

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – October 4, 2015

“Why We Marry”

Scripture: Mark 10:2-9; 18 Pentecost B (Proper 22)

“What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” Okay, well, there it is. That seems a tall order in our time; likely any time. It’s an understatement to say that it’s tough out there for married couples. The stresses of modern life, the changing cultural and religious tides, the responsibilities of dual working parent families, and the increasing pressures of raising children in these times all contribute to a kind of growing estrangement between couples who said at one time “...until we are parted by death” but who now find that marriage seems lifeless already, and vows that once resounded in hope fade ever more quietly into the distance.

Look, we all know that some marriages end, that where union once existed, walls of separation now stand. It is simply a part of our experience. But by recognizing it, we need not condone it... but neither need we condemn. Divorce remains a stark reminder of our limitations in relationship, and sometimes, but not always, our selfishness and hardness of heart. Divorce reminds us of our dependence upon the grace of God to heal us, to bless us within our unions, to reunite and

reconcile us when we are divided, and, from time to time, to forgive us when we can remain together no longer. What are we to do, we who hold marriage to be sanctified and holy?

Well, I hope I can bring a brief word to you this morning, those of you who are married, those of you who have been, those who are considering marriage in the Christian faith. And the words I would bring go something like this:

“Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life.

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other’s forgiveness and yours.

Make their life a sign of Christ’s love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair.

Give them such fulfilment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others.”

These words, along with the others that make up the prayers in the marriage rite of the Episcopal Church, are all too often the most overlooked part of any marriage ceremony. Yet these other words, I feel, are perhaps the most important expression of the covenant of marriage which we have in our Christian tradition,

because, while the vows we offer, ---“to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer or poorer,” and so on--- tell us *what* we are doing, the prayers offered in our ceremony of marriage, tell us *why* we are doing it. They tell us who we are as a married couple. They define marriage more readily than any other statement I know, and they reveal most clearly the hopes and responsibilities that stand before the couple and the community that supports them in their marriage.

[Invite the congregation to open the Book of Common Prayer and look at the prayers for marriage on page 429. (Text included at the end of this sermon.)]

When we are married in the church, married in the Christian faith, these prayers are a gift from which to find strength and direction and solace and purpose. Are you married now? Have you given your life in faith to another person as the one with whom you will always share your life? Do you hope to do so one day? Then come to know these prayers. Let them serve as a foundation for your relationship. Visit them from time to time, often if necessary. Let them guide you when your relationship struggles. Learn, and learn again, to be a strength, a comfort, a counsellor, a companion; understand that it will be necessary to forgive and to say “I’m sorry”; know that what you reveal in your marriage is seen by others and can help them grow in faith; let your relationship overflow with the desire to give as well as to receive.

In doing these things, we might be healed from that “hardness of heart” of which Jesus speaks, that “growing apart” that all too readily happens in our busy world. Give yourself the grace to not be perfect, nor expect your spouse to be perfect. After all, I think God holds that grace for you. But strive for what is good and right in marriage. And let those prayers be your guide.

The Prayers for Marriage from the *Book of Common Prayer*

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation, and giver of all grace: Look with favor upon the world you have made, and for which your Son gave his life, and especially upon this man and this woman whom you make one flesh in Holy Matrimony. *Amen.*

Give them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their common life, that each may be to the other a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy. *Amen.*

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and peace with you and one another all the days of their life. *Amen.*

Give them grace, when they hurt each other, to recognize and acknowledge their fault, and to seek each other's forgiveness and yours. *Amen.*

Make their life together a sign of Christ's love to this sinful and broken world, that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy conquer despair. *Amen.*

Bestow on them, if it is your will, the gift and heritage of children, and the grace to bring them up to know you, to love you, and to serve you. *Amen.*

Give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others. *Amen.*

Grant that all married persons who have witnessed these vows may find their lives strengthened and their loyalties confirmed. *Amen.*

Grant that the bonds of our common humanity, by which all your children are united one to another, and the living to the dead, may be so transformed by your grace, that your will may be done on earth as it is in heaven; where, O Father, with your Son, and the Holy Spirit, you live and reign in perfect unity, now and for ever. *Amen.*
