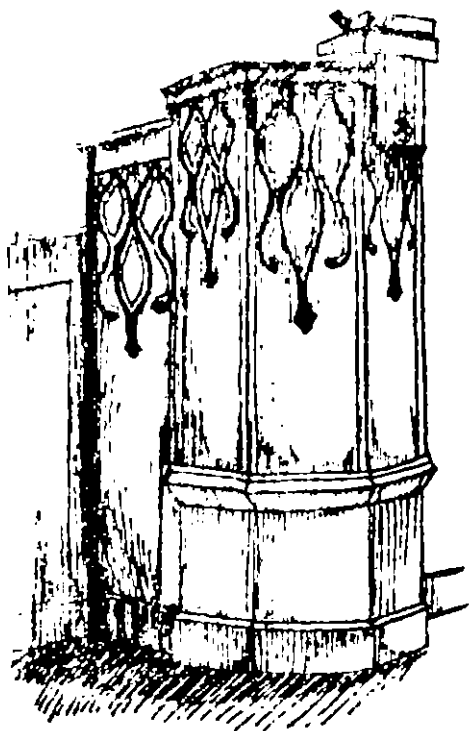


# The Southminster Pulpit

"IS IT WISE FOR A MAN TO MARRY?"



Text:

"The disciples said to him, '..if such is the case of a man with his wife, is it wise for a man to marry?'"

Matthew 19:10

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I am aware that this sermon will hurt some of you - but it will help others..... The Sign Board in front of the Church where we list the sermon topics prompts various comment from time to time, but never quite as extensive as this week: "Is It Wise For A Man To Marry?". We had two weddings here yesterday. The photographers both asked the grooms present to stand at the sign on their wedding day! I was also photographed, pretending I did not know the answer...

Earlier, a friend - recently hurt in a marital breakdown - typed out a two-page personal letter to me enumerating the reasons why it is unwise for a man to marry. A young friend explained to me the new attitudes toward marriage; and the equality of women casts the whole subject in a different light. Women are just not interested these days in giving up themselves and their careers for the obligations of the home and family...Is it wise for a man to marry?..

Admittedly the topic has a frivolous ring to it. One friend said, "Maybe". Another said, "I don't know about that; the real question is 'Is it wise for a woman to marry?'".....She was a she, by the way..... And while it is intended to prompt a kind of tongue-in-cheek kind of response, the sermon topic, both in its Scriptural setting and in my own mind - after twenty years of marriage and fifteen years of ministerial marriage counseling - has deep and serious sway in the categories and concourse of human happiness today.

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First, let's look at its origin in the Bible. The story appears both in Mark 10 and here again in Matthew 19. It says, "... large crowds had followed him out beyond the Jordan River in Judea, and the Pharisees came up to him in order to test him." "Is it lawful to divorce a wife for any cause?", they asked. Now, the question - sounding innocent enough - is really quite malicious. For, not unlike our own day, there were reigning opinions on both sides of the questions on how marriage and divorce should be handled. We are not the first culture to question the validity of marriage, neither are we the first to experiment casually with marriage rites and practices. In Jesus' day, there were some in the more rigid camps of Judaiam, the school of Shammai who felt that divorce should almost never be permitted. There were others, the school of Hillel, who followed the letter of the Mosaic law which permitted a man to put his wife away almost at will: "I'm through with you" - no trial, no lawyers, no nothing.

Notice I said a "man could put his wife away" - at the beginning there was almost no provision at all for a woman to divorce her husband - unless he had leprosy. And many feel it is still tilted in his favor... In between, were the searching souls who knew that marriage should be for life, but often it cannot be, for one reason or another. In the middle of our time, living as Niebuhr said, in a world that is anti-thetical to our highest self - Well, when it says they were putting him to the test, they really were. He had to take a side.

So Jesus responded, from the depth and

heart of the Scripture all the way back to Genesis. Philosophically he said, "Have you not read that He who made them from the beginning made them male and female?" From Genesis 1 he added, "For this reason a man should leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one. What God has joined together let no man put asunder..." Quoting the beginning of the scripture, in other words, Jesus said, "It is not lawful for a man to divorce his wife." It is antithetical to what God intended.

But the Pharisees, also knowing the Scripture immediately asked, "Why then" - quoting Deuteronomy 24 - "did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to put his wife away And he did. Deuteronomy 24 also says, "When a man takes a wife and marries her, if then she finds no favor in his eyes because he has found some indecency in her, he writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house." Period.

Those are fighting words and surely a topic for another day. But the Pharisees knew that the Holy Scriptures gave men the right to put their wives away, almost at will. Some of the Rabbinical interpretations spelled out what those words meant, and legal credence was available that allowed a man to divorce his wife for so incidental an offense as that she ruined a meal, or she spoke disrespectfully of his parents, or she was desultory in household duties, or even if she talked too much - or turned off the television in the middle of a game....The stricter interpretation of the law gave more dignity to marriage, to be sure. And the school of Shammai insisted that some serious moral lapse be present before the bill

of divorce could be written - but whatever, the law allowed a man to dispose of his wife - and the Pharisees were cornering Jesus in their attempt to make him choose between what was lawful and what was right...So Jesus responded, "Why, why did Moses permit a man to divorce his wife? - I'll tell you why:

"For your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." It is not what our heavenly father intended when man and woman and marriage were made. It was the compromise arising in the mind of Moses, prompted by the very same difficulties that you and I see around us, which forced him to make exceptions to the original desire of the Lord. And Jesus goes on to add, "But I say unto you, whoever divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery." Significantly, Mark - in the earlier version of the story - does not have the phrase "except for unchastity". Even more curiously, Luke omits the story completely, though he does include the isolated verse in agreement with Mark. The flow of the sentence, in other words, seems to indicate that Jesus was prohibiting divorce - under no circumstances save the most rigid and demanding should it be possible for a follower to divorce, especially seen in the context that a man should not be permitted to put his wife away at will. It is essential not to miss the setting in which the statement arises and to which it is related.

Offering a rampart for the family, Jesus is affirming the dignity and desirability of marriage as the ideal relationship among

the created men and women of the earth. He is also affirming the dignity and independence of women - In a day when a woman had almost no defenders, in a day when a wife was a piece of property to be transferred with elaborate ceremony from her father to her husband. This strong almost absolute condemnation of divorce is primarily a declaration that a man should not be permitted to put his wife away.

Whatever, when the disciples heard his answer, watch what they said next. Being all men themselves - when they heard that a man's right to put away his wife should be denied and that divorce was almost impossible, they replied: "If such is the case of a man and his wife" - in a free translation, they asked "if it is that hard" - "is it wise for a man to marry in the first place?" If marriage is that serious, if the obligation is so intense and irreversible, if the commitment is for life, then we probably should not get married at all. Right? Wrong. Jesus does go on to answer them.

It is possible, he said, that some should not marry, for a multitude of reasons - One of which could be the seriousness of the commitment; one of which could be a native predisposition away from normal man-woman relations; one of which could be the devotion to a higher duty, a commitment to Christ and his church, a commitment to education, preparation for an occupation from priest to surgeon to military service - for the life which demands a total dedication, it is necessary and proper that some people do not marry, as Jesus Christ himself did not. He took their question seriously, and the whole issue of celibacy for the Christian clergy

and the whole ascetic monastic movement and the vow of chastity for the monk is based on this gospel lesson, reinforced by Paul and his recommendation that the dedicated Christian refrain from marriage and give total time and devotion to Christ and his church.

If the marriage vow and ceremony places such a demand on the individuals involved in a commitment, is it wise for anyone to be married at all? Is it wise for a man to marry?

Without fail, in almost every case, the Bible answers yes. It is not only wise, but essential for a man to marry. The Old Testament teaches that a man is not complete without a woman, and vice-versa to be sure. In fact, the whole work of creation, Genesis teaches, is continued through the marital bond. "It is not good for man to be alone," is more than an idle direction. It implies that one is incomplete without the other. The original state of the created world is that the lonely man remains alienated and alone until he finds his fulfillment and completion with woman. From the beginning they were made male and female - one for the other, belonging together, and the two shall become one.

In time it became the sacred duty for each and every man to marry, save the occasional separation of the priest alone, and later the cult of the Essenes. The sacred union of man and wife was so complete a part of the Jewish way of life that often Biblical symbolism likened the marriage of man and woman to the love God

had for his people Israel. In a sense he married them in one grand and indissoluble union. In the New Testament Paul likens the union of Christ and his church to the union of a man with his wife - high concept indeed.

The Bible so elevates the role and duty of a man to be married that it is nearly unthinkable that a person would ever remain single, a prospect which prompted one serious Christian scholar to postulate that Paul as Pharisee surely must have been once married and even speculates that as a self-respecting Jewish male Jesus would have been married earlier in his life and was widowed or deserted by the time we meet him at age thirty. A vast exaggeration, to be sure, but nonetheless part and parcel of the way of life, and a way of saying that God's original intention was that each of his children should find his/her purpose within the divinely sanctioned marital union.

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Now, the modern world has added endless reflections of its own to the Biblical views, and endless problems. Almost everything is in a state of flux. I am not unaware of the mounting pressures which add enormous weight to the problems of marriage. At other times, in other places, I have enumerated the effects of transience, of sexual freedom, of women's rights, of financial commitments, of vocational demands, of our egocentric culture - so much so that psychiatrist J.A. Hadfield wrote in PSYCHOLOGY AND MORALS, "I am sometimes tempted to think that half of my patients are neurotic because they are not yet married, and the other half because they are.

Is it wise for a man to marry? The answer is yes, in four parts, with a tiny footnote at the bottom of the page.

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1. The first is a theological word regarding what the scripture says was the intention of God the Creator when the world was made. You and I might choose not to be bound by that, to be sure; Jesus himself notes that in some cases it is inapplicable but for the fulfillment of God's order and purpose - The risk one takes in marriage is akin to the risk one takes each time he or she steps out of self into the life or lives of others. It is not good for man to be alone. We were created, the Bible says - or we arise in Creation - chosen, selected for the purpose of living in small family units, cherishing and transmitting the socio-cultural and religious values from one generation to the next...the order of creation.

2. The second is a personal word - yours and not my own - of what it means to find completeness in so intimate a relationship: to work through the problems of the decades, to refine and be refined, to be fully known and loved, to reveal and have revealed, to care and be cared for on the journey - all of that cuts as close to the heart of what it is all about as anything I know. Sure, it takes work, and sure, it takes two; but the trouble I see with troubled marriages is that we seldom work at marriage. We work at everything else - 46,000,000 married couples - grow and adapt but run away from problems in the home...Behind the gruff

and impossible egotist is a little boy dying for acceptance. Behind and beneath the witch of a woman is a little girl who needs someone to pick her up and hold her and understand her need to be a person. Both are fragile. Neither wants separation and divorce. They want a way to understand and to be understood. It was said by one ancient rabbi that the very altar weeps when a couple married before it ends in divorce.

3. The third is a communal answer, where the past, present and the future meet in the passing of the generations. I should think that would be the most difficult thing for me to bear should I ever feel our marriage in decline. I would marshal all my strength and sinew to preserve it instantly and forever. Carlyle Marney told us one day of the coyote who had died of starvation at the edge of a desert one bleak and awful year. The post-mortem studies showed how the living cells carried whatever miniscule nourishment was available to protect and preserve the brain - to keep the control center alive the longest, lest hopefully some refreshing rain might come to renew the remainder. But the brain was the essential sine qua non. To and in our society I say the same of the basic essential family unit. All that we can do to improve it and preserve it and redirect it and renew it is and should be our chief and central concern. The insanity of our times is related in direct measure to the decline of home.

Should the occasion of my life be different, still I could not bear, not for one moment, to put myself above my family. I could not bear to look back one day and

realize that I had interrupted the natural movement of the generations. Occasionally it is forced upon us, to be sure - and under the most extreme circumstances, Christ is saying it might be permissible. What do you do if the other half of the partnership decides to leave? - grudgingly allowed - but I could not bear the thought that my father and my father's father and one James Cromie who crossed the Irish Sea in 1701, and my mother and my mother's father and his great-grandmother back in Stuttgart - I could not bear them peering in upon my life and being broken-hearted to see the family change, twisting and breaking because of my momentary anxieties and anger and my passing pursuit of momentary pleasures, my rush to be me. That it should ever overturn the generations, reversing the values of a whole civilization, would be anathema to me.

Bob Meily died this weekend - a grand and wonderful man. He was president of our Trustees here before many of you were even born. It was an enormous privilege to sit and talk with Flo, his wife, about fifty-six years of marriage. These past few years have been a burden. While I was there, I saw a picture of Bob and his great-grandson, holding him before him in his last failing weeks. It was the most touching thing you can imagine - God give you privilege one day to see the same, your life and values going on and on and on.

4. The fourth reason, and the final word of evidence, is my own. The pity is that this, the strongest testimony I could bring, will be severely curtailed by my own inability to wax with warm eloquence about how near

and dear this subject is to me. I am a hopeless sentimentalist. Twenty years ago, come 7:30 this evening, on September 2, 1959, I was standing with my brother at my side at the foot of the chancel steps of a magnificent and lovely church across this city, waiting for a girl named Peggy Good to come down the aisle. It was and is and I pray always will be the grandest and loveliest and most important day of all my life. Now I suppose it is fair to say that you should also talk to Peggy to see what she has to say on the subject. But funny how times slips away...I remember when my parents reached their Twentieth and then their Twenty-fifth Anniversary, we planned parties for them as if they were about to go over the hill for good..... Two pilgrims at a shrine on a twenty-year journey. Time doesn't alter it...Everything changes but everything remains the same.

Sometimes I think the only real secret I know about marriage and its success is the original advice that the best way to have a good marriage is to choose the right partner to begin with. That's really all it takes, and every son and daughter of the Lord will answer a loud affirmative - it is wise for a man to marry if he manages to marry the right woman in the first place.

I surely did, and while we have known our phases and stages, our share of worries and a few woes - It was wise and we know it and thank God for it - now and evermore.