

“CAN THIS MARRIAGE BE SAVED?”
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Readings: “Witnessing a Wedding” by Marge Piercy

Slowly and slower you have learned
to let yourselves grow while weaving
through each other in strong cloth.

It is not strangeness in the mate
you must fear, and not the fear
that loosens us so we lean back

chilly with a sudden draft on flesh
recently joined and taste again
the other sharp as tin in the mouth,

but familiarity we must mistrust,
the word based on the family
that fogs the sight and plugs the nose.

Fills the ears with the wax of possession.
Toughens the daily dead skin
callused against penetration.

Never think you know finally, or say
My husband likes, My wife is,
Without balancing in the coil of the inner ear

that no one is surely anything till dead.
Love without respect is cold as a boa
constrictor, its caresses as choking.

Celebrate your differences in bed.
Like species, couples die out or evolve.
Ah strange new beasties with strawberry hides,

Velvet green antlers, undulant necks,
tentacles, wings and the senses of bees,

your own changing mosaic of face

and the face of the stranger you live with
and try to love, who enters your body
like water, like pain, like food.¹

From *Grown Up Marriage* by Judith Viorst

Although marriage is for grown-ups, very few of us are (fully) grown up when we marry. Growing up takes time, perhaps a whole lifetime, and getting there—if we get there at all—is hard. But marriage, which can be the most vexatious of human relationships, can also be (an) engine for our growth. For in making some sort of peace with the disenchantments, demands, and astonishing complexities of ordinary married life, we can create—and no, this isn't a contradiction in terms—a grown-up marriage...

In a grown-up marriage, we understand that we aren't, and shouldn't be, each other's teacher, parent, editor, supervisor, or home-improvement project.

A grown-up marriage allows us to find a balance between autonomy and connection.

In a grown-up marriage we gradually acquire a rueful tolerance of each other's limitations and imperfections.

In a grown-up marriage we do not keep score—at least not out loud.

In a grown-up marriage we recognize that we don't always have to be in love with each other. In fact, we are well aware that we couldn't possibly always be in love with each other. But a grown-up marriage enables us, when we fall out of love with each other, to fall back in.

A grown-up marriage involves a tricky combination of honest and polite.

In a grown-up marriage we're able to apologize when we're wrong and not gloat when we're right. We can also accept an apology that falls short of total abasement—but not too short. In a grown-up marriage the laughter exceeds the regret.

In a grown-up marriage, we've learned to forgive and forget. Well, maybe not forget.

In a grown-up marriage we know how to communicate with each other and know when the only and best thing to do is shut up.

In a grown-up marriage we recognize that marriage does not give us a real identity, or keep us safe from the sorrows and pain of life, or even protect us forever after from loneliness.²

¹ Marge Piercy, "Witnessing a Wedding," in *My Mother's Body*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), pp. 35-36.

² John Buehrens, "What Is Marriage For?" *Quest* Vol. LX(6), June 2004, pp. 1-2.

Sermon

Marriage equality has been a major focus of my preaching over the last six months. With the decision of those pushing for a constitutional amendment outlawing marriage equality to wait 'til next year to try to put it on the state ballot, it seems likely marriage equality will continue to be a focus in the coming year-and-a-half. And of course it will be a focus for our whole Fellowship since we have taken a stand in support of marriage equality.

With all the talk about the politics of marriage I decided that I should also devote some attention to marriage itself. Marriage—whether it involves straight or gay people, whether it is in the context of legally recognized unions or not—is in my view a very important institution. As I said in a sermon last fall, I passionately believe in the institution of marriage. I know being married to Amy has made a profound difference in my life. I have no doubt at all that my marriage has made me a much better person. My passion for the institution of marriage is a big reason why I support marriage equality: I believe that this hallowed institution should be fully available to gay couples as well as straight couples.

So this is a sermon not about the politics of marriage but about the institution of marriage. Of course, I am interpreting this institution inclusively: I am not talking narrowly about only state-legitimated straight marriages. Specifically, I want to focus on what marriages need to flourish. But first, I need to go through some important preliminaries so that I can hopefully avoid at least a few of the minefields that surround the institution of marriage. And believe me, this subject feels as riddled with minefields as any I've addressed.

First, I have to say that I am not an expert on marriage. I've been married sixteen-and-a-half years. I look at Donna and Len Weis and Les and Ellen Gunter—both couples poised to celebrate their fiftieth anniversaries this year—and I feel like I'm still kind of a newlywed. I look at my parents and my parents-in-law—both couples married for 56 years—and I feel sheepish holding forth on marriage.

I have officiated at over 300 weddings, but that also doesn't make me an expert. There are some marriages I thought were doomed from the beginning—and they're still going strong. There have been other marriages I would have bet a fortune on succeeding (if I was a betting man), and they didn't survive a year. So I'm in a marriage and I've worked with a lot of couples getting married, but that doesn't necessarily make me smart about marriage!

I should add that I will talk in generalities today, and that of course is always dangerous ground because there are inevitably exceptions to generalities. Some of these exceptions, I suspect, are sitting right here listening to me today! Some of these exceptions might even stand up in a few minutes and argue with my generalities. To which I'll say, you're right! So let me say emphatically: What I'm about to say is not necessarily universally true, and you may well be the proof of this! This isn't a dodge. It's simply the truth.

Here's the second preliminary. Yes, I believe passionately in the institution of marriage. I believe it is potentially a very good thing for the individuals who are married and for society. But that said, I also need to say that marriage is not for everybody. For some it's simply not congenial or conducive to their spirits. For others, they haven't yet found the right mate (and they may or may not find that mate). Single people are

inherently just as good as married people, and though I do think society benefits from good marriages, this doesn't mean I think everybody ought to get married. If you are single, please don't interpret today's sermon in any way as an indictment of your singleness! It's not.

Third, while I believe passionately in marriage and think that marriage can potentially be a great boon, I also know that there are some marriages that are, well, hellish. Some marriages are harmful to all whom they touch, starting with the couple. Some marriages are better off ended. And then there are some marriages which aren't horrid but also which have died on the vine—the passion and connectedness are gone and they're not coming back. Unfortunately, it only takes one of the two to feel this to doom a marriage.

And fourth, I need to say that marriage is not easy. Love is not easy. It is tempting to wax sentimental about love and marriage, to dwell in fairy tale land. But that is just not the truth—or at least the whole truth—about marriage or love. Love and marriage take hard work. At least occasionally they demand that we work through large piles of you know what. I try gently to point this out at almost every wedding I do. Weddings are tempting times to be in fairy tale land, but sooner or later the couple will realize what a fallacy this is. Marriage takes work. For some that's a bummer to hear at their wedding. But it's the truth.

Of course, work is not necessarily a bad thing. Working to keep a marriage strong and healthy has many rewards, and I also think the work itself can be rewarding. Right now in my marriage, for example, the work I'm doing is largely focused on the domestic duties that keep a household running. Amy is unusually busy; a lot of interesting things are happening in her professional life. As a result I'm doing the lion's share of the cooking, grocery shopping, laundry, cleaning, finances, and childcare. There might be things I'd sometimes rather be doing than all this, like sitting down with a good book or watching a movie. But on the whole I'm really enjoying the work because my doing it is helping Amy do some really cool things. Amy is kind of waiting for me to get fed up with it—as I have on occasion in the past when there have been short seasons of me doing more of the household work. But I feel like maybe I've grown up a little bit. God knows the roles have more typically been reversed.

I should add that marriage isn't all work, either. In good marriages there is lots of fun, too: being together, talking together, sharing in activities both enjoy, sharing intimacy together. Hardly ever have fun together is not a recipe for a good and healthy marriage!

Okay, with these preliminaries dispensed with, now I can move into the heart of this sermon. What are some things couples can do to keep their marriage strong and healthy? What are some of the keys to a good marriage?

First of all, it seems to me that a strong and mutual sense of fidelity is important. Fidelity involves faithfulness not only to your spouse, but to the marriage itself. Fidelity is an active, on-going commitment to the well-being of the marriage. This means putting the marriage at the center of your life. This means regularly caring for the marriage, tending to it. Sure, work and caring for kids if you have them and spiritual searching and care of self and who knows what else also require lots of your attention and energy. It's not desirable—let alone realistic—to forsake these and concentrate exclusively on your marriage. But fidelity to your marriage continually brings your attention back to the

marriage, even as you juggle all the other commitments in your life. Though this isn't necessarily true in the short-term, over the long haul fidelity to a marriage privileges the marriage above all other relationships and commitments. I think over the long haul that is absolutely essential. If for long stretches of time your marriage takes a back seat to other things both good—like raising children or personal growth—or bad—like a chemical addiction—the marriage is in profound jeopardy.

Of course one important aspect of marital fidelity is sexual faithfulness. Typically this is the thing that first comes to mind when we think of fidelity in a marriage. This is understandable since sexuality is such a powerful human experience. The absence of sexual fidelity has certainly been the rock upon which many a marriage has foundered. Staying out of other people's beds is arguably strategy #1 for keeping your marriage healthy and strong.

Sexual fidelity is not always easy. Temptation is often an ever-present reality. In a marriage spanning decades, so, too, can be boredom. From what I've read, it's not at all clear biologically that we were made to be sexually faithful to the same partner for decades. So sexual fidelity takes work. It takes attentiveness, self-honesty, and a guardedness so that we recognize temptation when it rears its head sooner than later. Temptations that sneak up on us can be disastrous to sexual fidelity.

The writer Scott Russell Sanders writes about what sexual fidelity means to him in his marriage to his wife Ruth, and how in his life it's been a good thing. His thoughts strongly echo my own.

Fidelity entails restraint. The marriage vow means choosing one lover and forsaking all others. The fact that it's broken left and right does not change the meaning of the vow. In my experience, choosing one lover and renewing that choice day by day, year by year, is not a sacrifice of freedom, the way the bachelor jokes make it out to be, but a fulfillment of desire. Marriage gives meaning to desire, gives it a purpose, a history, a home. I keep faith not merely with Ruth but with myself, for the person I have become is inextricable from the life we have shared. Our travels, our meals, our walks and talks, the books we've read together, the movies and plays we've seen, the children we've brought into the world, the work we've done, our struggles and accomplishments—the sum of this mutual history defines who we are.³

I like how Sanders lifts up fidelity as a choice. I think that's right on. Fidelity—sexual and otherwise—is a voluntary choice, freely entered into. Fidelity is not about ownership or possession. It's also not a once-for-all-time choice. You don't make the choice on your wedding day and then you're good 'til death do you part. I believe that fidelity is a daily choice. I'm trying to incorporate this idea into my daily spiritual practice. There is a time in the practice when I'm attentive to the primary relationships in my life; that is an ideal time to commit myself to fidelity to my life partner for another day.

Another key to keeping a marriage healthy is to deal with the growth that each partner can potentially undergo as the years go by. Just think of the changes and

³ Scott Russell Sanders, *Hunting for Hope: A Father's Journeys* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 89.

potential growth we go through as individuals in 50 or 60 or 70 years of togetherness: from young to middle-aged to old. Sometimes from empty nester to full nester to empty nester. From rookie at work to established in work to retired. Every individual change stresses and stretches the relationship. That at least half the marriages survive 'til death parts the couple is a lot more astonishing statistic than that nearly half of marriages end in divorce!⁴

Of course personal growth is a good thing—this is what keeps the relationship from becoming stale and boring. I think the reading today from Marge Piercy beautifully lifts this up. But it's also a hard thing. It takes a lot of work—there's that word again!—to negotiate through these individual changes together. Without doing the work, the individual growth and change can very easily unhinge a marriage. Couples either die out or they evolve.

In the second reading, I like how Judith Viorst highlights that through the seasons of growth even our love itself might waver. This is in some ways an extreme statement, but there is truth in it, too. Maybe we don't fall all the way out of love in a marriage, but the intensity and the passion of our love surely waxes and wanes. As Viorst writes, this is not necessarily a bad thing; the trick is to keep working on the relationship so that the seeds are sown for falling back into a more intense and passionate love.

Another key to a strong marriage is finding a balance between autonomy and connection. That balance also no doubt fluctuates over time. But some sense of balance between these two poles is crucial. It's important on the one hand not to let your whole life get subsumed by your partner. This is the truth lifted up at many weddings I conduct with the reading from *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran: "Love one another, but make not a bond of love...Stand together, but not too near together."⁵ Both partners need to remain individuals. But that's not the whole story, because at the same time, both partners have to put their marriage at the center of their lives. This is the great paradox of marriage: you remain an individual, and at the center of your life is a partnership.

Another key, I'm convinced, is early intervention at the first sign of trouble. So many couples ignore the early warning signs and allow themselves to slowly drift apart. If they eventually seek help, it's often too late. So I make couples I marry solemnly swear they will get counseling if either party thinks there is a problem—even if the partner thinks there's no problem and they're just wasting their time and money on counseling.

There are other important qualities that are essential to a strong marriage. Tolerance of your partner's limitations and faults (not to mention your own) is a key. Related to this is the maturity to know you're not going to change anything fundamental about your partner. "Mate behavior modification"⁶ is an attractive but totally unrealistic enterprise. Mate behavior modification is another rock upon which many a marriage founders. Related to tolerance for the limitations and faults of our partner is another important quality for a good marriage: patience. Patience goes very far in helping marriages thrive. Also essential I think is mutual respect. If there is not mutual respect,

⁴ Sue Shellenbarger, "No Comfort in Numbers: Divorce Rate Varies Widely from Group to Group," *Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2004.

⁵ Khalil Gibran, *The Prophet*, (New York: Knopf, 1946), pp. 16-17.

⁶ Laura Kipnis, "Marriage is made in hell," *The Observer*, September 7, 2003.

there will not be mutuality; there will not be genuine love. And of good communication is a very important quality in a strong, lasting marriage.

A final key to a healthy and strong marriage is attentiveness. Inattentiveness and its companion complacency are mortal enemies of a good marriage. Judith Viorst puts it succinctly in her book: “If we imagine that marriage is where we can burp, bitch, snicker and snipe day after day without paying a price, we are wrong.”⁷ Just as bad is becoming so inattentive we basically disengage from the relationship. Whether such disengagement is intentional or not makes no difference. The result is the same: the marriage slowly but surely becomes seriously jeopardized.

It’s helpful to be particularly attentive to some of the potential issues that unhinge many a marriage. For example: disagreement over how to handle money, habitual retreating from conflicts, little fights that begin routinely to escalate into big fights, belittling or constant criticism by one or both partners, and reading the worst into the partner’s words and actions and the motives that underlie them. It also helps to be aware of two stages in a marriage that according to experts seem to be especially tricky: the first seven years of a marriage and around when the oldest child turns fourteen-years-old.⁸ I had never heard of this latter danger zone until doing the research for this sermon. With an oldest child who just turned fourteen a few months ago, this little piece of wisdom certainly got my attention! That is a good thing, because attentiveness is crucial to keeping a marriage healthy and strong.

It’s important to be attentive not just of warning signs but also of the good things. In a good marriage there are so many wonderful things big and little that happen all the time. Taking these for granted causes incalculable damage to marriage and spirituality.

Marge Piercy was the poet of my courtship with Amy and is the poet of our marriage. She has a line that sums up well what’s essential in a marriage: “love consciously/conscientiously, concretely, constructively.”⁹ That is a great motto for any marriage: love consciously, conscientiously, concretely, constructively. Live these words as best as you can, and your marriage has a pretty good shot.

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⁷ From the Amazon.com review of *Grown Up Marriage*.

⁸ Shellenbarger.

⁹ Marge Piercy, “To have without holding,” in Marilyn Sewell, ed., *Cries of the Spirit* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), p. 43.