

**The Changing Face of America's Families (I):
The Promise of Marriage**

A sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
7 March 2004

Text: I Corinthians 13

That America's families are changing is news to no one. Husband, wife, 2.2 kids -- the picture once regarded as normative—has expanded to include single-parent families, "blended" families, domestic partners with or without children, families in which both parents are employed outside the home. Some research indicates that 1 out of 2 marriages entered into today will end in divorce. An increasing number of young people are choosing co-habitation, and see it as logical preparation for marriage. There are serious proposals on the table for a constitutional amendment prohibiting gay marriage, and Ohio has already acted to limit spousal benefits in same-sex relationships.

Sociologist Mary Pipher calls family "our shelter from the storm, our oldest and most precious institution and our last great hope." During this sermon series, we will hold these most intimate and personal relationships to the light of God's loving counsel and guidance. Today we'll look at marriage; next week, divorce and re-marriage. On March 28th, we'll consider gay marriage, and following Easter, we'll explore the Christian community as a family prototype. As always, I value our partnership in the preaching process, and invite your comments, suggestions, critique.

This opening sermon on marriage will affirm biblical family values. But right away we have a problem: *which* biblical values? The family as described in the Bible is a very particular, culturally-defined version: a male-dominated household where wife and children and slaves were regarded as property under the complete control of the patriarch. Religious laws governing marriage presumed this arrangement. For example, a married man was allowed to have intercourse with a woman, as long as she was not another man's wife. Adultery as prohibited in the seventh commandment was the sin of trespassing on a man's property. Polygamy was regularly practiced in the Old Testament as a means of securing a male heir, and we remember the trouble this caused Abraham and his two wives Sarah and Hagar, divisions still painfully evident in the Middle East conflict between the descendents of these two unions. The apostle Paul's advice in the book of Ephesians used to be the gold standard for marriage: *Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife...in everything [she] is*

to be subject to her husband [Ephesians 5:22-24]. Yet this too reflects the patriarchal perspective of that time and culture, and cannot be considered God's unchanging word for a very different time and culture. Fact is, we cannot simply import biblical teaching on marriage to a contemporary understanding of it as a partnership of equals, shaped as well by a whole raft of psychological and sociological insights and cultural realities.

What Scripture does offer, however, is an ethic of love that can provide a solid foundation for marriage. In fact, the morning text is familiar, chosen frequently to be read at weddings. However, the love to which it refers is not the romantic passion that compels a couple to seek union. It is instead the love which is an act of will, the self-giving love which puts another's well-being ahead of one's own. Interestingly—but perhaps not surprisingly—the apostle Paul was prompted to write these words to a church community experiencing tremendous conflict. Listen for God's word in the reading from the first letter to the Corinthian churches, in the thirteenth chapter at the first verse, a word to help build marriages that will withstand the tests of time and changing circumstance, and bring great joy and fulfillment. [I Corinthians 13]

Attending a wedding for the first time, a little girl whispered to her mother, "Why is the bride dressed in white?" Her mother replied, "Because white is the color of happiness, and today is the happiest day of her life." The child thought about this for a moment, and then asked, "So why is the groom wearing black?"

All kidding aside, part of the challenge of marriage lies in seeing through the myths that surround it. Myths such as the one embedded in that little joke—that for the woman the wedding is the pinnacle of her dreams and for the man it's the beginning of the end. Or this one: "and they lived happily ever after." The romantic myth that imagines the blissful union of two people who completely fill each others' needs. The myth that confuses attraction with love, and infatuation with the dynamic to sustain it. And even the perspective reflected in the title of a Broadway show, "I Love You, You're Perfect, Now Change."

Marriage, the church has taught through the ages, is a gift from God. While Protestant churches do not regard marriage as a sacrament, we do believe that God blesses the covenant commitment of two people who promise to love and cherish each other "as long as they both shall live." Our wedding ceremonies are worship services in which a couple makes their vows in the presence of other persons and God. The ministers here and in most churches officiate at weddings only after the couple has participated in pre-marital counseling which includes conversation about

family background and experiences, communication skills, expectations, money matters, sexuality, and spirituality. We speak with engaged couples about the life-cycle of marriage that includes romantic attachment, disillusionment, and maturing love—a process that will repeat itself through the years. I think this bears saying from the pulpit because of contemporary culture’s lack of support for marriage—evidenced not only by the appalling divorce rate but also by the concept of the “starter marriage,” the mentality that accepts the impermanence of all human commitments, the self-absorbed attitude that seeks its own fulfillment first and last, the way the media give even one second of play time to Britney Spears and her 28-hour Las Vegas “marriage.”

The Marriage Coalition, a Cleveland-based organization headed by this church’s own Sandra Bender, emphasizes marriage as our society’s most pro-child institution. National research demonstrates that families with two parents are able to provide children greater financial and emotional stability than other family configurations. Working in partnership with faith communities, the Marriage Coalition offers a strong counterpoint to the cultural forces eroding marriage.

But maybe nothing is as effective for celebrating the promise of marriage than successful marriages. For research on this sermon, I asked 12 member couples—who together represent 482 years of marriage experience-- to share their secrets. On the one hand, they are just what you might expect. Commitment. Friendship. Communication and compromise. On the other hand, one couple agreed that they are diametrical opposites, and noted, “we have survived together into our 64th year of marriage to our delighted amazement.” The love the couples described took the form of active verbs: listening, holding common values and choosing priorities together, forgiving, not going to bed angry, showing affection, remaining hopeful. One husband responded, “[marriage takes] humility, humility, humility; [learning to say] you were right and I was wrong,” adding with candor, “It took me a long time.” I’ll bet. “Humor” was also high on the list; the ability to laugh together and enjoy each other’s company.

All the couples described marriage as “hard work” but infinitely worth the effort. And all the couples identified faith as a key component to their success; though this was expressed in various ways: praying and worshiping together, feeling supported by friends in the church, experiencing life’s transitions---birth, raising children, the death of parents—through the church rituals of baptism, confirmation, funerals, working on issues and projects that contribute to the good of the wider community. By actions that speak louder than words, these couples embody the definition given in M. Scott Peck’s book “The Road Less

Traveled:" *Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth.*" And I know these 12 couples are only representative of many strong and healthy marriages in this congregation. Your positive examples are worth a thousand words, and are another way you help Fairmount fulfill our mission "to make a difference in the world."

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. The promise of marriage is a deep and enduring love of intimate devotion and loyalty of life together. In her book *My Grandfather's Blessing: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging*, Naomi Remen offers one more characteristic to nurture this complex relationship. She tells how her grandfather used to bring her gifts. For her fourth birthday he brought her a little cup filled with dirt. "If you promise to put some water in the cup every day, something will happen," he said. She writes, "So I promised. At first, curious to see what would happen, I did not mind doing this. But as the days went by and nothing changed it got harder and harder to remember to put water in the cup. The second week was even harder and I became resentful of my promise to put water in the cup. By the third week I began to forget to water the cup and would often remember only after I'd gone to bed, and then have to get out of bed and water it in the dark.

But I did not miss a single day, and one morning there were two little green leaves that had not been there the night before. I was completely astonished. I could not wait to tell my grandfather, certain that he would be as surprised as I was. But of course he was not. Carefully he explained to me that life and surprise is everywhere, hidden in the most ordinary and unlikely places. I was delighted.

"...and all it needs is water?" I asked him. Gently he touched me on the top of my head. "No, my little one. All it needs is your faithfulness."

Friends, we come to the table of the Lord aware that in marriage, and in life, we are not always faithful. But this bread and this cup are signs that God always is. We love—in marriage, and in all relationships-- because God first loved us.
And always will.

TO THE GOD OF ALL GRACE, WHO CALLS US TO SHARE GOD'S GLORY IN UNION WITH JESUS CHRIST, BE THE POWER FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

The Rev. Louise F. Westfall, D.Min., Pastor