

“More than Madly in Love”

August 28, 2022

God’s Good Gift of Sexuality series

I hope that this series has offered us all something to consider. Whether it’s claiming the goodness of sexuality or seeing ourselves as helpers to one another, whether it’s understanding love more fully or seeing the broader connections between sexuality and spirituality, I pray that we celebrate who we are as God’s good creation - no matter our relationship status - single, partnered, married. I hope it’s clear by now that love and intimacy go far beyond just the physical aspects of our relationships. It’s more than being “madly in love.”

I’ve seen this truth played out in many ways in real stories, and when I think about Paul’s words to the Philippians, it takes me back to the wedding ceremony; which is really a worship service that recognizes God’s love for us lived out in relationships of covenant, commitment, consent, and care. Though we hear a lot of liturgy at weddings, I want to highlight a few parts.

Near the beginning, there’s what’s called the declaration of intention. **SLIDE:** *Will you have one another to live together in holy marriage? Will you love, comfort, honor and keep, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful as long as you both shall live?*

Right away, we call marriage *holy* - something set apart, something of God. And then there’s the big question: *will you love, comfort, honor, and keep one another in sickness and in health...will you choose only one another and be faithful?* Yes, it’s a question of intent, but it’s also about consent and commitment.

We ask profound questions when people choose to be married, and they don’t know what’s ahead. Could any of you who have been married have ever known all that you’d face? I don’t believe that people decide to be married with the intent that things won’t work out down the road. Divorce is a difficult reality that happens for many reasons and grieves many hearts. When we stand before God and witnesses and say these words, it’s powerful.

When I read the declaration of intention, I think about couples who have said those words, lived them out in powerful ways, and modeled the attitude that Paul talks about in Philippians. One woman who was diagnosed at age 40 with breast cancer and her spouse who reminded himself of the promises he made with this intention. A couple who has been living together for many years and continues

to support and encourage each other as partners. Couples who have experienced complications with pregnancies and adoption. Couples who have endured the devastating loss of children through accidents or other events and have supported one another in profound grief. A spouse who has gone to every treatment, appointment, procedure, caregiving during recovery, sitting near the bedside during healing, and being near even at the end of life. Couples who have shown the love of Christ to each other and honored one another. When I ask people who have married a long time what it takes, they say it's work and it's not always easy.

Beyond that declaration of intention, there are vows exchanged. You can find many versions these days, but here's a familiar one. **SLIDE:**

*In the name of God,
I, take you, to be my spouse,
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,
as long as we both shall live.
This is my solemn vow.*

Again, these are words of profound commitment - promising to be with one another in every situation in God's name! Rob Bell says, "When a couple first gets married, there are a thousand little adjustments they're constantly making, a thousand discussions about the details of life, a thousand conversations about trivial things that are actually significant. On their own, these conversations and interactions don't mean much, but added together, they're how two become one. They have something with each other that they have with no one else."

Part of that is physical connection, but it goes beyond that. We're called to be fully human - not to be anything less than what God intended for us to be. And part of that is recognizing others' full humanity. Maybe that's a part of what Paul is talking about with the church community.

Loving humbly changes who we are. How many of us understand that our relationships with others as a reflection of the love of Jesus? It's not just marriages, partnerships, or intimate relationships, but all of our relationships. We're called to reflect the love of Jesus. Scripture warns us about pride - about thinking of

ourselves more highly than others and treating others in ways that we wouldn't want to be treated. In every list of what to avoid, pride is there.

Paul's words are written to the church in Philippi, but there's a word for all of our relationships. These wedding Scriptures come from words written to a Christian community. He starts with a focus on our relationship with Christ – that's the grounding for everything else. Knowing Christ's love for us, we can love others better. We're called to have compassion and care for each other.

He encourages us to pay attention to the needs of others just as much as we do our own needs - to offer encouragement and comfort. It may sound simple, but as a rule, we don't do that well at all! Do you find it easy to think about others before you think of yourself? We know what we need and want, and it's easy to focus on that and only that. Paul must have known that we really have to work to love selflessly. That's another word from those who have nurtured long relationships and marriages – compromise and a willingness to pay attention to the other.

Paul lifts up our unity in Christ. He doesn't say uniformity, but unity - a sense of working together, serving one another, with the attitude of Jesus. Right after this passage, there's one of the first hymns written about Jesus – about humility and agape love. Selfish ambition and conceit don't have a place if we're trying to achieve unity. Humility is the way - not seeing ourselves as inferior, but rather seeing others as worthy of love that sacrifices.

It's okay to care about the things you care about, but relationships with others mean that we care about what others care about, too. Have you ever been talking to someone and felt like they were really not listening? Have you ever been the one who isn't listening? I've done both; I've experienced both. It's not good. When we're on the receiving end, it feels like no one cares. When we're the ones not listening, we're not offering true care.

If we want to nurture that kind of love, staying connected to God helps. In the passage we read, Paul reminds us of how Jesus showed selfless love - going to the cross for us. When we focus on the love of Jesus in worship, prayer, and study, we grow in our ability to love others in his name and spirit. Paul calls us to integrity - to make sure that the faith in Jesus we profess matches our words and actions. If I'm honest, there are moments when I haven't had integrity.

Writer Frederick Buechner, who passed away recently, is known for profound theological thoughts, and this is one example: "True humility doesn't

consist of thinking ill of yourself, but of not thinking of yourself much differently from the way you'd be apt to think of anybody else." To even consider humility, we begin by looking at Jesus. He tells us the truth about ourselves and about God. We come to God with open hands, but empty hands. God offers us grace and mercy in Jesus, and then calls us to extend it to others.

It's not easy - to humble ourselves, to think of others as just as important and beloved as we are, to remember that seeking the Kingdom of God isn't an ego trip or a power trip, and it's not about who's better or more worthy. It's all about the One who emptied himself of all but love and calls us to do the same.

Intimacy is relational, not transactional. It's built over time and bonds us together. It requires vulnerability and a large emotional investment. **SLIDE:** "Vulnerability is a state of emotional exposure that comes with a certain degree of uncertainty. It involves a person's willingness to accept the emotional risk that comes from being open and willing to love and be loved." That goes for any relationships. It's hard, but so necessary.

I thought about that as I saw close friends recently. We've known each other since middle school. It's a long time to know people and nurture relationships, and I realized again how important vulnerability is. I trust them with my feelings. I trust that they won't judge me; they'll love me unconditionally.

We have a model of vulnerability in Jesus and a call to vulnerability as people who follow him. That doesn't mean we're able to be vulnerable with everyone, but there are moments of human connection that allow us to do that - sometimes it's with a spouse and partner, sometimes a friend. This matters in all life-giving relationships.

Danielle Treweek writes, "the marriage relationship is central to human community. But its purpose is to serve the ends of this community as a whole—and ultimately the ends of divine-human community— rather than to be its sum total." Our relationships serve the greater community. Paul's words are for a community, but they inform our closest relationships. She says that creation is about what it means to be human - not simply something about marriage - but about a community.

When we get down to what people want in a potential partner, most people are looking for someone who's honest and someone who is trustworthy. We want to receive that and honor it in others. We know the cost of betrayal. It hurts.

Other traits like emotional stability, humor, and caring for yourself are important, but it's telling that honesty and trustworthiness are the top. That's the same for any relationship; we want to be able to trust each other and be honest - even when it's hard. And that takes time and effort from all of us.

God is for covenant, commitment, consent, and care. God models it for us and wants us to experience grace in all of our relationships, including the closest, most intimate ones, as we deal with the real stuff of life because it's hard. There are things we face individually and together that are hard. We need one another; we need support, encouragement, and trust.

It's more than being madly in love. It's cultivating relationships with the attitude of Christ, who showed us selfless love and calls us to do that for one another. May God help us love and care deeply with the love we've experienced in Christ.

Let us pray...