

MARRIAGE MATTERS

A Sermon by Barbara W. ten Hove

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Nearly twenty years ago, on a country road leading from Pennsylvania to Virginia, I did something most young women and girls do at least once in their life—I fantasized about my wedding. At the time I was dating the guy I would learn to call “the one before Jaco.” I was enamored of him, though not in love. But on that road, as I drove my dying father and grieving mother from home to doctor, I distracted myself from all that pain with thoughts of a perfect wedding. In it I wore the white dress and all my bridesmaids looked beautiful and happy. The church was decorated and the music was heavenly. Most importantly, my father was there, walking me down the aisle on his strong arm.

All this proved to be a fantasy. When I married Jaco, a short two years later, my wedding was not much like I had visualized on that long journey. In most ways it was better, though I missed my father a lot. But what I learned on that day and have continued to learn throughout the years is that a wedding is just a nice party. A marriage is something else all together.

When most of us in this modern Western world think about weddings, we think about the kind still quite popular today. You know, bride in a long white dress, guys in tuxedos, everybody in love. Many people think that this is what a wedding is and has always been—a great celebration for a man and a woman who have chosen each other to marry.

The couple getting married should have fallen madly in love at the age of 26 (him) and 23 (her). They should have wonderful parents who shed a lovely tear during the meaningful ceremony presided over by a charming middle aged man in a black robe who makes appropriate jokes at just the right moment. There will be a cute ring-bearer who tries to kiss the flower girl. And of course everyone lives happily ever after with their terrific jobs, a beautiful house, and 2.5 perfect children. Isn't this what a wedding and marriage are supposed to be?

Well, not exactly. You see, marriage—and the wedding that precedes it—has often looked nothing like what I just described. Modern American weddings bear very little resemblance to the weddings of regular people of say, 200 years ago. And they are even less like the weddings of people in the deeper past. Those who say that we must return to a time of “traditional” marriage, don’t really understand that marriage has evolved and changed as much as any other cultural institution in our time. And it is this change that has created the conflict around the definition of marriage.

I owe a great debt to the writer E.J. Graff for much of what I will speak about today. In 1999, Beacon Press (the Unitarian Universalist publishing organization) put out a little book by Graff that made quite a splash: *What Is Marriage For?* In it, Graff explores the curious history of marriage. She especially examines how the purpose of marriage has evolved and how those changes have impacted our current cultural debate.

What is Marriage For? describes in some detail the fascinating history of marriage in the Western world. I wish I had time just to recite to you from this illuminating book. I hope you will make a point to read it some day! But for our purposes here, I will simply skim the surface of Graff’s research before taking it in directions that may interest you. They certainly interest me.

The book is divided into chapters that address key reasons why people have married throughout the centuries. For instance, she has chapters on money, on sex, and on kinship. And she does an interesting job chronicling the religious evolution of marriage, particularly within the Judeo-Christian community.

To understand the role of marriage and how it has evolved over the centuries, it is important to look at the early history of the Christian church. But before I do, let me mention that Graff reminds us how marriage has always had an economic side to it as well as religious. Back in the earliest days of history, people chose mates not only for making babies but also to help bring in the crops, catch the fish and meat, and provide warmth and safety from the harsh environment.

Later, wealthy people married to tie two households together and create a stronger hold (a “stronghold”) on the land. Poorer people married to have a partner to do the hard work of living and to create children to do even more. But marriage was mostly for those with something to share or give. If you were too poor to provide a dowry for your daughter or have land for your son, then marriage might be completely out of reach for you.

Interestingly, then, within the communities of serfs and slaves, in both Europe and America, Graff found some of the earliest examples of people marrying truly for love. When you were not allowed to marry legally (as slaves were not), then the act of marrying *anyway* became a powerful symbol of freedom and love.

But love was not usually the primary reason to marry. And even though economics have always played a big part in marriage, one of the biggest reasons for marrying was to place limits on the animal urge present in all people—sex. And sex, because of its enormous place in the human psyche, has often been related to religion. So it is to religion and sexuality that I now turn.

Let me describe briefly what Graff sees as the primary historical strands of religion and sexuality that came together to make marriage the complicated arrangement it is today. She identifies two sources—Greco-Roman and Judaic—each leading ultimately to what became the Christian world. In ancient Rome, marriage was primarily about, as Graff puts it, “procreation and power.” Men (Rome was extremely patriarchal) would marry primarily for economic reasons, seeking a good wife from the same social class. From this wife the “official” baby Romans would be born.

But the husband had complete power in the family. Not only over his wife and children but also over various underlings who made up his household. Marriage was not really about sex. Legitimate children must come from the wife but sex could be had with anyone over whom the husband had power. Thus, servants and slaves of both genders were often used (and abused) by their master. And the Roman Gods were good role models on how to hold power over those below you.

The Jews had a different approach to marriage and sexuality. They did agree with the Romans that marriage must produce babies. (Did you know that Jewish men could divorce their wives if no child was born after ten years?) But the part sexuality played in marriage was less about power and more about praise. For Jews, even though women were clearly lower than men in the hierarchy, rabbinical texts of the day insisted that sexuality was a divine pleasure, given as a blessing to humans of both genders from their God. The act of love was considered an act of praise and men were encouraged to have sex with their wives on the Sabbath to further make sacred their day of rest.

From these two strands of ancient history Christianity emerged and diverged. In response to the arranged marriages of the Romans and Jews, many early Christians saw in Jesus' teaching a radical way to become fully human. Rather than giving themselves away in marriage (and this was more true for women than for men), early Christians began to explore the idea of celibacy.

From today's perspective, the idea of celibacy seems to be mostly about sex (or the lack thereof). But in truth it was as much about self-determination as it was about sexuality. For many in the Christian church, to make one's own choice about who and what they would do with their own bodies was a radical freedom unknown in their culture. As Graff writes, "All this celibacy was considered shockingly anti-social by the Romans and sinful by the Jews" [p. 58].

But as Christianity became the dominant religion, the idea of marriage began to shift. And one person who had an enormous influence on this change was Augustine, a 4th century Roman who famously converted to Christianity after a life of debauchery and sin (at least according to him). Augustine's writings made the case that celibacy was normal and natural and that sex was not. But for those who must get married, Augustine and his followers made it clear what marriage was for:

- It was for procreation—thus began the battle against abortion and contraception.
- It was for fidelity—once married always married, with no sex on the side.
- And it was a sacrament—a blessed and permanent relationship made to another person in the sight of God.

Since the time of Augustine, the concept of marriage has continued to evolve. Yet these three ideals of marriage—procreation, fidelity and sacredness—are often still considered the most important reasons people are to marry. Despite a long history of marriage that does not model these principles, in our world today people still talk and act as if “traditional marriage” can only be for the purpose of a man and a woman making a lifetime commitment in the sight of God to procreate.

E.J. Graff does a splendid job of showing how the idea of marriage, particularly in the last two centuries, has moved in a direction away from these ancient strictures—slowly but firmly in the direction of love. Today, few people within Western culture think of marriage as something that should be arranged for young people by the elders of the community. Most agree with these words, written by Unitarian minister A. Powell Davies in the middle of the 20th century and often spoken at weddings: “We belong together. Love is what we need, to love and be loved” [from *Great Occasions*, ed. Carl Seaburg, Beacon Press, p. 126].

Graff argues quite persuasively that love has become the center of marriage, not procreation. And a logical result of this is that there is no good reason to keep anyone from marrying whomever they love, including gay and lesbian people. This gradual movement toward freedom and choice in marriage is a natural continuation of the many civil rights movements of the past.

We have certainly heard arguments from some people that you cannot equate civil rights based on race with civil rights based on sexuality, and that may be true. But we can definitely argue that the deepening understanding and acceptance of rights and freedoms would of course lead naturally toward more and more people wanting the freedom to be who they are. And that includes the freedom to marry even if you are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered.

As someone who has been married for over 15 years to the person I love best in the world, I can't help but think that marriage matters. It matters to me that Jaco and I have made a lifetime commitment to love and care for one another. I believe all people deserve the same right. And so as I was researching this sermon, I found

myself desiring some way to counter those who want to “preserve” what they think is “traditional” marriage.

I believe we on the liberal end of the religious world need to find ways to speak religiously to the right. So, I thought I’d return to Augustine and his three reasons for marriage. Remember them? Procreation, fidelity and sacrament. How might these ideals be re-interpreted for the current age in a way that includes all people willing to make a lifetime commitment to another?

Let’s begin with procreation. Most people who marry want to have children and most people do. But I believe it is a rare couple anymore that does not practice some form of birth control. And there are people like Jaco and me who chose early in our marriage not to have children. What can the ideal of procreation as a basis for marriage say to those like us?

The word of course, means to make babies. But I think we can also interpret it by thinking of procreation as a form of **creativity**. In my experience, marriage to Jaco has made me a more creative person. Our two heads together come up with better ideas and stronger choices. Though we have never given birth to children, our life together as a married couple has enabled us each to offer more to the world than we could have apart.

Many people who choose to have or raise children do so because they want to give back to the world through their offspring. Parents who choose to raise kids, sometimes overcoming great obstacles, also exercise enormous creativity in their parenting, and the incredible children they raise do make our world a better place. So I don’t think it is a stretch to suggest an expansion of Augustine’s ideal of procreation as the bedrock of marriage. Marriage matters because it offers today’s modern couples the opportunity for creative growth and change within the safe harbor of a loving relationship.

Augustine’s second precept is fidelity, which comes from an old Latin word meaning faith, and faithfulness has long been a piece of the marriage contract. In Augustine’s day, the one who always had to be faithful was the wife, for it was imperative that

any child of hers must come from the seed of her husband. But the husband had a lot more choices and often had children by others.

Certainly the concept of fidelity is still advocated today, perhaps even more so than it was in the old days. Yet, sexual freedom has changed this ideal as well. Today, people who stray from their marriage vows have more options. They can divorce or fool around without worrying about being cast out of the community, stoned, even executed for adultery. Now, I am glad we have more of some choices, particularly around divorce and birth control. As much as I am a proponent for marriage, I also understand that some are unhealthy and must ultimately end. I am glad that people can make this hard choice without it destroying them or their children.

But I admit I am a fan of fidelity within the vows of marriage, straight or gay. Part of what makes fidelity so important in my eyes is that it can be a very powerful acknowledgement of **choice**. When we commit our life to another, we make a choice to be with that person. The marriage vows I often use when I conduct weddings include the words, “forsaking all others so long as we both shall live.” When we forsake others, it means we focus our love and energy in the direction of our partner, even when we may be tempted to stray.

E.J. Graff puts this in significant context during a discussion of utopian communities that often unsuccessfully tried to minimize the idea of marriage and fidelity in the pursuit of equality. “Utopians,” she notes, “regularly wish we could love everyone equally, which is roughly the same as loving no one particularly” [p. 177]. I believe marriage matters because we make a commitment to love one person in a very particular way.

Finally, Augustine was one of the first to call marriage a sacrament. In the Roman Catholic church today marriage still is one of the sacraments, and after two people are married divorce is impossible, only annulment can undo it. I am no fan of annulment. It always seemed to me like a very convoluted way to get out of a marriage when divorce is not an option. And I also abhor the idea, found in the Church of Latter Day Saints, that one can be married in the temple for life and forever. In other words, the one you marry here will follow you to heaven. That seems a bit much!

But I do believe that committing one's life to another can be a profoundly religious act. I am always so moved at weddings when I watch the two in love speak their love in front of family and friends. I do feel the presence of something holy when love makes its appearance. When two people come together with a dream and a promise, it's remarkable to me how **sacred** it feels to be the one who ceremonially helps them move from lovers to spouses.

I also believe that church communities have a responsibility to **support** couples who are doing the hard work of making a marriage work. I think it's wonderful that this church has a long history of creating Marriage Enrichment Groups. In these groups, straight and gay couples learn how to build lasting relationships, surrounded by people who are trying to do the same thing. Some of you may remember Ken Lee's memorial service last month and how Karen Morrill spoke so movingly of Ken and Lillian's role in their marriage enrichment group. I find it wonderful that couples of all ages, backgrounds and sexual orientation can find a home here. It's a big part of what a church is for.

Marriage is a valuable outlet for our authentic **creativity**; it is deepened by the ability *and requirement* to make **choices**, and strengthened by the **sacred support** found in religious community.

Before I close, I want to acknowledge those among us who have been wounded within the bonds of marriage and union. I have watched people I love lose their commitment to their partner and walk the hard path of disillusionment and divorce. I do not believe that people should stay together if their souls are withering on the vine. And there are certainly times when marriage can be used as a club, literally and figuratively, hurting the loved one over and over again. This is not marriage in my eyes, but bondage.

But for those of us who do find we can maintain our commitment over time, sharing our gifts and our love with our partner, marriage can be a profound blessing, calling us to make deeper and deeper commitments over time. It's why Marriage Enrichment

Groups are so important. They give couples a place to learn and grow as a couple in the presence of those who understand this wonderful and challenging path we walk.

I like being married and I hope to stay married for my whole life. But most of us will spend at least some of our life single, just as most of us will lead some of our lives in a committed relationship. Marriage is not the be-all-and-end all of life. Plenty of people lead happy and fulfilling lives without ever marrying. And this is as it should be. For ultimately, the liberal religious response to marriage is the same response we have to so many other issues in our world: freedom and choice are worthy ideals. All people should have the freedom to marry the one they love. It really is that simple.

You may be aware that the Unitarian Universalist Association, our denominational body, designated last Sunday, February 12, as “Freedom to Marry Day” and I wish I had more time to go deeper into the politics of this issue and speak more directly to the many ways freedom and choice are being taken away from people in this state and beyond. I am glad that some Paint Branchers and many Unitarian Universalists went to the Lobby Day in Annapolis last Monday, and talked with their legislators about this important issue. There is no good reason to deny the privileges of marriage to those couples that are willing to make the commitment marriage demands.

And one more thing I will urge you to do. When you speak about marriage, tell people you speak as a religious person who believes that at the heart of faith, there is love. Not rigid rules, not punishment and hate, but love—the greatest power in the universe. May we use that power to bless the world. Amen.

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