

‘THE ABCs OF MARRIAGE’

Text: “This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that
It refers to Christ and the church; however, let each
of you love his wife as he loves himself, and let the wife
see that she respects her husband.”

Ephesians 5: 21-33

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Just in case anybody is wondering, let me alert you at the start and inform you that I am an authority on marriage: Class A, thumbs up, authority!

I wrote that early in the week. I then assumed that my Peggy would be up in Pennsylvania at a family wedding this weekend, which means that I did not expect her to be seated in the pews today. She cancelled her trip and she is here. If I had known that, I would have opened the sermon with some less startling claim.

But I have been a pastoral counselor to hundreds of married couples through the decades, during which I have been privy to what marriage partners often think and do not say out loud. As one precious young woman confided to me once: “Things are not always what they seem.”

And, come the end of summer, Mrs. Cromie and I will celebrate our Golden Wedding Anniversary. Out of that longevity, I pondered titling this sermon “THE XYZs OF MARRIAGE.” But that sounded too much like the end of the road, so I decided not to alarm my Pretty Peggy, lest she decide that Forty Nine and three quarters years of marriage were enough. In that regard let me tell you a story.

I had a friend call me once to ask if I would officiate at a 50th Wedding Renewal of Vows Ceremony for his parents up in Ohio. Of course I did. In front of their family and friends at the fancy Pigeon Hollow Country Club, I had them repeat the vows of yore, including the one that says the wife would “Love, Honor, and Obey” her husband all the days of her life. A good time was had by all, I thought. They sent me a nice note and even enclosed a little check, emphasis on little, i.e., in the range of what they probably would have given their old preacher back in 1947. But I didn’t care. Successful marriage cannot be measured in dollars.

But, stay tuned, about 6 weeks later John called me again and asked if I would return to Blooming Falls to visit his same parents. He told me that his mother, shockingly, had filed for divorce and his father thought she was crazy. “Please see if you can help them,” he pleaded. So off I went to Ohio, again. After a chilly greeting we sat down to talk. I eventually asked his mother why she filed for divorce, just a few weeks after the aforementioned Golden renewal. Her answer will amaze you! Without hesitation she replied, “Honestly Reverend, I never could stand him a whit, and I finally got up the nerve to tell him.” The moral of the story is that husbands be careful, you never know what your wife is thinking. By the way I did not receive a little note following the second visit. And oddly that was the last time I agreed to do a Renewal of Vows ceremony. It seems too risky.

We turn today to a sermon in my “Family and Personal” Category of Sermons. I used to teach a course for young pastors on how to arrange a full year of preaching with proper attention to the variety of needs in a congregation. I long ago rejected the prescribed Lectionary listings of Bible texts which many preachers use. I do not intend to be disrespectful, but I find it far too restrictive for the range of my own interests and the concerns I see in the parish. The little rebel in me refuses to allow someone else to tell me what text I should preach on for 52 Sundays a year.

Just in case you might be interested, I divide my sermons into three categories, almost equally. One third of the time I focus on Biblical and Theological topics: sermons which touch on the theological concerns of who God is, what Christ requires, and the personal responsibilities of individual

Christians. The importance of ecclesiastical holidays falls there: Christmas, Easter, Pentecost. Also the whys and wherefores of the things we do and believe about what the Bible says and means.

Then I try to spend a second third of my time on the community and social issues of the day. They have changed through the decades, but our Christian responsibility to do something concrete about things like hunger and race relations or youth and drugs and alcohol, aging and illness, war and peace and all the rest never change. Concerns of the national churches belong here too.

The third category I label Personal and Family, which obviously includes of the Christian home and marriage and the duty each of us assumes to live a Christ-like life inside ourselves, first with those around us, and then with others beyond. We come to one of those this morning: “The ABCs of Marriage.”

I try always to be aware of individual pressures when I preach on family topics. Some of you, I know, have been disappointed in marriage. That happens. One or the other decided to terminate the relationship. Or, just as bad in many cases, communication and love slip away and the marriage dies a natural death of boredom. Others have chosen not to marry. Some wanted to and never got the chance. Some have lost their spouse to death and are now alone. Others have entered a second or third marriage or some new relationship which has brought new joy to their lives. Some are in love with another person, but the way we manage things, they are not permitted to be married. That is sad too. My Dad used to say that for every dozen words you say from the pulpit, there are at least a hundred different messages going out and twice that many ideas and opinions. I move gingerly; but my role as spiritual and moral leader is to move on anyway, no matter what minefields lie ahead. So let’s go.

Well, the ABCs: Unlike my normal situational sermons where you have to wander through the homiletical forest to find out what I am trying to say, I will outline this one as a traditional Presbyterian sermon. I have assigned a key word to each of the three sections which begin with an A, B, and C. Here we go.

First, “A.” I begin with the breathtaking news that - Marriage is Awesome. That’s a good word, I think, but others would do: “Breathtaking, astounding, overwhelming, and humbling” are all approved synonyms, according to Webster. “Awesome” itself is defined as “a wondering reverence tinged with fear and inspired by the sublime.” Pick whichever word you like. In our Scripture from Ephesians, St. Paul called marriage “a mystery,” and a “profound mystery” at that. “Inscrutable, vague ambiguous and obscure” are synonyms for that word and they are all good words too. Whatever else you to call the state of Holy Matrimony, it is at least awesome.

Thinks about it; two entirely different people, often still young, with virtually no formal training, with two sets of assumptions and expectations, trained to respond to events and challenges in individual ways, all of a sudden commit themselves to one another for the rest of their lives. Paul says that a man shall leave his father and mother, the woman too, and cling unto his wife. In the developing process, they are told to leave their parents and former attachments behind and cleave to each other to become one flesh, as the Bible says.

Hush for a moment and consider how awesome that is. Dr. W. Hugh Missildine wrote a wonderful book 50 years ago called, Your Inner Child of the Past, where he says that at least four people are present in every marriage: the two participants, along with their two inner children of the past. The quartet is there in body, mind and soul - with peculiar histories, assumptions and expectations of what marriage will bring. And of course, families never go away. It's a wonder that anybody makes it to fifty days, let alone fifty years.

The two are supposed to become one, the Bible says; but my father used to say, "The real problem is "Which one will they be?" Which one will they be? That is the question. How will they manage to meld and mold, even hammer their past and futures together into a single unit in such a way that the integrity of each will not be violated; and that both, as they grow and change through the coming days and decades, will see that the needs of each and both will be reasonably met and fashioned into a united front where two people become one people who are still two people. Awesome!

In our marriage vows we take each other as we are, not as one intends the other to become. "For richer or poorer, for better for worse, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until death do us part." That is awesome, too. In marriage you agree to care for and encourage the other, not just when it is convenient and comfortable, but all the time. You promise to be patient and kind. You promise to be true, forsaking all others, not some of the time, but all the time, through all the years. You promise to be the President of your partner's fan club. Even when the other is ill or lost or confused, you don't give up.

Many within the sound of my voice could testify as to how massive that obligation can become. Marriage requires a lot sometimes. I had a woman tell me in the first years of my ministry after I said that she must have been relieved that her ailing husband finally passed away, she replied, "Oh yes I guess, but I would bring him back in a minute and care for him all over again." I didn't understand how she could say that then, but I do now. Love is awesome and so is marriage.

I often enjoy listening to opera on National Public Radio. During the intermission of Porgy and Bess one day, several authorities got to discussing how marriage is treated in Opera. The moderator asked: "Do any of you know an opera where happy marriage is celebrated?" Most of the time, as you know, it isn't. Oh my goodness, they hemmed and hawed around. One of them quipped that the parents of Hansel and Gretel were probably happy. Then someone remembered that "Falstaff" oddly is of a happy marriage. Another ventured "Fidelio". But they were stuck. You have to go a long way to find a good marriage in music and sometimes an even longer way to find one around you. Country music is mostly about heart aches and broken lives, too.

Peggy and I, in our gratitude and even wonderment, sometimes talk over which couples we have known over the years who have happy marriages. We are normally quite generous in our assessments. I guess we are hoping they would say the same about us. But there are not too many; most seem to be a compromise.

Paul calls it a mystery. In his time and place he advised that "Wives should be submissive to their husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church." (Ephesians 5: 21-22) That is a stranger mystery and it puts a particular kind of stress on "awesome." Some husbands adore the instruction. They love being head of the home. Peggy and I

over the years have concluded that it does not mean what it seems to say, not literally. We think it indicates that there has to be someone in charge: a division of labor mutually agreed on the issues where the one should be subject to the other. Long ago we agreed that Peggy would be in charge of some things, and that I would be in charge of some others. “Stay off of my turf” was often sallied about in our household in those early years, “Hey, I’m in charge of that!” It helps to distribute decision making; to find out which one is best at what intersection and surrender responsibility there.

For example, early on, I was the Biblical man in charge, so among other things, I handled our finances. That is often a touchy area. In typically male bravado, I insisted that my way was the chosen way - until we got into all sorts of trouble. I still refuse to balance a check book, why, because I can always remember what is in the account. But I couldn’t: my checks kept bouncing, even one to my father-in-law, which was especially humiliating at the time. He thought I was a bit of a jerk anyway, and I proved it to him. So one day, humbly, I asked Peg if she would be in charge of our money, and we have lived happily ever after. And so it went.

In these latter years, frankly, I have trouble trying to remember what the areas are where I am still in charge. I know I am responsible for our aging dog, Egg Nogg. Most of the time I am in charge of taking out the rubbish. And of course I am in charge of writing sermons. Oh dear, how the mighty are fallen. For one thing marriage is awesome.

Second, “B”, marriage is beautiful! I know that will sound strange to those of you who have suffered in marriage, but I have always felt that to be loved by someone you love cuts pretty close to what it is all about. When someone knows you totally, and loves you anyway, it mirrors the forgiving love which God has for each and all of his children. I know it breaks down and it can surely break your heart, but when you look at how awesome it all is, it is a wonder that so many succeed in making marriage work. The Lord knows everything about you, what you think of when you are alone, every fault you ever had, every lie you ever told, every time you compromised, every time you ever cheated on anyone or any thing, and when you ask him to, he still accepts you in Christ for what you are.

And he loves you anyway, not because you are worth it, but because you are you and because you belong to him. You are a child of God. The father’s love is unbounded and endless. When we first were made as creatures back in Genesis, it says God breathed the breath of his life into us. And when we surrender ourselves back to him in Jesus Christ, he breathes the new breath of his son into us and we belong to him. That is beautiful.

Love is patient and kind, the Bible says. The world can be so unkind and it surely is impatient. I do not need to remind any of you here that if you do not measure up to what others want of you, in school or work or play or friendships, they tend to close the book and you are gone. I do not need to remind you here in worship of how often the world can disappoint you. It even happens in churches. But, if you have a refuge in your home, if you have someone there you can turn to who loves you more than you love yourself, someone who holds your happiness most gently in the heart: in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness of the body, mind or soul, you can survive what goes on outside. And if you can’t or won’t accept what is offered; if you get absorbed in other

callings and in what other say and make you do, I remind you of the famous words of William Morrison who wrote, "If you cannot live on love, you should die in a ditch!"

It might be getting too heavy, so let me shed a little lightness: years ago and far away I casually asked a young married woman walking down the hall how she was doing. She said "Fine." Something told me that she wasn't. So I asked, "Are you sure?" "No I'm not," she blurted out "I wish I could get a divorce." Wow, I was shocked. They seemed so happy together when they were at church functions. I mentioned that she had promised to marry him for life. She said, "Yeah, but he hasn't shown any signs of life for 11 years." Oh dear.

It reminded me of the old story of the young woman who through her growing up years, as many used to, dreamed of the day when her Prince Charming would come to take her away on a great white horse. When she decided on her husband-to-be, her parents tried to warn her that the boy seemed a little different, to say the least. He was more like a frog than a Prince Charming, but she married him anyway. "I can turn him into a Prince," she was dreaming, "just like they do in the fairy tales." You kiss the frog and he turns into a prince. But then she added one day, "The problem is that I have been kissing him for fourteen years and he is still a frog!"

Much of what St. Paul writes, and the same is true of much of what Jesus said in the Gospels about marriage, goes back to the book of Genesis and the story of creation. It might seem difficult to adapt the words of that ancient story into our modern life verbatim, but the meaning behind the stories is what is precious. Take it with this spin:

In the beginning in the Garden, there was one man, Adam - which means "Man" in Hebrew. And according to the first story of creation, there are two in Genesis by the way, God gave him everything. Adam owned it all. Bill Gates has 40 Billion dollars I guess, by latest count, but Adam owned the whole shebang. He was the proprietor of the whole earth. "Everything in it," all the gold and jewels and lumber and food were his. All the birds and cattle and fish and farms and flowers, even the creeping little things belonged to him. And he got to name them all: "This is an egret, here is a giraffe, there is a hippopotamus, and that will be a llama." It does not say where he got the names or how he could remember which was which.

But with all of that, it wasn't long before Adam realized that he still was not happy: something was missing from in his life. Puzzled, he spoke to God one day, I am paraphrasing, and he told the Creator that he was uncomfortable having all those things for himself. There is an emptiness inside and I don't know how to fill it up. (Have you ever felt that way?) And glory be, when Adam told him, God understood. The Creator knew what was missing.

He told Adam to go to sleep and he would solve the problem. Adam did, and while he slept, it says, God took one of his ribs and made a woman. When he woke up, there she was. The moment he saw her, his life was forever changed. It was beautiful. She was beautiful and lovely and he was lonely no more. His ennui was over. "O thank you, Dear God, for this beautiful moment. I now have everything I need." And he called her Eve. Men, I don't know what nicknames you have for your wife, but for a change you might try "Eve," - God's gift to Adam.

Some narrow-minded commentators say that the story means that God has that same exact plan for every man and woman, i.e., only in the marriage of a man and a woman can a person be fulfilled

and made whole. I don't think so. The point of the story has to do with Adam and Eve. The ensuing teaching of the Bible allows for other arrangements where life can be fulfilled completely without the bond of a man and his wife. If no where else, look at Jesus Christ who was a life long bachelor. He did not need to be married to fulfill God's purpose for his life. I could take it further, but I think you have the point.

But back to marriage. St. Paul writes, "Husbands, love you wife, as you love yourself." It is a total, self-giving, sacrificing love. You might be a big shot out in the world and widely heralded and appreciated where you work or play. But that is worth nothing at all compared to the love of a man for his wife and a wife for her husband. When it happens, it is Beautiful! Would that it did more often.

Awesome, beautiful, finally now, "C" - what would your "C" be? I pondered calling it "Christ-like," as you probably guessed I would. And, I believe in that conclusion. When we were in the Holy Land, we had the privilege of visiting Cana of Galilee up near Nazareth where Jesus performed his first miracle of turning the water into wine at a family wedding. Cana isn't much these days - just a little old broken down town where not much happens and almost no one there knows about the famous wedding. There is an old church at the top of the hill, where the miracle took place, they say. And, of course, there is a small tourist shop to buy souvenirs - like they sell Cana wine for two dollars a bottle.

But I wandered into the little sanctuary. Big clay jugs stood at the entrance way as reminders of the miracle. I sat down to say a little prayer. Above the altar, unusual for a church chancel, is an oversized painting of the wedding at Cana. The guests are gathered around a table at the reception. The wine is clearly in view. At first I couldn't figure out where the bride and groom were. (They are over in the rear on the far right, if you ever go to see them.) That didn't seem right; the reason we go to weddings is to see the couple and wish them well and pray for them. But the couple was hardly visible.

And, in the center front of the table was Jesus Christ, presiding over the festivities. It didn't take long to figure out what the artist was trying to say. Jesus Christ must be in the center of every Christian marriage, every home, and every life. If you keep the Lord in the center of all you are and do, he will continually bless all you are and long to be together. If one or the other or both forgets that central power, the marriage will drift to the rear and fade out of view and you will forever struggle on your own. If one decides to turn away from that, and not the other, it is pitiful. You cannot fly an airplane on one wing, and you can not keep up a marriage with one partner. But if both keep centered on Jesus Christ, no matter what else happens, that marriage and home will be blessed. Believe it. I was going to end by saying that my "C" is for Christ-like, and I have.

But along with that "C," I chose a verb; "C" is for commitment. For everything you get in life you have to give up something else. There is too much baggage in your memories and former lives to carry it all into the new relationship. I have found that the secret to maturity is knowing what to leave behind and what to carry with you.

The central illusion regarding marriage is that it will take care of itself once you decide to enter its domain. It won't. It is like everything else you need and want as you go through the daily rounds. To have it in abundance, you have to be committed to it. You have to spend time on it, doing a renewal of vows ceremony each and every year, maybe each and every month. Dozens of times couples have said to me that I have spent more time and energy on their marriage in the previous few weeks than they had in all their years together.

Thinking that your marriage will take care of itself is equivalent to thinking that your body will take care of itself. Look at me. I once was a dashing young read head, tall and strong and thin. I just assumed that as I grew older things would take care of themselves - because they were supposed to. I never planned to move into a size XXLarge. I drifted into it. Without commitment to your body, it will drift on and on and on, until some doctor says you have to lose that weight or you will be traveling on.

Thinking that your marriage can make it on its own is also like saying that your children will turn out right just because you think they should. Or that your job will be successful because you turn up at work most mornings. Or that you can become a golfer of note just by picking up a club. Or that you can learn to play the French horn just by blowing into it.

It doesn't work that way. Marriage requires work and re-adjustment, give-and-take and kindness and honesty and commitment. It requires constant attention: speak to each other often about where you are and how you are changing. It will not thrive in silence. Unless both make it a priority and feed its life with time and energy and patience and prayer, it will rest quietly on the shelf. If need be, seek all the help you can find to make it work.

And let me add that Churches fail their purpose when they fail to offer competent, sensitive, and Biblical marriage training. We fail here at Sharon Church, as do most other congregations. It cannot be a sometime thing. Churches need to commit themselves to Christian education all along the way - to make it a number one priority. And Christian marriage, home and family should be on the top of every planning session of our Christian education programs.

Well, it is time to go. Let's give it back to St. Paul again before we do. He writes in the same passage in Ephesians that the love we share in marriage should be akin to the love which Christ had for his church, total self-giving, self-denying love. What is awesome and beautiful requires that depth of commitment. Sometimes one or the other has a special need. Sometimes the other does not want to share what is troubling them. We all get lost sometimes and the other has to go gently and look for the other. Sometimes one slows down and the other has to wait for him or her to catch up. Sometimes things go wrong. Sometimes the other seems angry, but they really are just afraid. The opposite of love is not hate, it is fear.

Good communication is the answer to most of the problems that we face. Talk to each other. Tell the other what is wrong with you, not what you think is wrong with them. Everybody is stupid once in a while. And stupid is as stupid does. But you need not let stupidity rule your days together; let kindness rule, learn to receive the forgiving love Christ had for his church and which he still has for you and me.

Christ does not love us because we are worth it. We aren't, not most of the time. He does not love you on the condition that you unerringly perform your deeds and say your perfect words as he wants you to. He knows that you can step out of line. He understands. He loves you unconditionally, knowing everything about you. Forgiving you becomes part and parcel of his love. Laying down his life is the way he loves, giving all, and more, for each of us.

If you have someone who loves you (or if you did, or if you one day will) you are the luckiest person in the world. That is Awesome, Beautiful, Christ-like and Committed - for now and forever more. Amen.