres of Christes body. Thirdly, for the mutual societie, helpe, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, bothe in prosperity and adversitye, into the whiche holy state these two persones present, come nowe to be joyned. Therefore if any man can shewe any just cause, why thei may not lawfully be joyned together let hym now speake, or els hereafter for ever holde his peace.

Contained in these lovely ancient words are the four purposes of marriage which we need to consider each in its turn.

First, marriage is to be unitive, that is it represents two who “join together,” leave their own families, and cleave to one another to begin a new family. This is the clear teaching of the Bible from the beginning to the end. Marriage in scripture is about not just a few individual passages, as is often alleged, but a theme in the broad structure of the biblical narrative which flows from the primordial couple in the Garden of Eden, through the Song of Solomon to the celebration of an undefiled marriage bed in the New Testament (Hebrews 13). The Bible's positive teaching on marriage is that it is intended by God to be a "one flesh" union which embraces the complementarity of the two sexes. All of the behaviors in the Bible which are declared out of bounds for Christians come from being measured against this standard.

This unitive purpose of marriage is fulfilled sexually as the two bodies of a husband and wife fit together, but it is important to understand that this physical oneness is simply a sacramental reflection of the oneness which should develop in the marriage as a whole. To cite the Roman Catholic Catechism “Conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter - appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, a unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul.”

Part of the magic of marriage in this sense is best seen in marriages that have lasted 4, 5, 6 decades or more. If you spend time with such people in a more intimate setting, you will find you feel as if you are talking to one person whereas you are speaking to two. If you watch their actions together, it can often seem as if they are taking steps in a choreographed dance, except there is no director.

CS Lewis provides added insight on this point: “The Christian idea of marriage is based on Christ’s words that a man and wife are to be regarded as a single organism - for that is what the words ‘one flesh’ would be in modern English. And the Christians believe that when He said this He was not expressing a sentiment but stating a fact - just as one is stating a fact when one says that a lock and its key are one mechanism, or that a violin and a bow are one musical instrument. The inventor of the human machine was telling us that its two halves, the male and the female, were made to be combined together in pairs, not simply on the sexual level, but totally combined. The monstrosity of sexual intercourse outside marriage is that those who indulge in it are trying to isolate one kind of union (the sexual) from all the other kinds of union which were intended to go along with it and make up the total union. The Christian attitude does not mean that there is anything wrong about sexual pleasure, any more than about the pleasure of eating. It means that you must not isolate that pleasure and try to get it by itself, any more than you ought to try to get the pleasures of taste without swallowing and digesting, by chewing things and spitting them out again.

As a consequence, Christianity teaches that marriage is for life.”

Let us then move on to the second purpose of marriage, which is procreation, the creating of children who are then ‘brought up in the feare and nurtoure of the Lorde, and praise of

God.’ This is spoken to in the Genesis admonition to be “fruitful and multiply” and again, although it includes children, the image involves much more. The couple are to bend down in service to one another, to bend up to God in worship and then to advance out into the world to advance the kingdom of God through spiritual fruitbearing also. A truly fruitful marriage is a beautiful source of life to a community and church of which the couple is a part.

The third purpose of marriage would have seemed commonplace in the 16th century but is nearly entirely neglected today—marriage is a remedy for sin. Most people only think of this in the physical sense of being rescued from sexual sin, meaning that it is better to marry than to be involved in any out of bounds Christian behavior which would occur if you were not married.

That is true, but this purpose of marriage involves so much more. Here is a newsflash for you: you and I are monumentally selfish people; we all operate as though the world revolves around us. We all long to say to ‘mirror mirror on the wall whose the greatest of them all’ and to hear back—you are! In Malcom Muggeridge’s wonderful phrase we are all imprisoned in “the dark little dungeon of our ego.”

Now comes the good news—in marriage you have been given a partner to rescue you from yourself! Marriage is like constantly being forced to put up a three dimensional mirror in front of oneself, and what we discover is, things that we did that never bothered or concerned us before, bother our spouses quite a bit!

One personal illustration if I may. There was a time a number of years ago now when I was serving at St Paul’s Summerville and we found ourselves involved in an enormous leadership battle over the future of the parish. I know this never occurs at St Michael’s (smile) but the focus was on buildings and money.

This battle went on for years. As it dragged on the vestry meetings got longer and longer, sometimes lasting 4 to 6 hours (I kid you not). At the peak of the conflict the vestry voted and the tally was 6-6. At the end of that vestry meeting I was angry and depressed. I came home and tried to go to sleep.

Nothing I attempted worked, so I slid out of bed at maybe one o’clock in the morning and went into the kitchen and microwaved some vegetables. I got my plastic bowl, in went the vegetables and over I went and sat at the dining room table in the dark. It was just me, my bowl, and the vegetables, which I was ever more aggressively stabbing with my fork one at a time.

Now perhaps you can guess what I am going to say. Unbeknownst to me my wife had awakened, realized I was no longer in bed, and come out to see where I was. Without my realizing it she had slipped into a chair on the other side of the table. Just as I was raising my fork to try another stab at a vegetable I heard a voice in the dark say: “Is it just going to be you and the vegetables or can I get a word in here?”

I burst out laughing, and I didn't laugh for a short time. My world had become so small that the only thing in it was myself, the bowl, the vegetables and the vestry. My wonderful wife enabled me to be rescued from myself. Lo and behold, I was invited to rediscover the world was bigger than I thought.

We need to add one final and fourth purpose of marriage to our list, and for this I prefer the term communion. This is the idea that comes from the phrase in Genesis where it says it was not good for the man to be alone, so he was given a companion. In the New Testament this is what is meant by the lovely word "fellowship" (koinonia, Acts 2:42).

One simple way to unpack this concept in practical terms is the saying: joy shared is doubled, sorrow shared is halved. There is nothing quite like having a blessing occur in your own life and having your spouse celebrate it. And when the hardships come—and they will—healthy marriage are places where we bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6).

In summary, marriage was understood to have four purposes: union (the two shall become one flesh), procreation (be fruitful and multiply), prevention (marriage was actually understood to prevent sin—when was the last sermon you heard on THAT one?), and communion (deep fellowship in Christ with your closest fellow traveler along the way).

I hope you can see in the present controversy where this takes us.

A same sex union cannot be unitive, because physically the bodies do not fit together in their design, and it is unable to be procreative.

So whatever else you can say about the relationships the Episcopal Church has sanctioned at an official level, they are not marriages. Yet the church has always understood that the only proper context for the expression of sexual intimacy is between a man and a woman who are married to each other. So what, it must be asked, are those claiming the necessity for change asking for? Among themselves there are actually three positions. Some say marriage needs to be shifted, some say we need a new category which is like marriage in some ways but unlike it in others, and others say we need to encourage friendships which may develop a physical side and see what God's spirit will do.

Incredibly, which of these three positions is actually being argued for, and what exactly we are doing, has still not been spelled out and agreed upon. These are relationships in search of a theology, and the doctrine of marriage is at stake.

The Diocese of South Carolina stands with the Holy Scriptures and the undivided Church east and west on the nature and meaning of marriage. We can do no other.