

"THE TIMES OF OUR LIVES"
II. To Marry With Meaning"

INTRODUCTION Tuning in some time ago to one of the talk shows on television, I was greeted by a group of people discussing marriage. Among the panelists were Mrs. Norman Vincent Peale and Germaine Greer. As you might expect, different points of view were expressed, but one of the prevailing opinions was that marriage was an outmoded institution. The advocates of this view were arguing that a commitment and a relationship between two people could be just as valid without a ceremony and a certificate. And they represented a phenomenon of our time - the couples who are living together, with varying degrees of commitment and permanence, but without the benefit of legal or clergy sanction. I tended to agree with David Frost who remarked at the end of the show that he thought that Mrs. Peale had done extremely well in a rather difficult assignment. She was surrounded by some pretty sharp panelists....people who didn't share her particular point of view.

It helps me, at least, to get perspective on this matter when I realize that this is not the first time that the institution of marriage has been under attack. In one of Harry Emerson Fosdick's books, I came across a sermon that he preached in 1929 entitled, "What Is Happening to the American Family?" In that sermon, he expressed concern at the growing acceptance of the concept of "Companionate marriage".

"That phrase has become generally synonymous with trial marriage.....it represents a scheme of sexual experimentation, whereby two people go through the form of marriage in order to live with each other without assuming either the hope of permanency or the responsibility of children...."

When several of the panelists on that talk show declared their disdain of marriage in the old, traditional sense, there was really nothing so new or startling about that. Some of their parents - and grandparents - were talking in somewhat similar ways 25 - 50 years ago. Nonetheless, let us not write off the modern attack on marriage as simply cyclic and faddish. For there are some elements in the picture now that were not there in past generations, and they make the future of marriage less certain. Women's Lib has challenged the traditional role of the woman as wife, mother, and home-maker. Biology and genetics foresee all kinds of possibilities for artificial insemination, selecting superior parents, scientifically guiding personality development. The Pill encourages greater sexual freedom and helps to remove the fear of pregnancy. Some of the old barriers - legal and moral - against abortion and divorce have come tumbling down. There is a widespread permissiveness toward pre-marital and extra-marital affairs. Indeed, the old institution of marriage is under a somewhat severe siege.

DEVELOPMENT When anyone asks, "Why not...why be strapped with the old forms, the old ties and traditions of marriage" - the ultimate answer, I feel, is not so much in terms of legal responsibility and protection, as it is in terms of the eternal moral law of God.

Just as last week when we were thinking about standards for our homes, we quoted a secular writer, "The 20th century has not found a way to repeal the Ten Commandments" - so you can say the same thing about the Judeo-Christian standards of monogamy and marriage..."the 20th century has not found a way to repeal basic moral law at the center of things".

You find it first in one of the earliest chapters of Genesis, "Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one". Both Jesus and Paul quoted that, and Jesus added, "So they are no longer two, but

one. What, therefore, God has joined together, let not man put asunder". This is at the heart of a moral law which reflects the experience of the ages and the wisdom of God - this concept that two people will feel such love and loyalty to one another as they feel to no one else, and that before God, they enter into a life-long relationship that only death can break.

PROBLEM OF DIVORCE

Of course, no discussion on this subject can go very far without confronting head-on the problem of divorce. Jesus, quite clearly, took his stand four-square against divorce. At the same time, I have never been able to make Jesus into the rigid legalist who would say that divorce is never justified. Indeed, after taking his unequivocal stand about marriage and divorce, he went on to say to his puzzled disciples, "Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it is given". There was no retreating from the ideal and the standard that he proclaimed, but with his God-like understanding of what was in the heart of man, he knew that people sometimes worked themselves into intolerable prison cages within their marriages.

Then or now, people get married who never should get married, who turn their relationship into a hell instead of a home, becoming spiteful and hateful - the very characteristics which are the opposite of love and marriage. And it seems to me that the Gospel of the second chance which Jesus offered to people in other contexts must also apply in the realm of sick-unto-death marriages and to those who share in varying degree the responsibility for that sickness. Only let us never make divorce too permissive and too perfumed. It is tragic and painful - at best, the lesser of two evils, and it is seldom experienced without hurt and wounds and scars to those most intimately involved in family circles. It is not the original, intentional will of God for any persons, and that clear fact is tempered only by the love of God which accepts us and seeks to heal us through all of our hurts, wounds and brokenness.

But come back now to the main thrust of today's sermon, which I understand to be the main thread of our spiritual heritage - simply that the eternal, invincible ideal, authored by God himself, is a steady, permanent relationship between two people - sharing, caring, loving, growing "until death do us part". Now clearly couples differ and circumstances differ, and there are no simple all-purpose, all people prescriptions for a meaningful and lasting marriage. But given the basic ingredient of love, there are at least three words that point to meaning and stability within marriage. Let me touch upon all three briefly.

COMMITMENT

The first word is commitment. I clipped a cartoon recently in a magazine which portrayed a wedding ceremony. As the minister asked the bride the traditional question, "Will you have this man to be your wedded husband", she casually replied, "Natch". I smiled at the incongruity of it, but I fell to reflecting on the different attitudes that can be conveyed, even in the traditional answer to the question, "I will". The words, "I will" can simply be an easy affirmative - the formal commitment of "natch", or they can communicate strong commitment and determination, "I will". And a marriage, I feel - one with meaning and strength - requires the latter. I recall one wedding at which I was officiating here in the chancel where the bride instead of answering "I will" at the appropriate moment - fainted...right here at the altar. The groom and I picked her up and managed to get her over to the choir stall where she was stretched out until a doctor arrived. We never did get the "I will". She never married that young man. But this is another story.

Strong, successful marriages don't just happen. Work, patience and persistence are needed. Inevitably, there are problems, discouragements and differences of

opinion. And these are the shoals and the storms by which marriages are wrecked unless people care enough and are committed enough to get past them. David Mace, a respected marriage counsellor offers this thought and observation:

"In marriage, the will to succeed is of vital importance. I have known situations that seemed altogether hopeless, yet somehow in the end, the problems were solved. I have known other marriages in which there was really very little wrong, but which failed because husband and wife lacked the determination to make them work."

A simple, important ingredient to marriage is "the determination to make it work". Obviously it applies to couples starting out, but it applies just as surely to the rest of us at later stages in the journey. A commitment on the part of each partner to work at it, to make it go.

COMMUNICATION The second word is communication. I'm sure you'll agree that it's one of the over-burdened words of our time, for we're always talking about the need for greater communication - in our work and in our world, in a church or in a community - across the gulfs that separate people, and in the bonds that unite us in a home. But if it's an over-burdened word, it is because it represents an under-developed art. A lot of us, I think, grew up thinking that we should keep our innermost feelings to ourselves, and maybe we even entered into marriage thinking that silence was more golden than honest speech, and that repression of our feelings was better than expression of those feelings.

I think there is something to be said for restraint and for timing in our communication. I knew a man once in our church who always seemed to seek me out on a Sunday morning a few minutes before eleven to unburden to me his latest complaints about the church. After a while I learned to avoid him, but then there came a time when we became pretty good friends as I became honest enough and bold enough to tell him what I thought of his timing, and he could still be honest enough to tell me what he thought about the church.

So - in marriage as in some other areas, all that passes in the name of honesty and communication is not necessarily good and healing. Nagging and bitterness and bullying and temper tantrums are not really what we mean by communication in marriage. Rather we are talking about two people who love each other and who trust each other enough to try to put into words how they feel and to talk things through at the right time. And sometimes, communication is at a deeper level than words. It is in emotions - like joy and sorrow and responsible anger. Just as there have been break-through in physical health in our life-times, so it seems to me that this has been a major break-through in marital health in our time - this realization of the importance of communication in a marriage that keeps growing in maturity. ~~Honesty, openness, sharing, talking, listening, weeping, laughing, differing, failing, succeeding~~ and they can all mean growing -- together.

CONSECRATION Commitment. Communication. And the third word - (it also begins with 'c') - is consecration. By that I mean the Christian commitment of a home and the spiritual values that attend it.

I received a call this past week from a young man in his late twenties, soon to be married here, who asked if he and the young lady might have two hours of my time in the next two weeks to talk about the spiritual side of marriage. I gladly responded in the affirmative ~~and thought to myself how long it has been since someone called me regarding this~~. We give thought to the physical aspects of marriage and

usually touch upon the economic or financial aspects, but pass over so easily the spiritual side of marriage. I was reminded of an item I read recently regarding the reflections of a psychologist and counsellor after forty years as a counsellor. It said:

"His research leads him to believe that a marriage performed by a priest, clergyman or rabbi has a greater chance for success than those legalized by a judge or a county clerk".

Surely there is no automatic insurance in a marriage performed by a clergyman. Any minister can think with sadness of some marriage that he helped to launch that didn't last. But I think the point in the observation is this - that marriages that both start with some religious orientation and stay with it have a much better chance at maturity and survival. Take that 13th chapter of First Corinthians that we read in the service this morning - the famous "love" chapter. What a thermostat for renewing the meaning of marriage.

I can remember as a boy occasionally going into homes that contained a sampler or motto on the wall with these words: "Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal". That sort of thing doesn't turn us on now-a-days. We've gotten away from it. It's gone out of style with most homes, but it is, after all, a pretty clear message from and about the sponsor. We don't have to have it out there on the wall, but if it's built into a marriage in one way or another, it will help it and strengthen it.

For a marriage to have some ongoing consecration to Christ, some vital connection with the Bible, some tie with a Church, a concern for some religious habits and ways in a home - is by no means a protection against problems and conflicts in a marriage, but it is to be in tune with a power that refines, renews and re-directs in a positive way.

Whenever I perform a wedding service, I cannot help but be moved by the majestic meaning of some of the words of the wedding service. Whether or not these words mean re-dedication or memories or hopes for you personally, still reflect on them - for if we lose the values and the vision in those words we shall in that relationship that is deeper and more meaningful than any other we shall ever experience in life be poor, indeed:

"Marriage is an honorable estate, instituted of God....
not to be entered into unadvisedly, but reverently,
discreetly, and in the love of God.

I take you to be my wife or husband - to have and to hold,
from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer,
for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to
cherish, till death do us part. Those whom God hath joined
together let not man put asunder".

LET US PRAY: O God and Master of us all, help us to put into practice in the relationship of our daily lives these things that we have been considering here this hour; and as we go about our way, help us to live that we may be more nearly measured by the spirit and the life of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. Amen

greater commitment - communication - consecration.