

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

June 26th, 2011 (#442a)

Title: "What God Has Joined Together"

Text: Matthew 19:6

The month of June has traditionally been known as the wedding month. In fact, it was on this day 62 years ago that my parents were married. One person decided to interview children between the ages of 6 and 10 to find out their understanding of marriage and love. Their answers were quiet revealing. When asked, *"What, exactly, is marriage?"*, Eric (age 6) replied, *"Marriage is when you get to keep your girl and don't have to give her back to her parents!"* When asked what was the proper age to get married, there was a divergence of answers. Eight-year-old Carolyn replied, *"Eighty-four! Because at that age, you don't have to work anymore, and you can spend all your time loving each other."* Little Bert, age 5, had a different perspective. He said, *"Once I'm done with kindergarten, I'm going to find me a wife!"* And when asked why love happens between two particular people, Manuel said, *"I think you're supposed to get shot with an arrow or something, but the rest of it isn't supposed to be so painful."* And Regina confided to the interviewer: *"I'm not rushing into being in love. I'm finding Grade four hard enough."* As you can see, even at an early age there are differences in opinion as to what marriage is all about.

Since there are so many differences of opinion (even at an early age) as to what marriage is all about, we need to be reminded from time-to-time what God has to say about it. This topic, though, is emotionally charged for some people. Past experiences in marriage may have hurt you, and your emotions are still raw. My intent is not to bring any additional pain or condemnation, but to help us see what God's loving plan is for us regarding marriage. And if you would like to speak with me regarding what is said this morning, please see me after the service or call me so we can set up an appointment.

Please turn with me to the 19th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus gives us his basic understanding of marriage. Even though the Pharisees wanted Jesus to talk about divorce, Jesus began with statements about marriage. In a society in which divorce is becoming more and more prevalent, the question we need to be discussing and debating is not divorce. Our urgent need, for us and our children, is to communicate again and again what the Scriptures teach about marriage. Matthew chapter 19, beginning with verse 1. Hear God's unchanging Word.

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there.

Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." (Matthew 19:1-6; NIV) This is God's Word.

In these few brief sentences, Jesus gives us His thoughts on the subject of marriage. While this passage is not exhaustive of Jesus' teaching on the subject, it does include four major principles regarding marriage.

The first principle is that marriage is a divine institution; that is, God thought it up. It is not something that has been dreamed up by men and women. Rather, it goes back to the very beginning of time, Jesus tells us. And if God thought it up ... if God created marriage for our own welfare, then we had better listen to what he says about it.

Some people would disagree that marriage is a divine institution. They would say that marriage is an accumulation of manmade customs that has evolved over time. Yes, much in our wedding ceremonies is based on custom. The custom of wearing "*something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue*" is only about 100 years old. Some people still throw rice, though most are now using birdseed (It makes for easier cleanup. The birds do it for you!). And then there are the traditions of throwing the bridal bouquet and the wearing of rings and the eating of cake. Not that any of these are necessarily wrong. But in focusing on these customs and traditions, we have gotten away from what God has to say about marriage. And disenchanted with these traditions, some couples are saying: "*Why not just live together and forget about marriage?*"

While it is true that much about weddings is based on commonly accepted norms, they are of secondary significance at best. Of primary significance is what God has said from the beginning of creation regarding marriage. Therefore, humanity's alternate lifestyles, as they are sometimes called, cannot be valid if they go against God's Word.

There are three reasons why God ordained marriage. First, God ordained marriage for profound psychological reasons. Experts on the human psyche tell us that one of our greatest needs as humans is to learn to both receive and to express love. If this need is not fulfilled, we will suffer severe psychological trauma. And where do we see love modeled and take those first steps of risking love? In the context of marriage and the family! It should therefore not be surprising that many of the disturbed people in our society are the products of broken homes and broken marriages.

Shortly after entering the pastoral ministry I began using an evaluative tool called "*Prepare/Enrich*" in working with pre-marriage couples. It is an excellent tool for helping to facilitate discussion and for the couple to learn more about themselves and their families of origin ... the families they grew up in. One researcher decided to test out the validity of this tool in regards to the families of origin, and gave it to a large number of hardened criminals that had been locked away in prison. With very few exceptions, almost every inmate had come from extremely dysfunctional families. In those families these men had not learned to receive and/or express love.

Secondly, God ordained marriage for profound sociological reasons. As poet John Donne wrote, no man is an island unto himself - nor a woman for that matter! We do not live in a vacuum. Whatever we do affects someone else. And how do we learn to function properly in society? Again, in the context of marriage and the family! Marriage and the family provides us with rich opportunities to learn how to relate to others.

And thirdly, God ordained marriage for profound theological reasons. The Bible repeatedly uses the concept of marriage to illustrate theological truths. In the Old Testament, God promises or covenants to be our God eternally and invites us to respond by becoming His people. In order

for us to get a grasp on this truth, the Bible uses the model of marriage. In the same way that a man makes a covenant with his wife, and the wife with her husband, God commits Himself to His people.

And therein lies the problem with just *"living together."* It does not model God's covenant of love with us. And since marriage was God's idea rather than ours, we are called to conform to his ways.

In the great Exodus event, we find a great covenanting event taking place at Mt. Sinai **before** the giving of the Law. In a significant social event for the people of Israel (which is outlined for us in the 19th chapter of the book of Exodus), Yahweh declares that He will be their God, and the people respond that they will be His people. Does this wording sound somewhat familiar? It should. Listen to the covenant vows from a wedding ceremony:

"I take you to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward ...

I take you to be my wedded husband, to have and to hold from this day forward ..."

At Mt. Sinai we have the establishment of an exclusive relationship - only One God for his people. No flirting around with the gods of the Canaanites and Jebusites and all the other *"ites"* is allowed. At Sinai we have a public declaration at a great social event - all the people come together at the foot of the mountain where there is thunder and lightning and earthquake and the sound of trumpets, and both God and the people speak and respond. This relationship is permanent ... no trial period, no checking out to see whether another god might come along that looks better or has a better deal. And finally, this covenant is consummated with the giving of the Ten Commandments. Scripture also declares that each succeeding generation was given the opportunity to reaffirm the original covenant and make it their own.

The second principle in marriage is that God has made us male and female. He has made us wonderfully different. Yes, we are different physically, of course. But we are also different mentally and emotionally. Could it possibly be true that *"Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus"*? Some of our legislators think that they have a better idea than God when it comes to marriage. They want to legalize and normalize relationships which are outside of God's revealed will, and want to call it *"good."* My concern is that when we decide to move out from under God's canopy of grace, we leave ourselves open to the storm of God's judgment.

Because of this failure to understand that marriage is a divine institution, and that God has made us male and female, there is also a total confusion about sexuality in our day. *"Anything goes"* seems to be the approach of many people. But with the spreading of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases, more and more people are beginning to recognize and recommend the biblical norm of one husband - one wife in a world going mad in its pursuit of pleasurable sex. In her book entitled *"Going the Distance: Secrets to Lifelong Love,"* psychotherapist Dr. Lonnie Barbach - considered the Dear Abby of sexuality and relationships for the baby boomer generation - states that *"only monogamy can provide the trust and security needed for intimacy and sexual fulfillment."* H. Alden Welch adds: *"Premarital sex, promiscuous sex, sex outside a committed, monogamous, publicly acknowledged relationship is not only risky and against God's laws, it is psychologically and spiritually damaging..."*

Another principle in marriage is that there is to be a leaving. *"For this reason a man will leave his father and his mother ..."* (vs. 5). For a marriage to be all that God intended it to be, there needs to be a leaving of parents. The first commitment - after God - is no longer to the parents. It is now to the spouse. One of the reasons some marriages get into difficulty is that one or both parties have never *"left"* their parents. Yes, maybe they've left them and moved to

another city. But they have never left them psychologically. They continue to look back to their family of origin as an "escape hatch." They are not prepared to give the marriage relationship the commitment that is needed to make it work.

Stuart Briscoe tells about the time a young couple who was planning to get married came to see him. He reports that as they came in the door, that the cold blast of November wind was warm compared to the atmosphere between them. It seems that their wedding day was to be on the opening day of deer hunting season. And he wanted her to spend their honeymoon deer hunting. After using some humor to alleviate the tension, he counseled them:

"To the best of my knowledge you don't have to get married. Why are you choosing to get married?" Looking at the man, he said, "If hunting is more important to you than marriage and your wife, why do you need a wife? Stick with deer. The simple fact of the matter is this: If you're going to enter a new relationship, it ought to be because you've chosen that new relationship over the old one."

The "leaving of father and mother" is a statement that you've chosen that new relationship over the old one.

Another important principle in marriage is that there is also to be - in the words of the old King James Version, a "cleaving" or uniting. In this uniting, a married couple become a unique entity. The best and the worst, the strengths and the weaknesses of both bride and groom are now fused into one new entity so that each one might be mutually complementary and enriching.

Have you noticed how opposites attract - for about 6 weeks? After that, opposites irritate. Wouldn't you think that when God in His wisdom brings two people together, they would be people who could agree on the temperature in the house? Wouldn't you think that when God ordains two people from eternity to be made for each other, they would be people who had been brought up to treat a tube of toothpaste or a roll of toilet paper the same way?

If we have come to recognize that two have become one, we also have begun to see that these two are melded into a new oneness. But this process requires adjustment and commitment.

A grandmother, who was celebrating her golden wedding anniversary, shared the secret of her long and happy marriage. "On my wedding day," she exclaimed, "I decided to make a list of ten of my husband's faults which, for the sake of our marriage, I would overlook."

A guest later asked the woman what some of the faults she had chosen to overlook were. The grandmother replied, "To tell you the truth, my dear, I never did get around to listing them. But whenever my husband did something that made me hopping mad, I would say to myself, 'Lucky for him that's one of the ten!'"

And finally, **Jesus reminds us that marriage imposes a profound responsibility.** "What God has joined together, let man not separate" (vs. 6). In this responsibility, we need to ask ourselves some important questions. Are we allowing our marriage to collapse by default, because we refuse to work on it, to make adjustments, to build what is necessary? Remember that God joined couples together so they could discover His plan for them - a new and divine oneness. Are we guilty of being too casual about our sexuality? Are we abusing God's gifts to us?

And if you are looking back on a failed marriage, what then? If you are responsible for a broken marriage or feel you are guilty of some unmentionable act, I have some good news for you. There is forgiveness available. You obtain it by admitting to God your sin, and repenting of it. Don't seek to blame anybody else. Call it what it is. Seek God's cleansing and forgiveness and

then allow Him to gather the broken pieces of your life and put them back together.

And for those who are contemplating marriage, or who are married, I leave you with this story. For sometimes out of the mouths of babes come great truths.

A little boy sat through a Sunday School class and learned about the time Jesus went to a wedding and turned water into wine.

"And what did you learn from that story?" asked his father afterward.

The boy thought for a moment and answered, *"If you're having a wedding, make sure Jesus is there."*

Yes, make sure that Jesus is there at your wedding, and in your marriage, too! AMEN.

CALL TO OFFERING

:

There is an old story about a man who is asked by a neighbour if he may borrow his clothesline.

The man replied, *"Sorry, I cannot lend you my clothesline, because I am drying flour on it!"* The

neighbour said, *"I didn't know you could dry flour on a clothesline!"* The man explained, *"It is*

amazing how many things can be done with a clothesline when you don't want to lend it out!" **

There is no end of excuses we will find if we don't want to share what we have been given. But if we look at God's generosity and love for us, there is no end of reasons why we can give. What are you finding? Excuses? Or reasons?