

## MARRIAGE is NOT for EVERYONE

First Unitarian Church of Saint Louis

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“Marriage is a great institution, but I'm not ready for an institution.” Mae West

### Readings:

The Apostle Paul's First Letter to the Christians in Corinth Chapter 7, verses 7-9, 28, and 32-34.

<sup>7</sup> I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God....<sup>8</sup> Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. <sup>9</sup> But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion... <sup>28</sup> If you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this... <sup>32</sup> I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—<sup>34</sup> and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about ... how she can please her husband.

E.J. Graff, “Conclusion” from *What Is Marriage For?* (Beacon Press, 1999)

“Western marriage today is a home for the heart: entering, furnishing, and exiting that home is your business alone.... Our society has endorsed what some of us think of as the most spiritual purpose of marriage, the refreshing of the individual spirit. And if we are to respect that spirit, same-sex couples belong. [Conservative] warnings are usually based on the idea that changing a given rule changes the very definition of marriage. And of course, they're right: define marriage as a lifetime commitment, and divorce flouts its very definition.... Define marriage as a bond between one man and one woman, and same-sex marriage is absurd. But define marriage as a commitment to live up the rigorous demands of love, to care for each other as best as you humanly can, then all these possibilities- divorce, contraception, feminism, marriage between two women or two men- are necessary to respect the human spirit... Belief in love, belief in the integrity of the individual conscience, is profoundly unsettling... that each individual should- no, must- be free to choose his or her life course rather than following a path laid out by tradition... it insists that each of us matters, and that each of us must choose for ourselves how to live... Making lesbians and gay men more legally visible will neither solve nor complicate anyone else's daily commitments. [Yet] it will insist on something that is quite unnerving to acknowledge: that we must each pay rigorous attention to – and believe in- each individual spirit.”

## SERMON

The readings evoke two contrasting opinions on marriage. When I perform weddings I have some things I always say. One is this: The most amazing thing about a wedding is that two people are promising to love each other, not only as they are, but also as they will become. Since we don't know what life will bring, what changes we will undergo, pledging holy union is thus an act of great faith; faith in one another and the sense of union between. It is an act of strong hope; that out of trouble and time will arise deeper love and a firmer commitment, and above all it is an act of unconditional love, or with one condition: "as long as we both shall live." Marriage is an amazing thing. It is a challenging commitment; but it is not for everyone.

More specifically, in case you weren't politically active here in 2004, or if you are one of those people who don't read the Missouri State constitution closely, I must tell you "that to be valid and recognized in this state, a marriage shall exist only between a man and a woman". The point of amending our constitution by adding these words was only to say "marriage is not for same-gendered couples". Missouri was the twelfth state to ban such unions since 1998 when Alaska began the fad. Today 33 of 50 states have made such amendments. Supporters say that these amendments are in defense of "marriage". They support commitment between two people as part of what makes our society stable. But their reasoning breaks down when one asks "why not expand the franchise?" However, despite our cultural memory of a fused church and state, civil marriage is not the same thing as a marriage religiously blessed and defined. The amendment does not prevent gay or lesbian people from being married, only from being recognized as married by the state. Thus, despite the lack of legal recognition, we Unitarians have implicitly affirmed lesbian and gay unions for centuries and explicitly as a body for over forty years. We find that the goals of our faith are furthered by blessing such unions.

The title of my sermon actually comes not from the constitution but from a conversation I had with a member of a Unitarian Universalist church. He had been talking with me about his disastrous divorce almost fifteen years before. Since it had been so long since his first marriage I asked, "Do you plan to get married again?" He responded, "I am not cut out for marriage, I tried it once and I am not going to try it again." After a pause he stated with absolute confidence, "Marriage is not for everyone." I agreed. Everyone wants to be loved, to have companions, and to share their life with others. So, what I say today is that covenantal community is for everyone even if marriage is not.

To be married has always been both a blessing and a curse, depending on who was talking about it. In the 1800s middle class men were expected to work and women were expected to do all the work of passing on religion and culture to the next generation. I heard of one Baptist woman who fell in love with a Universalist, perhaps it was a member of this church. However, she feared that his Unitarian faith would put at risk the souls of any children they might have. After trying to convert him to her Baptist faith for months she got her mother to talk to him and when that failed she went to her father and said, "I love him and I want to marry him but I fear that he is a Universalist, and does not believe in Hell at all." Her father said, "Don't worry dear. Join forces with your mother. In between the two of you I am sure he will be utterly convinced."

E.J. Graff has pointed out that marriage has ceased to be a way to control and distribute clan wealth and has turned into a way to share and shore up personal well-being and inner fortunes. Marriage has stopped affirming babies social worth and identity and is focused on enriching a couple's happiness and intimacy. The family has ceased being society's main work group and has started to be seen instead as the primary nurturing nest for the young. Finally, choosing kin alliances is no longer quite so critical to marriage, and we now let the pair themselves choose their partners, free of family permission. Thus legal sanction of marriage exists mostly to mediate private disputes about property and child custody and its real purpose is to nurture the individuals involved.

What is more we know that the exact definition of marriage has been argued about over the centuries, the purposes of marriage and how it was arranged and to what ends have changed over thousands of years. For instance, Abraham, the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, (according to scriptures) once profited handsomely by marrying his wife off as his sister and he later got his wife's servant pregnant with his wife's advice and consent. And what about wise King Solomon who had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines? How wise was he? Love is the foundation of modern marriage, as Graff points out. The concept of romantic love exists in all cultures but is usually not linked to marriage. For most of history Western societies have been suspicious of marriages based on love, despite the glorification of love in songs and stories. Love is often portrayed as a dangerous emotion that lead us to tragedy. Our ideas of love have changed along with marriage.

Likewise in America traditions have changed often. In the 1700s married women had no legal possessions, had no legal control over the fate of their children, and no power to divorce an abusive husband. All of this has changed. Divorce is mercifully easier for those trapped in abusive and oppressive relationships because of many hard won battles. Today's conservatives want to hold onto the incarnation of marriage that won the last century's battle, anachronistically calling that version "traditional" and "time-honored". They ignore the diversity of marriage even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One illusion of any definition of marriage is that every marriage is exactly the same. The fact is that just as each individual is unique, so too is each marriage. The nature of the agreement between the persons involved can vary greatly.

Thus, what Paul said to the Christians in Corinth does not apply to all people everywhere. In fact he was speaking from a very particular world view that was more about keeping faith in a dying world than establishing a social order for whole nations. There is an odd little passage in the midst of that section about marriage when he explains why marriage causes trouble:

<sup>7:29</sup>What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; <sup>30</sup>those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; <sup>31</sup>those who use the things of the world, as if [they're] not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away".

So his view of marriage is set in a time of endings and vast change and he wants people to "simplify" and not make any unnecessary changes. Ah, as it was in his day so it is in ours: the times they are a changing.

According to a recent Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census data from 2010: Barely half of all adults in the United States—a record low—are currently married, and the median age at first marriage has never been higher [about 27 and ½ years old] In 1960, 72% of all adults ages 18 and older were married; today just 51% are. It is not yet known whether today's young adults are abandoning marriage or merely delaying it. A much higher share— 72%—have been married at least once. However, this “ever married” share is down from 85% in 1960. Because of these very simple facts asking what marriage means in 1960 was a very different question that it is today.

What is more, by age group, the decline in the proportion of currently married adults is more dramatic the younger one is. Only 9% of adults ages 18-24 were married in 2010, compare that with 45% in 1960. Among adults ages 25-34, fewer than half (44%) were married in 2010, compared with 82% in 1960. Finally I must note that statistics for marriage by racial and ethnic group diverge notably. Among Hispanics, 48% are married, and among blacks, only 31% are married. This is one half of the 61% of blacks who were married in 1960.

In the midst of all this doom and gloom for marriage it should be noted that 61% of those who have never married say they would like to be, 27 percent say they are not sure. Still there are a full 12% who say “I am not interested.” There is always been someone for whom marriage is not, for various reasons. I remember a young Jewish woman friend I knew in college. She did not want to ever be married. She described herself as “a-sexual”. She was a very intelligent and career driven woman. For various reasons she desired neither sexual relations nor a close companion. She wanted neither children nor financial support. But the women in her synagogue were shocked and dismayed by her choice and kept trying to figure out what was wrong with her. She remained Jewish, but she liked hanging out with Unitarian Universalists because we accepted her just as she was.

Marriage as we have known it during the past century is passing away. The social definition of marriage, who it is and is not for, is a religious question, a question about what it means to be human and what kind of relationships will we dedicate our minds and bodies to. It is a question of how and why we can make unions that are just and right and good. Of course, the fact is that all human beings need to be in communion with other people. Even the sociopath desires other people to prey on. Even the anti-social recluse will decline and dissipate in the isolation they seek, just as an infant who is fed but unloved will die. So we need to be in relationship.

Thus our Unitarian theology, especially as it has developed in the past several decades, has focused on the idea of Covenant as essential for the health and power of relationships. The iconic biblical covenant is between Abraham and God. When Abraham becomes concerned that God can cover his end of the bargain they have this strange ritual where they cut animal carcasses in half and God, in the form of a torch and lantern, pass between them. I have never had wedding couples ask to do this. But they do bring two halves of their community together with an isle dividing them, down which the couple walks. Covenants are open-ended unlike a contract. A contract is enforceable by law a covenant is not. Covenants usually change the two

parties in a way that links their identities and fortunes together. It is very hard to dissolve a covenant. Even after legal divorce couples, especially if children were involved, find they are still connected in some way, or other.

This is what it means when one joins a church: to enter into a covenant where your identity is linked with the religious identity of others. We, in this congregation are shaped by a covenant to form relationships of justice, equity and compassion. We join this congregation to share the promise of a Beloved Community knowing such things as love, decency, tolerance, and justice can be forged only in covenantal community. This is not easy. I am inspired by the people who remained members, came to worship, gave of their time and energy to this congregation even when it was troubled.

I conduct many weddings and union ceremonies throughout the year. Each time I do I think about what I am doing and why. I don't want to be the conductor of an irrelevant ceremony, waving my magic wand over a meaningless promise. I am also interested in marriage because I am also a married person. I think about what it means that I have made this promise to be linked with, and to care for, someone else. I want to understand what it means that I keep this covenant: this commitment and bond. Most difficult time in marriage was when I was in graduate school. Our second child was born near the end of my studies. We had no money, and like most parents had a severe lack of sleep. The stress of raising small people, and the ruination of my wife's career all put heavy strains on the marriage. I made one choice to go off to serve a small church every-other weekend for nine months. But the nadir was when I went to General Assembly on a very hot week in June, the week that one year old Molly and four year old Emily both came down with Chicken pox. And we were preparing to move the next week. Amy has said that the question in her mind that week was not "if" we would divorce, but "when". Somehow we went through that time and have come out the other side. Here 28 years since we first made our covenant, we continue to be married; we continue to love and honor and cherish each other. But though the basic promise has not changed, the relationship has. Of course there have been times that I have also been frustrated, unhappy or angry about our marriage. What has made the difference for me is that I do not see the marriage vow as a trap or prison. I know it is a matter of choice how I will fulfill my promise. I choose what kind of person I want to be. Each day I decide for myself how I understand the covenant and how I will fulfill its requirements.

I want to emphasize our faith in covenants, including the covenant of marriage. We Unitarian Universalists have a faith in covenants made by free persons are a source of goodness. We affirm that peace and justice arise from the lives of people who keep their promises. Marriage is not for everyone, but anyone can make a promise to serve others and keep that promise in faith and commitment for anyone willing to take the nurture of the human spirit, seriously. So may it be with us, and with people throughout the world.