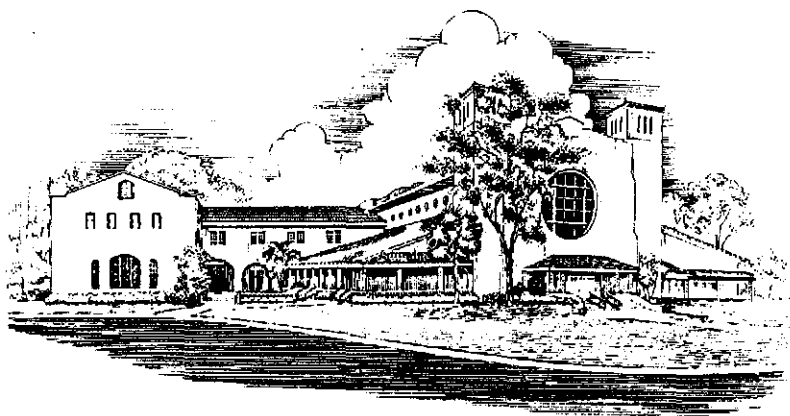


First Church Pulpit

**"THE SECOND MARRIAGE:
A TIME TO START OVER AGAIN . . ."**

Text: "Let marriage be held in honor by all . . ."

— Hebrews 13:4



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Our sermon topic today is "The Second Marriage: A Time To Start All Over Again." Frankly, my friends, at the time I proposed and published the topic several months ago, it seemed a rather easy task. I mean, I planned to bring out all my Scriptural knowledge and pastoral views on second marriages. I would tell those who are married the second time how to behave, and they would all go home and live happily ever after.

The problem was, as the months came along and I began to do more intensive research, and talked extensively with those who had experienced second marriage firsthand, I come in fear and trembling. I found to my surprise that having been married to my first and only wife for thirty-one years, I was not entirely informed on the problems. I knew some things from my work, from problems which people shared with me, but I was not aware from the inside, as I was told quite abruptly by many. The comments, for example, ranged from: "Go slowly!" and "Don't jump out of the frying pan into the fire", to a perfectly blunt "Don't do it."

One parishioner relayed to me a story that I told from this pulpit four years ago (In his opinion, it was the best thing I ever said). It had to do with a little illustration which pertained to the sermon that day. It also pertains to this one. (It goes to show you though, that people remember the stories far longer than the heart and the content of the

Gospel. Some of you who are here, will recall it. The minister was preaching on sin and perfection, and he said to the congregation, as preachers have wont to do: "Now, is there anybody here who is sinless? Anybody who is perfect? If anybody here has no sins and is perfect, please stand up." Of course, no one stood up. So he asked again: "Are you sure? If there is anybody here who is perfect, please stand up." Upon which a little man, way in the back of the church, stood up sheepishly. The pastor looked sternly at him and said: "Do you mean to tell me, sir, that you are perfect?" He said: "N-n-no sir...I am s-s-standing up in honor of my wife's first husband...."

Now, I know there are many couples within the sound of my voice, whose second marriages are very happy indeed. They thank God for each other. Happiness is hard to find in this world, so, when you find it anywhere, rejoice in it, thank God for it, hold on to it, treasure it, and embrace it.

The topic is timely. From time to time throughout the year, I try to address a few of the family and personal problems I encounter, and bring theology and the Bible to the subject.

One out of four of those who will approach the wedding altar in our nation in 1990, will have been previously married. For every three marriages, there are two divorces.

The divorce rate is 50% higher in second marriages, which lends more credence to the necessity of the topic. Four out of five men who were previously married, marry again. Three out of four women do eventually, though the men tend to remarry earlier, as if you did not know!. A reliable study shows that one out of seven households, almost four million in the United States, exists where one parent has been previously married, and has at least one child by a previous marriage, and of course that brings another whole dimension to the topic. I know what I say will bother some of you, but it might help others.

I know there are many of you to whom the subject is not applicable. Following the first service, one woman said: "I am struggling so hard to keep my first marriage alive, why are you talking about a second?!" Another said: "What I really want to know is how to handle my seventeen-year old child, will you preach another sermon on that next week?" You know what I mean. But if it does not touch you directly, perhaps you could pass it along to someone to whom it would be helpful, and I would be pleased.

The subject as we know it seems to be new, but actually it is not. Think of your own grandparents, great-grandparents, or even your own parents. In previous generations, due to the shorter span of life, because of disease, and other things that have happened in the past, in a time when it was important to have a parent

present to care for the children, or to work in the farm or the home, remarriage was legendary. It happened almost all the time. More recently, it has been a question of divorced people remarrying, but I have a feeling that the dynamics are the same. I will let you judge that yourself. If you like to keep notes or know where you are, the introduction is over. I intend now to present three points on "The Second Marriage: A Time To Start Over Again", and track it as we go.

I.

The first thing I want to say is a word of caution, all kidding aside. My best advice to you is: Be careful and go slowly. I have seen many mistakes made by those who rush into another marriage, before the echo and clamor of the previous marriage has died down. And, there is a reason. Whatever had been the circumstances for the dissolution of the first marriage, whether it was death, or tragedy, divorce or boredom, abuse, or any other reason, there is always an element of vulnerability present, which transcends all rational explanations for the demise of the first marriage, or the initiation of the second.

What I know is this: almost no one chooses to have a second marriage, even if many times it becomes much happier than the first. That is

rather obvious when it follows the death of a spouse, but it is also true in divorce. Almost no one chooses to go through the pain, the losing of part of oneself, the shattering of one's values, the overturning of one's foundation stones once again, not willingly.

Sometimes it is a mutual separation. Often it is imposed by one or the other. But what I want to share with you is that in my opinion, some marry the second time for good reasons, and some do not. Often it comes from the leftover feelings of the excitement of being in love. Love can be blind, whatever age you are. I always recommend that a person take at least six months to recuperate, and six more months to seek to learn what is happening inside. Otherwise, you are in danger of moving on too quickly, of not allowing enough time to find yourself again after the grief or final separation, and you will bury the search to learn what you need to learn.

Some marry for security, some because they are lonely. Some marry to have companionship. Others marry for revenge. I mean, if you have been hurt deep down by a previous partner, it does not take long to want to prove to yourself or to others, or to him or her, that you are desirable. Some marry again out of panic. Life is moving along, and chances are few. Of course, some marry for money. I always recommend, although sometimes I think almost no one ever listens to

me, I recommend to everyone of any age who is contemplating a second marriage, that he or she seek professional help and pre-marriage counseling. It helps, I found, to have an objective observer, perhaps your pastor, friend, whoever, to sort through the issues and ideas of the proposed new marriage.

Let me tell you a story. When I first came to South Florida, I came out of the relatively stable environment of Western Pennsylvania. Most marriages I did there were two young people coming together for the first time. I was unprepared for the number of second and third marriages etc. in South Florida. So, I had a policy in my previous parish: you did not get married, unless you came to meet with me at least twice. With that directive, I arrived here. Soon a couple came to see if I would marry them, a couple no longer young. I trotted out my policy. I said: "Well, I can consider marrying you, but first you have to meet with me once about the wedding, and once about the topic of what it means to get married again." Upon which, the man of the intended marriage said to me: "Reverend, I was married fifty-four years when my wife died, and she was married fifty-two when her husband died, we have a hundred and six years of experience between us! What could you ever tell us, young man?" That put me in my South Florida seat, to be sure. I am happy to tell you, that although they did not get any advice from me, I did marry them, and to this

day, they seem to be very very happy indeed.

That seems extreme, but I often hear it from couples of all ages: "We are not starry-eyed kids, what could you possibly tell us, that we do not already know?" While I sometimes do not insist, I still say that I encourage you, if you are in that preliminary time, to seek some professional help to sort through the issues. I have had countless people tell me, many with tears in their eyes: "If I had only known...if I could have talked to somebody to see what he was really like...if I had not been so gullible, and titillated by my fancy feelings...if I realized he was so heavily in debt...if...if...if.... Things are not always what they seem. Puppy love does not end when persons put on a few years, and there is still no fool like an old fool.

In that regard, by the way, though it is beyond the boundaries of my ministerial work, I always suggest the consideration of a pre-nuptial marriage agreement, especially if there are children involved. That procedure requires a complete financial disclosure, and it forces the issue of whether the marriage is intended to be permanent. I do not say you have to do it, but I ask everyone to consider it, as a way to frame the importance of a second marriage. Point One is over: Be careful, go slowly.

II.

We now move to a different group of people, ones who are already been married a second time, and life is moving along. I looked for a comprehensive way to summarize what I think I have learned through the years, and I came up with this heading: The second marriage is not the first.

In fact, in God's eyes it is a first marriage, in that it is a marriage, or He could not give His blessing at all. Karl Barth once wrote that the only way we can ask for the blessing of the Lord on a second marriage, whether it comes out of death or divorce, or a decree of the Church or State, is to realize that in the eyes of God, this marriage is a new marriage. God does not look down to say: "Well, look at this! A second marriage for Tony and Sue...they are going to try it again!" No.... God looks down and says: "I honor your desire to be together. I will bless you, not as a second marriage, but as a new marriage in My eyes." If that is what God says, we must say the same. You cannot stand at the wedding altar, or go away from it saying: "I was a failure, now I have another chance." The past is over and gone. Your sins and oversights are forgiven. You are starting out anew.

To be more specific, I always try to emphasize that newness. The ideal, of course, is to move into a new home, one that does not carry the memories

of the first marriage with the first mate. However, do not let that worry you. I realize it is often not a practical or a financial possibility. But then the partner who has previously lived in the home, must take special care, that it not be a place where he or she used to live with someone else, but to adapt it to the new mate. I suppose there is no other red flag that waves in my face on a second marriage than the need to meet on neutral ground. It can be accomplished in a previous home, but that makes it harder. It is so easy to fall into the same patterns...after all, the same person travels on. So do not draw comparisons, do not think it is business as usual. Do not assume that you know what the other one is thinking. Communicate on a regular and scheduled basis. Take the liberty of saying to the one you love: "How are things going? Is there anything I am doing that bothers you? Is there anything you would like to say to me, no matter how painful it might sound?" My father used to tease that the Bible says: "Marriage is two becoming one. The problem is: which one shall they be?"

To go further, if I encourage the couple to start out a new marriage, I need to be more specific, and say to each of the partners: "Start you out all over again, too!" In other words, you were in your past a certain personality, with certain needs and fears and worries, which worked or did not work. But now, as Christ promises, you too must become new.

The scheme I used to help people to do that is very brief and interesting. I call it a "Needs Inventory." I have used this with couples of all ages. Take a sheet of 8 1/2 x 11 paper, draw a line down through the center of it. Write on the first column: "My needs (as I perceive them)". Work it out, I say an hour is enough, list ten needs in all. "I need time alone"... "I need my wife to look up to me... I need... I need... I need.... Then, on the other side, use the second column and write the partner's needs (as you perceive them). I often recommend that couples do this at every anniversary. Needs change through the years. I can guarantee you, especially I am speaking to the gentlemen, out of my thirty years of experience in marriage and counselling: you do not know what she is thinking. The danger I see is that men in particular, but sometimes women too, assume they know what their wife (or husband) is feeling and experiencing. So, I say it quite bluntly: "Gentlemen: you do not know what she is thinking or feeling!"

A wonderful book on this subject, which I have read more than once, has some unique observations, and is also amusing. It is titled: Joanna's Husband and David's Wife, a classic in the field of marriage insights, written by Elizabeth Hailey. You will enjoy it. The story is true. Joanna, the wife, as most wives, was much more careful in following the marriage. For twenty-five years, she wrote in her diary once or twice a week, saying what she felt, what he was doing, what

they were doing, how the children were progressing. Then, when they ran into big trouble after twenty-six years of marriage, she decided she would give the diary to their daughter Julia, so she could read what the marriage was about.

David, the husband, found out about it. He was so troubled and bothered, he sat down and wrote his own diary. He too gave it to poor little Julia, to tell his side. All that I can tell you here is this: The assumption that one knew what the other was doing or thinking in the course of their marriage, was entirely false. It would be almost funny, were it not so tragic. They did not communicate with each other. Finally, through the accident and luck of the diaries, it does have a happy ending.

My point is, we need to know our needs, and to attempt to discover the needs of the other one. If your new wife or husband is a gift from God, then at least you owe him or her the courtesy of speaking and sharing yourself. It does not always happen. I can make two generalizations after thirty years of working in this field. Gentlemen, are you listening?

The first is that men almost always are looking for someone to take care of them. The little boy never goes away.... They want their wives to be a kind of mother, with a few extra frills and fancies thrown in. They want women to cater to their every need and whim, even when they fail to

tell the wife what their need or whim is. Often the problem is complicated, because they do not know what they need, and they are aghast to hear someone say they are looking for a mother, not a wife.

Either way, is it too trite to say that marriage, as well as life, is tilted in favor of men? I mean, he has the freedom to leave, she takes care of the family. He has the freedom to do what he wants, she has the home and meals and other things to attend to. I had one woman tell me when her marriage was in trouble: "All he wants is for me to sit down at his feet and adore him.... "

The second generalization concerns the wife. She is looking, especially in a second marriage, for someone to acknowledge her as a real person, with God-given talents and responsibilities. She wants someone to take care of her, too...to treat her kindly, but to turn her loose to grow, not to smother her, and appreciate what she tries to do. Men, if you do not know that, you are a fool. When God gives you the gift of a woman to love you, He gives you a wonderful gift. The obligations you assume are great. We are past the day when you can ask her to obey you. But we are not past the day when God wants you to be kind, to care for her, to be tender.... Do not dump your frustrations from the outside on the home or the marriage, the second marriage. Point Two: The second marriage is not the first.

III.

In conclusion, briefly, I quote the words of our text from Hebrews 13:4, the Biblical instruction, unyielding, from God Himself: "Let marriage be held in honor among all." The Bible does not provide a detailed set of instructions for second marriages, in fact, it is rather ambivalent about it. But it does embrace all of marriage, of which a second marriage is part. The author of Hebrews knew more than he says. He knew what went on in that ancient world, when the search for equality was far less than it is in our day. He knew that the men could cavort about the kingdom at will, fighting battles, doing anything they chose, while their wives were tied down to the home. I have a less than secret feeling, that the strength behind every marriage is the woman. So the author of Hebrews says: "Let mutual love continue...", reminiscent of St. Paul in I Corinthians and Ephesians. "Let mutual love continue." Be kind to one another. Let marriage, be held in honor by everyone. God charges you to respect each other, to feed each other strength.

St. Paul says: "Love is not jealous." I know many husbands who are jealous, as well as many wives, and often, frankly, there is reason. But St. Paul does not mean that. He means never be jealous of your partner, of allowing her to become the kind of person God intended when God first gave her life. He means that

each one should be the number one supporter of the other, rejoicing in the triumphs, weeping in the sorrows and frustrations. Your number one fan in all the world should be your wife or husband. Treat the one whom God has given you as the most important gift in all the world, for when God brought Eve to Adam, He said: "You are incomplete by yourself. I bring you this woman to complete you...to show you what you need, even though you did not know you needed it."

In marriage then, first or second or whatever, each one is to love the partner as Christ, Paul says, loved His Church: sanctifying it, giving his life up for it, total and self-giving. Sometimes it is difficult, I know, but often we make our own problems.

We hold a lot of things in honor, don't we? Our jobs, our money, our success, our place in the world, our accomplishments, even our church. It is all good. The author of Hebrews says that the bottom line of it all is (Are you listening?): "Let marriage be held in honor, whatever else you do, among all."

Over the years, as I told you, I have done some marriage counseling. I do not have enough time for that any more. But I am privileged as a pastor to meet with young couples when a marriage goes wrong, and I am often present at Fiftieth wedding anniversaries, and all the in-betweens.

I will close with the words of a lovely woman I used to know. She is gone now. Near the end, we looked back on her life. She had had difficult times. In her first marriage, there was trouble with the children. Then her husband took ill, and was bedfast for seven years until he died. She was privileged to marry again, only to learn that her second husband also had cancer. She had to wait and watch and take care of him.

I was there to help her to say goodbye, as we planned the funeral. Trying to get her to talk about her life, I said: "In looking back, my dear, with all that you have been through, is there any way to summarize it?" You know what she said? She smiled and said: "Of course. If I had it all to do over, I would do it all again. I would be faithful to my children, even when it broke my heart. I would be faithful to my husband, and my second husband, through all their troubles. It only made the good times seem all the better. If I had to do it over, I would do it all again, and I thank God for what I had."

I pray, my friends, that when all is said and done, you can say that too. For now and evermore. Amen.