“The Sacred Act of Marriage”

Acts 2:14-21

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At our wedding, just over three years ago, there were very few things that could have ruined the day for me.

There were certainly moments that had potential.

Like the day before when we were setting up the big party tent and setting out tables and chairs for the reception.

The rental company delivered the pieces for the dance floor.

We were so excited to set up the floor on the patio behind my uncle’s house.

He lived on the Front Range of Colorado, so the whole span of the Colorado horizon set the background for his patio.

It was the perfect place to put the dance floor.

Well, the pieces arrived, and we were baffled when the delivery guy laid out two squares of floor and then drove away.

Each piece was about 3’ x3’, making a total are of 6’x3’.

Try to image a wedding crowd dancing on such a tiny space of dance floor!

Only two, maybe three people could dance at one time!

We called the rental company to figure out what was going on, and learned that that was what was ordered.

It must have been a mistake when the numbers were imputed.

They were hesitant to send more flooring out, since their delivery guy was busy and other events were using dance floors as well.

I remember someone turning to me and asking if I was going to be okay.

I suppose they thought I would go all Bridezilla on the situation, having a meltdown and crying about how my wedding was ruined because of the tiny dance floor.

I just sort of laughed off the situation, took a picture of the hilariously tiny dance floor, and went to work setting up decorations.

It turns out they were able to send more flooring and all worked out just fine in the end.

There were other moments too, that could have spelled disaster.

The truth is, I don’t remember any of them.

They may have been stressful in the moment, but all of that has passed.

Because three years later, I don’t look back at that wedding day and fixate on the problems.

I don’t even spend too much time reflecting on how beautiful my dress was, or how yummy the ice cream sundae bar was.

What stands out to me most are things that helped us prepare for the *marriage* that was head of us.

Like pre-marital counseling.

Those sessions when we talked about difficult issues and tried to figure out how were going to join our lives together without driving each other crazy.

I remember spending those months before the wedding, preparing more for the marriage that would take place starting on that special day.

I remember spending weeks fine tuning the liturgy, making sure it had integrity and reflected our theology of marriage.

We worked with our pastor to make sure that what was said honored the sacred act of marriage.

I remember carefully pursuing the Bible, selecting a scripture passage that would be preached on at the ceremony.

We did not select the passage from Acts 2 that we read today.

Unsurprisingly it is not listed in the Book of Common Worship under suggested passages for a marriage ceremony.

So you might be a bit baffled as to why this scripture passage was chosen for a sermon on marriage.

For the past 7 weeks we have been exploring the Book of Acts and its mention of the 7 sacred acts of our church.

Wanting to follow suit, I scoured the Book of Acts in search of some commentary on marriage from the early churchgoers.

Turns out there is no mention of marriage in that way in Acts.

There are a few stories about married couples and one about some unmarried daughters.

But Acts does not explicitly talk about marriage and how it was treated by the early church.

If you were to take a gander at marriage in the rest of the Bible, you might walk away confused.

Various books and letters in the Bible have a variety of opinions on the matter.

Starting at the beginning with Genesis chapter 2.

We hear the account of Adam and Eve, the first married couple in creation.

Scripture tells us that man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Like all of Scripture, there’s more than one way to interpret this.

It could be that marriage is meant to be between one man and one woman.

Making the case for a monogamous, heterosexual standard.

Or, it could mean that marriage is meant to be a lifetime endeavor.

Making the case against divorces.

Or, it could simply be an explanation of where marriage came from.

Making the case that marriage is a gift for all of creation.

But then if we skip ahead a few chapters, we find Jacob and his 4 wives.

Hmm. He seems to have veered away from that one man, one woman standard.

This seems to make the case that polygamous marriage is acceptable.

Jacob isn’t even the most controversial of the polygamous Biblical men.

Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

This king of Israel had an appalling number of women in his life.

So, the Old Testament seems to have a rather muddled view on marriage.

Jumping ahead to the New Testament, we find that marriage is rarely mentioned.

In the Gospels, Jesus says very little, other than a few comments on adultery and divorce.

He doesn’t seem to claim it as a central theological issue.

And then there’s Paul who says its best to stay single and celibate.

Apparently Christians are better off focusing on God and not on intimacy.

But even his comments on the matter are few and far between.

So it’s interesting that today it appears the single most controversial matter the church is talking about is marriage.

Particularly gay marriage and the recent shift in culture and law regarding gay marriage.

We the church have decided this topic is more important than any other.

In our own denomination, the definition of marriage has divided our church.

Recently the wording was changed so that rather than marriage being between a man and a woman, our Book of Order now declares that marriage is between two people.

This leaves much room for interpretation and it in no way forces anyone to agree with a certain stance on marriage.

Regardless of this, scores of congregations are voting to leave the denomination in search of a setting where gay marriage is preached against.

This conflict has been going on for decades and seems to be reaching a breaking point of late.

The irony of this situation is that 500 years ago, the Protestant reformers, those patriarchs of our tradition decided to hand marriage over to the authority of the government.

We decided that the church should not be in the business of decide who can and can’t get married.

Martin Luther said marriage is a worldly thing. Not a matter of church business.

When our tradition broke away from the Catholic Church, our view of marriage changed drastically.

It was agreed that marriage is not a sacrament.

John Calvin, one of the fathers of our faith, had a lot to say on the matter.

He devotes many chapters of his institutes berating anyone who disagreed with him.

He says “Marriage is a good and holy ordinance of God; just like farming, building, cobbling and barbering are lawful ordinances of God, and yet are not sacraments. For it is required that a sacrament be not only a work of God, but an outward ceremony appointed by God to confirm a promise.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

He still affirms it is a sacred and important thing, but not a sacrament.

This is hugely important when we look at the conflict over marriage in our church today.

It is crucial that we recognize that marriage is not a sacrament.

And equally important, we must recognize that we gave the government the authority to decide who can marry.

When we remember these two things, we can set aside this issue on marriage and not make it the central theological debate of our time.

One which divides the church into two.

So then, what should the church say about marriage today?

Like John Calvin, we still recognize that it is a sacred and important thing.

Something that is given to us by God.

Yes, if we look at Scripture we seemed to get mixed messages on what marriage should look like and what it is about.   
But we Presbyterians look at the Bible with a critical lens.

We like to use scripture to interpret scripture, which means we don’t pluck a few verses out of the Bible to fit our argument.

We carefully read the entire canon and measure it against itself.

When we take a step back and look at the broader picture, we find rather beautiful theological claims for marriage should be.

We find that marriage is one of the many ways we can live out our baptismal vows.

To be baptized is to be called to new life.

This new life is centered in discipleship to Christ.

So when two people take those vows to love and honor one another, their promises to each other reflect the love that Christ has for us.

This relationship is a special calling where two people are joined as one.

It is one of those unique ways in which we see the words of Galatians chapter three lived out.

Those words which proclaim that there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female.

Instead of dichotomy and hierarchy, marriage shows us an example of egalitarian life, where all parties are valued the same and there’s no distinction between the two.

We also see marriage connected to our other sacrament, The Lord’s Supper.

When we find ourselves at the Table for communion, we receive the call to serve Christ by serving others.

What better place to practice that, than in a marriage where partners are called to love and serve each other?

And finally, Marriage is a reminder of the future hope that we cling to as Christians.

This brings us back to our scripture passage from Acts chapter 2.

The one that doesn’t seem to make sense for a sermon on marriage.

It takes place on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fills the church.

People are confused by this event, not surprisingly, and they turn to Peter for answers.

He tells them that this is encounter with the Holy Spirit is a preview of what is to come in the Kingdom of God.

He quotes the prophet Joel, and gives the people an image of the heavenly future that is to come.

He says that the spirit will be poured out upon all people.

It will be a time of wonder and amazement.

It will be a time when all are equal and given equal standing.

It will be a time when the Kingdom of God is fully realized on earth.

The beautiful thing about marriage is that it offers us a glimpse of this time.

It is a partnership grounded in love, wonder and amazement.

Two people are given equal standing in the relationship, loving and serving each other.

This is exactly what new life looks like in the Kingdom of God.

It is a time when every tear is wiped away.

When all pain and suffering ceases.

When we are fully embraced by God’s love and don’t know anything outside of [[2]](#endnote-1)it.

In the blissful joy of marriage, we get a foretaste of this joy in the Kingdom.

We get a preview of what it will be like to live in that glorious reality.

I’m thankful to have experienced many moments like this in the relatively short time I’ve been married.

When we overcome challenges, and celebrate life together, I get that joyful feeling which is just a taste of what is to come.

For better and for worse, in sickness and in health. For richer or poorer.

Marriage offers us an opportunity to love and serve and experience a foretaste of heaven.

Thanks be to God for this sacred and wonderful gift.

Amen.

1. Calvin, John. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion (2 Volume Set)*. 1559 ed. 2 vols. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960, XIX 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Much inspiration for this sermon came from Kimberly Bracken Long’s article on marriage: http://pres-outlook.org/2015/07/practicing-the-scales-of-love-rethinking-christian-marriage/. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)