Focus on Marriage
Expectation and Understanding

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Digging Deeper (Questions are on the last page)

Focus on Marriage: Expectation and Understanding
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Background Notes
Key Scripture Texts: Ephesians 5:21-33; 6:1-4; Colossians 3:18-19; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 John 2:1-2; Genesis 2:18, 21-25

Introduction
Recent economic challenges continue to put pressure on families and especially on marriages. Choosing to spend a lifetime with another human being brings into play a world of necessary resources, including material ones. Decision-making about finances ranks among the highest causes of marital conflict. Strengthening marriages also means assisting couples in navigating the treacherous world of work, investment, and spending.

But marriage is about more than money. Bringing together two widely unique human beings into a partnership elicits another world of personality, emotions, socialization, and faith. Marriage is not an amalgam, chemically arranged in a lab. Persons are more than atoms in motion, meeting each other in the void, and bonding predictably. When they marry, people awaken in the midst of a great mystery, hard to understand and marvelous to behold. As Abraham Lincoln wrote shortly after his marriage to Mary Todd: “Nothing new here except my marrying, which to me, is matter of profound wonder.”

A world of expectations accompanies the entrance into marriage, some of them scarcely practical and most of them never attainable. What enormous promise surrounds life ahead of the couple struck with marital bliss — and what sudden disappointment. Few anticipate the shared struggles facing them as they launch the ship of marital bliss. How unprepared they are for the sudden reversal of fortunes and the denial of hoped-for dreams. Still, much richness follows as well. Two people discover the remarkable benefits when opposites meet and greet the future together. Who would have thought that such differently wired persons would make the necessary connections for a doubly reinforced life together? They learn the tricky process of being each other’s complements. With different sets of eyes they have, until now, looked at the world. But now things are a bit cross-eyed as a new source of vision looks at identical things from different angles. Does anybody sell corrective lenses for married couples?

In marriage, expectation meets understanding — or at least it should. “Whom did I marry? Who is he now? I had no idea she would be like this!” Marriage is a call to mutual understanding, drawn from constant attention to the details and the distinctives of two persons, so wonderfully different and so hopelessly in love. Learning to make that relationship work requires large doses of patience, and a willingness to gain new insights each day into the mysterious world within the heart of the one we married. And it is a mystery to be sure, for husband and wife alike. There was a time when cultural roles and traditional stereotypes were taken at face value, and men and women assumed they needed only to accept those givens, and all would be well. But human beings are not easily put into neat gender categories.

Partners in marriage are more than male and female. They cannot short-cut the process of understanding each other simply by classifying men as providers, protectors, respecters, or dominant directors, while assigning to women the roles of nurture, intimacy, security, and nesting. The attempt to make marriage work like this, based on the “good old days,” is a recipe for deep misunderstanding. Instead, the relationship of marriage is a

constant, fluid, changing, and growing process of negotiation, rooted in principles of solid human relationships. Understanding how this works is essential to healthy marriages.

The church, both ancient Israel and the body of Christ, shared a vested interest in marriage. When the final editors of Genesis put the finishing touches on that magnificent piece of writing, they made sure that marriage received its proper due in the very first pages (Genesis 1-3). As the story of the Bible unfolds, married persons carry forward the divine purpose. Then, as the public ministry of Jesus begins, his first wonder, changing water into wine, happens within the context of “a wedding in Cana” (John 2). Even the ending of the Bible contains the dramatic scene of “a bride beautifully dressed for her husband” (Revelation 21:2). Not all this marital imagery is literal, but underlying each figure is the assumption of marriage — a relationship taken quite seriously. Marriage as the symbol for God’s people contains the idea of the covenant, a solemn contract, originating with God Himself and radiating outward into the very existence of everything He has made. We frequently read about “male and female” as the essential carriers of God’s cosmic purposes.

Of all the high expectations about the future of marriage, the notion that marriage is God’s idea, His invention, is foremost in the biblical material. Human beings creatively adorn this work of God through culture and art, so that within the many people-groups, the actual form and style of marriage takes on incredible variety. A wedding ceremony in Lemont, Illinois, doesn’t look the same as an Armenian wedding in Palestine. Even within American society, we observe the diversity in celebrating nuptials. God graciously gave His human creations great freedom in this regard, and the Bible itself does not line out an exact wedding ceremony, for example, but allows opportunity for rich plural forms; all the more reason to lift up the sacredness of marriage, and honor it with many cultural hues. God’s expectations for marriage get expressed in this pluralism of celebration. Listen to the vows at a wedding ceremony: they bring together treasures old and new. “Till death do us part…” or “I take you to be my lawful wife…” or “With this ring, I thee wed.” Yet, couples regularly offer a personal texture, drawing on their hitherto shared experiences as engaged persons, imagining and hoping about the kind of life they will spend together. Thankfully, the church encourages them to do so.

Marriage implies reliability and permanence, the solid ground for the maintenance of human society, and the safe environment for the nurture of children. Above all, marriage as commitment, raises the expectations that realities on the ground — sickness, conflict, children, disaster — will not ultimately undo what God has done. These are reasonable expectations, to be sure, and they must find their rootage in what Christians believe about marriage itself. Human expectations might be recipes for disappointment, and that is why the relationship of marriage must become the place where real conversations between spouses about the shape of their marriage can take place.

In this two-week series, we explore the contours of the marriage relationship. Our emphasis this week falls on expectations and understanding in marriage.

**Cultural Cross-Currents the Challenges to Marriage**

Divorce in the United States has been increasing since the end of the 19th century, dipping slightly in the 1990's. According to recent statistics:

- The Divorce rate: 3.6 per 1,000 population (46 reporting States and D.C).
- 50% percent of first marriages, 67% of second and 74% of third marriages end in divorce
- The divorce rate in America for first marriages is 41 percent, for second marriages 60 percent and for third marriages 73 percent.
- The last-reported U.S. divorce rate for a calendar year, available as of May, 2005, is 0.38% divorces per capita per year.
The divorce rate last year (per 1,000 people) was 3.6, the lowest rate since 1970 and down from 4.2 in 2000 and from 4.7 in 1990.²

Of greater interest is the research of George Barna, especially as it impacts Christian communities:

- 11% of the adult population is currently divorced.
- 25% of adults have had at least one divorce during their lifetime.
- Divorce rates among conservative Christians were significantly higher than for other faith groups, and much higher than Atheists and Agnostics experience.

George Barna, president and founder of Barna Research Group, commented:

While it may be alarming to discover that born again Christians are more likely than others to experience a divorce, that pattern has been in place for quite some time. Even more disturbing, perhaps, is that when those individuals experience a divorce many of them feel their community of faith provides rejection rather than support and healing. But the research also raises questions regarding the effectiveness of how churches minister to families. The ultimate responsibility for a marriage belongs to the husband and wife, but the high incidence of divorce within the Christian community challenges the idea that churches provide truly practical and life-changing support for marriages.³

Some have challenged these findings, but Barna stands by his assessments. It has been suggested that Christian churches may have difficulty acknowledging or even being aware of divorced persons in their congregations. The stigma of divorce within some Christian denominations may prevent open discussion about such issues, and give the false impression that few couples have had to deal with the problem.

Talking about marriage and divorce within the church is a healthy experience, akin to confession and renewal within the Christian tradition. When the church makes such conversation difficult, it casts a stumbling block on the pathway of those who want Christ to become their restorer. The whole Gospel is for the whole person — including the marriage person. Honesty about marriage and divorce does not mean promoting divorce or devaluing marriage. Instead, freedom to examine this important topic is a sign that the Church is God's redeeming community in the world.

Among the challenging aspects of divorce is the impact on children. In an excellent article, Julie Hanlon Rubio examines the fact that "More children than ever spend at least some of their childhood in single parent homes, while others live in blended families or split their time between two families."⁴ Rubio calls for a theological re-examination of the place children occupy in the total marriage-family unit. Based on research and church history, she cites authorities who want to keep all persons involved in marriage uppermost in making the divorce decision. The decision to divorce is not just about the couple, she insists. One prominent church father who developed the "three-in-one flesh" model was John Chrysostom who argued that the "one flesh" nature of marriage points to the child as "the bridge connecting mother to father."⁵ We encourage further study on this intriguing approach to the marriage-divorce issue.

Failed and flawed expectations about marriage often lie at the heart of marital disintegration. What the biblical material gives us is a fresh set of eyes, and a new way of looking at a culturally encrusted institution. It also invites serious exploration of our inner life, that deep and murky interior of the human psyche, multi-layered and often inaccessible, and from which springs the delicate cords binding couples together.

² Information from U.S. Census sources and state-by-state reporting.
The Genesis Connection/Disconnection

Among the earliest Old Testament passages which deal with marriage are those found in the creation accounts of Genesis 1-2. Our previous studies have addressed aspects of these texts, but they stand repeating.

18 Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." … 21 So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. 22 And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. 23 Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." 24 Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. 25 And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:18, 21-25).

1. Companionship within the human species was important to God because companionship eternally belonged to God's nature: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In woman, man found his peer and his equal which consisted in a physical union at his origin and in a physical union in his marriage. The notion of the "helper fit for him" does not imply inferiority but correspondence.

2. Revelation from God was required for humankind to understanding the nature of the marriage union. As we noted previously, the "deep sleep" in this story suggests that Adam received a revelation from God in the form of a vision which explained to him the true meaning of marriage as a "one flesh" relationship, and, as such, Adam and his wife were inseparable in the eyes of God. The symbol of divine surgery and the mechanics of the rib teach this union.

3. God "brings woman to man" in Adam's vision, the sign that this creature is designed for him. It is not among the animals that Adam finds his complement but in woman.

4. Relationships based on birth remain intact but they no longer control the life of the one who enters into the marriage union. "Leave and cleave" expresses the proper order for men and women who enter marriage. The act of leaving is not a sign of disrespect but is an act of obedience to the divine order of marriage. Failure to do this can result in all sort of problems between husbands and wives, especially where parental control interferes with marital companionship.

5. The absence of shame is also a sign of the new privacy which surrounds the one-flesh nature of marriage. Should shame return (and it will in Genesis 3), it is due to an interloper, Sin, which becomes the first "other man" or "other woman" in human history.

The fracturing of marriage occurs during the Fall, according to Genesis 3, and we will explore that text in next week’s study. ider social fabric.

Bulwarks of Marriage

If being human involves, in part, being in relationship, then it stands to reason that stronger marriage relationships contribute to those defenses which keep divorce at bay. This is not to say that marriages become wholly immune to fractures and separations. As Scripture counsels, "Let anyone who thinks that he stands, take heed, lest he falls" (1 Corinthians 10:12). But God has offered His own support for marriage in the story of redemption itself.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians tells that story and makes the connection:

21 submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ. 22 Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. 23 For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. 24 Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. 25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. 28 In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, 30 because we are members of his body. 31 "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." 32 This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. 33 However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband (Ephesians 5:21-33).
Submission is a two-way street because it is based on reverence for Christ. That is, we must not demand from each other what belongs properly only to God. Reverence of this sort is due to God alone. The Greek word used by Paul is the stronger term phobos which has the nuance of "fear, respect." In the presence of the awesome King of kings and Lord of lords, partners in a marriage make no pretensions to being "lord" over each other. Thus, we can speak of "mutual submission" in which husbands and wives find a proper equality in service, care and respect. Imagine how the story of Genesis 3 might have turned out had this principle been followed! Men and women live in a committed, mutually submitted, and Christ-centered relationship when they enter marriage. Submission is mutual and it is voluntary. That is not always true with sexual relationships outside of marriage where the "hunt" drives the process, and the hunter and the hunted live in a constant state of unsettledness about each other. Sex ever functions as the "hook" holding together two people who have not entered into a covenant with each other. As such, sex in a non-marital setting always leaves persons on their guard, wondering, questioning, doubting, and certainly not safely trusting each other.

1. Headship, when applied to marriage, is not about authority but about the source of love. Studies in ancient anatomy reveal that physicians living at Paul's time (including his personal one, Luke) didn't locate thought in the brain, but in other organs like the heart, liver and kidneys. However, they accorded to the "head" the source of life and reproduction. Paul calls Christ "the head" precisely because is the "Savior of the body." Along with that imagery comes the reference to: 1) giving up oneself for the other; 2) sanctifying (making holy) the other; 3) washing the other; 4) presenting the other without spot, wrinkle, or blemish in all splendor. As the "head," husbands nourish, cherish and hold fast their wives, treating them as they would treat themselves. This text offers a superior alternative, one which respects persons, and thereby protects them in a loving, considerate bond. For the man to be a woman's "head" means for him to be her source. For the woman to "submit" to the man means for her to avail herself of his supply and accept his love.

3. Marriage, as the union of two-in-one, is a genuine mystery. Having a strong marriage involves respecting and honoring the mystery. For Paul, the true "source" for marriage lies within the Christ-church relationship. And in this connection exists the deeper mystery. How are we to understand the mystery of marriage? 1) We don't understanding everything about marriage when we begin that relationship; 2) As the marriage unfolds, it reveals twists and turns which are unexpected and even fearful; 3) God must reveal the meaning of their marriage mystery to the partners; 4) Marriage is richer and deeper as time passes, and as the mystery is revealed. That said, sometimes the puzzlement of marriage displaces its mystery. So perplexing are the hard and difficult patches faced by the partners, that they imagine they have made a grave error in choosing each other. Suddenly the puzzle is not the marriage but the other partner! "If I live a thousand years, I will never figure you out!" exclaims the frustrated husband or wife. And they might be right about that! Paul tells us that a "great mystery" (to mustērion touto mega estin) lies hidden within God's relationship to us through Christ, and our marriages also share in that mystery. Just as a life-long commitment to Jesus Christ is required to plumb the depths of that relationship, so also marriage takes a life-time to fully appreciate its meaning and depth.

4. God stands as the true bulwark of marriage, having blazed the trail for a fallen humanity whom he came to redeem. Marriage is, then, not simply a human institution which rests on natural foundations. As we have said frequently in our studies, marriage is God's idea, not ours. By the same token, marriage finds its true meaning in another grand idea of God: salvation. The Fall fractured marriage; the cross restores marriage on new foundations. We are made one in Christ, both God and humanity in the community; we are made one in Christ, both man and woman in marriage. Paul implies that salvation is not only about the marriage partners, it is also about the marriage person — one flesh. In our weakness, we are flesh; in God's salvation we are one flesh made new.

5. When such a relationship functions properly, sex is not a weapon, hook, trap, manipulation, or lure. Rather, sex becomes a symbolic expression of the unity which head and submission imply.

6. Sex treats the other's body as one's own; sex sees one's own body as belonging to another. This way of seeing the other is learned at the foot of the cross where God's Son gave himself for the other and made of the other his own body — the church, the people of God.
7. In this way, belonging to the body of Christ becomes the environment in which marriage is learned anew, and where sexuality becomes within marriage the sacrament for expressing God's love for His people. Such love is redemptive, washing, cleansing, and restoring the other. Such love does not use sexuality as a way of demanding marital rights but a way of giving them away.

Scholars think that the book of Colossians preceded the writing of Ephesians. At this early stage of his thought, Paul wrote less, planting seeds for his later reflections. His view on marriage fills two brief verses:

18 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them (Colossians 3:18-19).

1. The phrase “as it is fit in the Lord” corresponds to the Ephesian language, “as to the Lord.”
2. What is unique comes in 3:19 where a husband’s love for his wife helps him avoid being “bitter against” her. The Greek word for “to be bitter” is pikrainō which has the nuance of “to be exasperated with” or “to foster bitter feelings.” Forms of this word, in classical usage, have to do with a “sharp or bitter tongue.”

In his pastoral letter to all the churches, "John" writes with both candor and compassion:
1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2).

The writer of this letter prefers the language of family to talk about the people of God. His reference to "little children" in this passage stresses the inexperience and vulnerability of his audience. Elsewhere he used the language of "young men" and "old men" in order to emphasize strengthen and wisdom. Newcomers to marriage are, by all intents, "little children." To the newlyweds, then, this passage says: "I am writing these things to you so that you might not divorce. But if anyone does divorce, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous..." When our marriages are in distress, on the verge of divorce, in the midst of separation, and all hope seems gone, this passages encourages us with the truth that Jesus Christ is our "advocate." The Greek word used here is paraklētos: one "called to one's aid; a legal assistant." In John's Gospel the same term is applied to the Holy Spirit. God comes to our aid, takes up our cause, and seeks our restoration. Here is restorative justice in action — the kind of justice which does not settle scores but which saves souls — and marriages.

Agapē Love: The Selfless Choice and The Second Chance
Two final passages bolster the bulwark of marriage. They both rhapsodize the virtue of love, in particular, the agapē-style love unique to the Christian faith.

Love Arrives
7 Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. 10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 11 Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. 13 By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 Whoever confesses that Jesus is
the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God. 16 So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him (1 John 4:7-16).

Love Abides
1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. 4 Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; 5 it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. 7 Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 8 Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. 13 So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Corinthians 13:1-13).

From the hands of different writers ("John" and Paul), these poetic expositions of agapē love coincide with and complement each other. We have suggested two possible emphases: Love Arrives and Love Abides. When thought of in terms of marriage, love is present in the first stirrings of human attraction, as two people find each other and then explore the meaning of the strange and wonderful mystery which draws them together. Love arrives!

1. In the first of the two love-texts, we hear how this love arrives when God sends His Son into the world (4:9) with a definite purpose: "so that we might live through him." We gather hope from this arrival, for we immediately seize upon that purpose for our marriages: that our marriages might live through him.

2. Furthermore, with this arrival human beings glimpse the nature of God: "No one has ever seen God. If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us" (4:12). Inasmuch as God's character is relational, we have the additional assurance that the arrival of God's love in our marital lives brings with it the true model of authentic relationship.

3. One other truth emerging from 1 John 4 is that God's love is something "we come to know and to believe." The underlying Greek verb forms imply a process leading to a settled condition (perfect tenses). This, too, is Good News for married persons: love progressively leads us "to know and believe." While we might desire a fast and final result at the onset of our marital vows, reality tells us otherwise. The power of agapē love gradually moves us forward as we learn to "know and trust" each other in marriage.

More critical for lasting, life-long marriages is the assurance that Love Abides. Human experience teaches us the partial and temporary quality of life. Paul's 13th chapter climaxes with the words "now faith, hope and love abide, these three; the greatest of these is love" (13:13). The word "abides" (Greek: menei) underscores the persistence and permanence of agapē. Such love does not depend on human personality or temperament; it does not require constant self-assurance. As 13:8 puts it even more clearly, "Love never ends" (oudepote piptei: "does not ever fall down"). Of course, such a quality does not exist within human beings, at least not naturally. By nature, we can fall and have fallen! Human history tells the tale of the Fall in both text and sub-texts. Marriage constantly grapples with the fear of falling. More practically, we talk about "letting each other down." Disappointment is a common companion of marriage. On the other hand, marriage lived by the power of agapē love promises better things.

1. When Paul offers his "list" of Love's heroic triumphs, he uses words like: patient and kind — the pair of positives which anchor the marriage enterprise! Holding up and holding close! God's love does not abandon marriage partners to their own devices when it comes to patience and kindness. Are these not the bulwarks of personal salvation, that God's patience and His loving-kindness bring us to repentance (Romans 2:4)? The God who is long-suffering and not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9) pours his Love into marriage partners from the moment they exchange their vows and say the telling words, "I do." Strengthened by patience and kindness they receive from God the first-fruits of His saving Love.
2. Strangely, more of Love's activity is spent stemming the tide of the foes to marriage. Repeatedly Paul tells what Love does not do: envy, boast, be arrogant, be rude, insist on its own way, be irritable, be resentful, rejoice in wrongdoing. How many are the enemies of marriage! How necessary is the bulwark of divine Love against them!

3. As if to add flourish to his love-symphony, Paul applauds Love's achievements: Bears all, believes all, hopes all, and endures all. Some of us would gladly settle for lesser accomplishments: Help us bear some, believe some, hope some, and endure some of marriage's hardest trials! But God's Love is rich and lavish (Ephesians 2:4), and he sheds it broadly and deeply into the heart of our marriage.

4. Coping with immaturity in marriage is a familiar theme: "Grow up!" we'd like to say to our partner from time to time. "When I was a child..." Paul remembers. Marriage begins that way, and in those early days we "speak like a child" to each other, think about each other in "childish terms," and lay plans together as novices engaging in a new vocation. As time passes, however, the weight of marriage starts to stretch the fiber of our "childish ways," and we start to expect from each other much more than before. Is the marriage person equal to this task? Paul tells us that Love is!

5. Early in the marriage not all is yet clear. "In a mirror dimly," Paul reminds us in 13:12. Will we ever see "face to face" as the passage hopes we will? Or better, will we ever see "eye to eye"? What we need in the marriage journey is the wisdom of the heavenly parent who knows us better than we know ourselves; who knows our marriage person better than we can even begin to imagine it. And Love stands ready to make known to us what ordinary knowledge fails to communicate. Love is a form of knowing which partners in marriage desperately need when a great deal about their relationship (and each other) makes no sense at all.

A Wedding Homily
One of my most joyous moments during the past few years was the wedding of my daughter, Julie. Most of the reason lies with the event itself, as I walked her down the aisle and gave her away to share her life with John. The rest of the reason was my privilege to offer the wedding homily during the service. Among the things I wanted to do was to place that blessed day in its biblical context, but also to allow the wisdom of others to shape whatever counsel I might offer to the happy couple. After some reflection, I have decided to incorporate the full content of that homily in the concluding section of this week's Notes. All personal references have been left intact, though I suspect many of you may want to adapt them to your own marriages. Rather than offer formal footnotes, I have summarized any sources I consulted which added meaning and insight to the whole piece. My prayer is that what was said on that occasion may strengthen your marriage resolves and offer insight into what God is doing during this season of your relationship. For those who are contemplating marriage or perhaps counseling those in marriage crisis, may you find some modicum of encouragement in these words.

Reflections on Marriage
Julie Brown and John Scott Wedding
May 25, 2008

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen. The basis for the message on this joyful wedding day are the readings from 1 John 4 and the great chapter of love, 1 Corinthians 13.

"Show your love by what you do" is often advice given to people who are suppose to live more "like Christians". Ironically, Paul's so-called "Love Chapter" seems to move in a very different direction, suggesting that people can "do" all sorts of things and still not "have love". They can be eloquent speakers, benevolent benefactors, and even courageous martyrs and still come up short in the matter of love. Of course, Paul chooses to use an off-the-beaten-path-word for love, agapē, not one of the popular favorites in his own day, a rather uncommon word, really. Choosing such a word signals Paul intentions to pour some fresh meaning into a word without much of a reputation already. He could have used eros, the love which wants; or philos, the love which befriends; or storgē, the love which feels with affection. But he didn't. Instead he picked this word agapē which means the love which chooses, the love which wills. Here is unconditional love found in the very nature of God Himself: for God is love, God is agapē. And God made no demands on human beings before he chose
to love them: "For God so loved the world that He gave his only son, that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16).

And so, on this glorious occasion when John and Julie have chosen to join their lives together, our interest in "love" moves beyond words and actions into more dangerous territory. You see, there is this tricky little phrase in the wedding ceremony that says "till death do us part", a rather quaint way of saying what Paul says in his letter: "Love never fails". I once witnessed a wedding service where it was proposed we change all of that to read, "till love shall end", and at once, I protested that if you walk down that road you'd need to change the meaning of love as the Bible understands it. For love is not some kind of oil reserve that one day just runs out all by itself, and nobody can do anything about it. Why of course, we can-do something about!, and that's our focus today.

Love never ends," St. Paul writes in the lesson read from 1 Corinthians 13. Or, to put it more positively, "love abides." What does that really mean--to say that "love abides"? Or, indeed, what possible sense could it make to say this in a world in which the truth so clearly seems to be that love quite often does not abide?

We pause for a moment in this service in order to think about just that question. And we do this not only for the sake of Julie and John. No, we do it for our own sake, because we all need regularly to remind ourselves what marriage actually means. We do it so that together we can think about how it might be that Julie and John, or any of the rest of us, might solemnly vow "not to part till death parts us."

It's a crazy thing to do, really. That two young people should together reach out and take hold of their future in this way--should determine that, come what may, it will be a future together--can hardly make sense. Unless, perhaps, God makes sense of it for us. For the miracle and the mystery of marriage is that God permits us to exercise just a little of His own creative power--to determine this one thing about our future: that it will be a future together. And having permitted us to be as creative as he Himself is, God then asks us--and invites us--to learn also to be as steadfast and faithful as He is.

What might God hope to accomplish through such a crazy invitation? God has in mind to get something done in us and to us. Stanley Hauerwas, who teaches theology and ethics at Duke Divinity School, and who almost never fails to be provocative, once wrote that the most basic law of marriage could be stated in a sentence: "You always marry the wrong person."

He went on to explain: "The one thought to be Mr. Right turns out not to be. Ms. Right tends to show up after marriage. But the adventure of marriage is learning to love the person to whom you are married.... Love does not create a marriage; marriage teaches us what a costly adventure love is." The good professor from Duke deliberately made the point a little provocatively, but it is nonetheless true.

Of course, for anyone who is married, it is true that you may not be married now to the person you once thought you were marrying. Five years from now, or ten years from now, the person sitting next to you won't necessarily be the person you thought you were giving yourself to. Go, ahead, turn to the person to whom you are married and say, "Hey, you're not the person I married". Some of you did that enthusiastically… The rest of you--Oh, how I hate to see pain on people's faces!

So if marriage requires us to choose just exactly the right person ... well, we're all in very big trouble. The target keeps shifting. Marrying means promising to be faithful to someone who may keep changing. And so, God does not ask you today, "John, do you love Julie?" but rather, "John, will you love Julie?" "Julie, will you love John?"

Marriage, therefore, exists not primarily to make us happy but to make us holy--though in the long run, of course, there can be no happiness apart from holiness. But it's holiness that God is after. Holiness simply means that God undertakes the life-long project to transform our lives, make them grow, cause them to be strong, and,
above all else, make them reflect who He is--become godlike ourselves. And so in marriage God goes to work on us--begins to teach us what it means, what it will require of us, to love even just this one person as God loves each of us, with steadfastness and faithfulness. Every marriage will be different, of course, and so the lesson will have to come in different ways, but it has a chance to happen for us only as we accept the discipline of marriage as God's good gift to us.

They will have to learn these things, and have opportunity to learn them, precisely because, by God's grace, "love abides." God gives us time. That comes first--the time, the abiding, the commitment to abide in a love like God's, the love that joins Father, Son and Spirit. And when that comes first, when--as God's gift--you have a duty to abide, when you know that this other person is not just someone you fell in love with but (to paraphrase Will Willimon) "the one you're stuck with," then very gradually we may learn. Then God slowly begins to make of us the people he wants us to be, draws us into his own love--the only sort of love that truly abides.

In his book *Works of Love*, Soren Kierkegaard, that tortured philosopher-genius of 19th-century Denmark, wrote a series of chapters reflecting on the themes of I Corinthians 13. One of his chapters is titled simply "Love Abides," and in that chapter are two of the most unforgettable and powerful pages that I have ever read. I was tempted just to read them today, but I didn't think that would work too well. So instead I will try simply to capture their flavor for a moment--if only in summary form.

Kierkegaard pictures two people, whom together he calls the "lover-beloved," two persons joined by the hyphen that is God's own love, the love which abides, persons who no longer seem able to keep their bond together. He writes, "And so the breaking-point between the two is reached". The beloved turns away. But, says Kierkegaard, the lover keeps the hyphen: "lover-." Imagine, Kierkegaard says, that you saw nothing but a word followed by a hyphen. What would you say? You would say that the word is not yet complete. Consequently, "the lover-"--who wills to abide in the eternal love that is God's--believes that the relationship which another considers broken is a relationship that has not yet been completed. And so the "lover-" abides.

Then Kierkegaard explains himself again, shifting the metaphor. "And so it came to the breaking-point." But the lover abides. He--or she--says: We're only halfway through this sentence, a sentence that is not yet complete. What a difference there is, Kierkegaard notes, between a sentence fragment and an unfinished sentence. And for the lover, who wills to abide, it cannot be a broken fragment. The sentence is simply not yet complete.

Then Kierkegaard says it again. "And so it came to the breaking-point." Lover and beloved are no longer speaking to each other. But, Kierkegaard writes, "the lover-" says: `I will abide; therefore we shall still speak with one another, because silence also belongs to conversation at times.'"

Kierkegaard then proposes one final grand picture: "Does the dance cease because one dancer has gone away? In a certain sense, yes. But if the other still remains standing in the posture which expresses a turning towards the one who is not seen, and if you abide, then you will say, `Now the dance will begin just as soon as the other comes, the one who is expected.'"

Every time I read that, I try to picture it. The lover, standing there in the posture of the dancer, waiting for the beloved. Not assuming that the dance has ceased, but abiding, expecting the beloved to come and the dance to begin again. I try to picture it!

It seems like a rather awkward posture, doesn't it? One could get a cramp--or lots of cramps. A stiff neck. One could tire. One could become impatient. But that is why God gives us time, gives us marriage: that we may not tire, but, on the contrary, gain joy in abiding. And that, Julie and John, is why God gives you time, gives you marriage today--that slowly and patiently you may be drawn into God's own love, a love stronger and more steadfast than comes naturally to you or to any of us. That you may be drawn into the dance of love that never ends, because, as St. Paul says, "love never ends." Love abides.
The God of love, has established marriage for the welfare and happiness of mankind. His was the plan and only with Him can you work it out with joy. God said, ‘It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a partner for him.’ Now your joys are doubled since the happiness of one is the happiness of the other. Your burdens now are halved since when you share them, you divide the load.

May the Lord bless you, John. May your strength be Julie's protection, your character be her boast and her pride, and may you so live that she will find in you the haven for which the heart of a woman truly longs.

May the Lord bless you, Julie. May God give you a tenderness that will make you great, a deep sense of understanding and a great faith in the Lord Jesus. May He give you that inner beauty of soul that never fades, that eternal youth that is found in holding fast the things that never age.

May the Lord teach both of you that marriage is not living merely for each other; it is two uniting and joining hands to serve the Lord. May God give you a great spiritual purpose in life. May you seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and the other things shall be added to you.

May you not expect that perfection of each other that belongs alone to God. May you minimize each other’s weaknesses, be swift to praise and magnify each other’s points of comeliness and strength, and see each other through a lover’s kind and patient eyes.

May the Lord make such assignments to you on the scroll of His will as will bless you and develop your characters as you walk together. May He give you enough tears to keep you tender, enough hurts to keep you humane, enough of failure to keep your hands clenched tightly in the Lord, and enough of success to make them sure you walk with God.

May you never take each other’s love for granted, but always experience that breathless wonder that exclaims, ‘Out of all this world you have chosen me.’

When life is done and the sun is setting, may you be found then as now still hand in hand, still thanking God for each other. May you serve the Lord happily, faithfully, together, until at last one shall lay the other into the arms of God. This we ask through Jesus Christ, Great Lover of Our Souls. Amen.


Conclusion

Form Louis Evan’s “Wedding Prayer,” cited above, comes this helpful advice: “May you not expect that perfection of each other that belongs alone to God.” The biblical material we studied this week affirms that the marriage relationship thrives in the environment where Christ is loved, honored, and obeyed. Previous generations may have attempted to put that weight on the couples, asking that the wife, for example, discharge those duties to her husband. The Bible will not let us take that step so glibly. Instead, we are to grow our marriages “out of reverence for Christ.” When romantic love replaced covenant love in marriage — a somewhat recent development in the West, spouses became like gods to each other, idolized on pedestals and isolated in bubbles. So high are the expectations of romantic love, it’s no wonder that the vocabulary we use to speak about it contains the words “fall in love.” If we fall in love, who will catch us?
That is, of course, the risk of any love that puts spouse above God. May the lessons of Scripture, learned this week, guide us as we find that blessed union of expectation and understanding, not only in our relationship with each other, but with Christ, the true author of our marriages.

Glory to God! Amen.
To gain a deeper understanding of *Focus on Marriage: Expectation and Understanding*, carefully read the selected passages below. To aid you in your study, we invite you to visit the website at [http://www.chicagofirstnaz.org](http://www.chicagofirstnaz.org), click on *Resources*, click the tab *Series*, find and click on the series title, find and click on the date you want, and then click on the *Background Notes* link at the lower left. You can also pick up a copy of the *Background Notes* at the *Information* desk, or from your ABF leader. Now consider the following questions, as you ask the Lord to teach you.

1. Discuss the economic challenges that put pressure on marriages. How have they impacted your marriage? How have you responded?
2. With what sorts of expectations did (or do) you enter into marriage? Where do these expectations come from, and in what ways are they realistic and unrealistic. Respond to this statement, offered as part of a wedding prayer: “May you not expect that perfection of each other that belongs alone to God.”
3. Read Genesis 2:18, 21-25. How is the formation of human beings as man and woman a clue to understanding the marriage relationship? What questions does this passage raise, and how might you address them?
4. What traditional roles of husband and wife have guided your approach to marriage? Are some of these open to debate and negotiation? How has that process of negotiation worked out in your marriage? Give some examples.
5. What distinctively Christian values govern the marriage relationship in Ephesians 5:21-33? Discuss the word "submit" within the context of this passage? What does it mean? What does it not mean?
6. How important is the phrase “out of reverence for Christ” in 5:21? Apply this idea to the problem of expectations in marriage.
7. What does Paul mean by calling marriage “a mystery”? In what sense is this true for you? How should we respond to mystery in marriage?
9. God's special kind of love (*agapē*) creates the real bond of Christian marriage. Read 1 John 4:7-16 and 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 which both discuss how this love should operate in the lives of married persons. Identify several ways that this love is especially necessary for a strong marriage, based on a reading of these passages.
10. How is the biblical view of *agape*-style love an important part of being an understanding spouse in marriage? Choose some examples from 1 Corinthians 13 of how love behaves that encourage such understanding.
11. What enemies of marriage contribute to divorce? How is the practice of God's love the greatest bulwark against the enemies of your marriage?