

TILL DEATH OR DIVORCE DO US PART

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

July 30, 2017

Scripture: Matthew 19:3-12; John 2:1-11

There is a song in the play “Hamilton” entitled, “Best of Wives and Best of Women.” It is, according to historian and Hamilton scholar Joanne Freeman, of Yale University, Alexander Hamilton’s own words written to his wife Eliza in a letter, part of which is read in the play. But if you have not seen Hamilton, the play, you should not mistake this endearing reference as indicative of all there is to know about their relationship.

What do any of us know of one another’s relationship, our way of being married, our way of being single and imagining what marriage would be for us. Kanye and Kim, Napoleon and Josephine, George and Amal, or for that matter, Donald and Melania. We none of us know what goes on behind closed doors, even if every now and then we see a glimpse of the true state of affairs, so to speak.

Alexander Hamilton married Eliza Schuyler but he also was at least attracted and flirtatious toward Eliza’s sister Angelica, who controls her passion for the sake of her family.

Later in the play and in reality, while Eliza is out of the city, Hamilton is besieged by a woman, Maria Reynolds who claims that she is being abused by her husband. Hamilton takes her in and has an ongoing affair with her, one for which he will pay hush money to Maria Reynold’s husband, and eventually will confess to that in print. What would MSNBC do with that today?

Throughout these ups and downs in their marriage, Hamilton nevertheless dearly loves Eliza, even though he has disappointed her. It is not an easy love. It is not an easy marriage. And when Eliza discovers the entanglement with Maria, she burns all of her husband’s letters to her in anger; a loss to both her, and to history.

Together Alexander and Eliza have a son, Philip. And in the play the song “Best of Wives and Best of Women” is the last communication that Hamilton has with his beloved Eliza before he goes off to meet Aaron Burr that fateful day of the duel that took his life.

Now if that sounds a bit complicated, maybe it’s because marriage itself is complicated. Marriage and the commitments of marriage are the most complex of all human relationships, defined by promises, shaped by endurance, formed in forgiveness, and constantly in need of attention and renewal. I once had a friend in the ministry who told me that she had made the conscious decision to renew her commitment to be married five times to the man she had married. Not because he was a philanderer, or unfaithful, but because marriage is difficult and it needs tending and feeding and cannot be taken for granted.

One of the things that I most enjoy as a pastor is officiating at a wedding. I like the ceremony of it, the traditions, the familiar words, the importance of the moment, the contrasting intimacy of the couple’s words to each other in the context of a public ritual. And it is important that there are witnesses present, something that symbolizes the social contract of an intimate and private commitment.

Those words that the couple say. “I will,” “I do.” They are among the few performative words still left in our language. To say “I do” is to establish the very promise that you make. Your word is now your bond, and what you have promised is what now is. By *saying* that you will take this other person, you *do* take and receive them. And it will be harder than you can imagine to keep those promises, because life will throw everything it can at you.

A friend once said that 35 years ago he said two words, “I do,” and he had spent the next 35 years contemplating their meaning.

For me, as a minister, to see that couple heading down the aisle, away from me, through the midst of the congregation that has affirmed them and witnessed their promises, is always a moving experience.

Bill cranks up the organ in some joyful recessional, sometimes Mendelssohn, sometimes something else, but I watch that couple moving down the aisle, exuberant, joyful, not quite sure what has just hit them, but almost skipping down the aisle they are so happy, and... clueless.

Who knows what life will hold for them? What joys and sorrows await them? What laughter, what tears, what companionship, what happiness... or, like Alexander and Eliza, what heartbreak and hurt, what broken promises and strains on forgiveness, what sadness at the end, whatever the end may be....

That's the mystery that I behold as I see a couple heading away from me, down that aisle, heading into fair weather and strong storms and prevailing winds that will meet them as they work out what marriage will be for them, no two exactly alike.

Maybe it's because marriage is so complicated that that is why St. Paul advised against it. We can forgive him his negative advice because he was not offering pastoral care but rather eschatological warning. His views on marriage were premised on the idea that time was short and the Second Coming of Christ was near. There was too little time to work on the complexity of human and intimate relationships and be ready for the end times that were so imminent from his perspective.

Nevertheless, he allowed for marriage in a rather unenthusiastic way by writing, "...it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion."¹ Which is hardly an endorsement of either passion or marriage!

But it is not, nor has it ever been the only point of contention that we have had with Paul's theology and advice on matters that relate to men and women and how they should act... in church and in the bonds of marriage elsewhere.

And in the spirit of full disclosure let me say that I wanted to speak today about marriage for several reasons. First, because I didn't want to talk about Russia, or Anthony Scaramucci's foul mouth, or Rience Priebus, or the Korean's ICBM, or about the recklessness and ill-informed tweet banning transgendered persons from military service. Nor did I want to spend time on the despicable *amicus* brief of the Justice Department declaring that the ban on discrimination against gay persons was not prohibited by the Civil Rights Act. I didn't want to talk about the now terminus health care bill no longer before congress.

There are just so many areas where the nation is derailing itself, that I do not want to fall into the trap of preaching politics instead of the gospel. Because therein, I think, lies quicksand.

Not that I, or the gospel have nothing to say about Caesar, but there are some weeks when the issues are too plentiful and the better part of wisdom is to discuss something more enduring than today's headline, which will likely prove to be only half as inflammatory as tomorrow's.

We are dealing with insanity in the public sphere, and one of the first things you learn in counseling is that if you are feeling confused and crazy as you listen to the person whom you are trying to understand, then it is a sure sign that the person you are trying to understand is confused and crazy, not you.

If nothing else the craziness and frenzy of our public life today is not helping the stability of any of our enduring relationships as in marriage, so I am trying to discipline myself to remain focused on issues that offer firm ground on which to stand, gospel ground.

And marriage, affects all of us, whether we are married or not, once or more times married, wish to be married, have never been married, gay or straight married. Most of our parents were married, if we ourselves were not, so marriage touches all of our lives and self-understanding, whether we are participants or onlookers.

Back to marriage, an institution, incidentally, that has declined in numbers since the financial fallout of 2008.

Recently I read an article written by Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Seminary. It was an article in the Christian Century magazine about marriage. And in it he began by saying that like most clergy he does not care so much for doing weddings as he does doing the counseling before the wedding.

But let me hasten to say that in that regard we differ, because I like both.

Craig Barnes, having acknowledged that it's the counseling that he likes even more than the wedding ceremony then remembers a couple, Sue and Mike, whom he counseled for marriage many years ago. At what he thought would be the last counseling session before the wedding, a work session to finalize the vows and words of the service, the groom to be, Mike, started the conversation by saying, "Before we get into this I have to say that I'm really scared."²

Now that he had everyone's attention, especially Sue's, he added, "Oh, I'm not afraid of marrying you. I'm terrified of losing you."

Mike looked back at Craig and said, "Several years ago my mother died, and it almost killed me." Turning to Sue he continued, "What if something happens to you? I can't imagine how I would survive."

Craig says that Mike looked at him with big puppy dog eyes and he knew what Mike probably wanted him to say to his fear, "Oh Mike don't worry about that. You're both young and there are so many wonderful years ahead for both of you." But Craig said he had buried too many young people to say that.

Now at this point in the story as I read Craig's account, I was wondering if he was quoting me and not crediting me, or whether he went to the same counselor I did who told him the same thing, or whether this is just an insight that is in the public domain and belongs to everyone, but Craig Barnes said as compassionately as he could, "Mike, in my experience 100% of marriages come to an end, and you'll never beat those odds.

Mike was stunned, of course, but rallied to say, "What?"

Barnes answered,

"Well your marriage will end in either death or divorce. There are no alternatives... Let's say you have a fabulous marriage that lasts as long as we can imagine. How about 60 years? Or 70? There are few of those, but let's assume you have 70 years, and that each of those years is an experience in deeper intimacy. Still, one of you is eventually going to have to lay the other into the arms of God. That day will tear you apart."

Speaking for myself, I can say that the young couples that I marry often assume that it's easier for their parents or some older couple after all those years together to let your spouse go. But just the opposite is true. For one thing, death always hurts terribly whether it comes to the newly married or to the longtime married.

I once participated in a funeral in which the groom was killed on the couple's honeymoon. They had gone off to a ski resort following a winter wedding and the first day of their honeymoon trip, he had an accident, plowed into a tree, suffered a brain injury and died. The same friends who had gathered a week before for the wedding, came again to the church days later for the funeral.

The truth of the matter is the better the marriage, the harder it is at the end, regardless of the years. It's not the quantity, but the quality of the time that matters, though length of years can be a particular blessing. For those who are together for a very long time the survivor has no idea what the meaning of that word is when *survival* has always included the one in the casket or the urn.

Paul Monette and Roger Horowitz were together 14 years the last two of which were cut short by the AIDS crisis. And what no court could accomplish in those days of the late Eighties, the marrying of two souls struggling through that time side by side accomplished in the soul what was forbidden by the law.

Monette writes in his memoir, **Borrowed Time**, what I have always felt was the most eloquent of remembrances to emerge from that battlefield of a time in the late 80's strewn with the sunken bodies of so many brave soldiers.

It was late in the disease for Roger. Amoebiasis and cryptosporidium had taken their toll and Roger's eyes were blinded by the disease.

Paul Monette describes arriving home after running some errands one day and announcing his arrival so as not to startle Roger. He writes,

One afternoon, I walked in calling "Here I am," as usual. I realize now that I would announce myself this way as a counter to his blindness, but it's still the phrase I speak when I visit the grave, or sometimes when I walk into the empty house. As soon as he heard my greeting he smiled and declared with a mixture of astonishment and tenderness, "But we're the same person. When did that happen?... I agreed up and down right away, yet I've brooded on it longer than almost anything he ever said. I think the reason for the "But" is that this was his answer to the darkness that told him he would die. But how could he die and leave me? How was it even physically possible to separate us now, with the two of us so interchangeably one?"³

Marriage, when it's good, if you work at it, if you sacrifice for it, if you lose yourself in it makes you one with the other at some inexplicable point that you cannot exactly remember. And if and when that happens, and it doesn't always happen, but if it happens, then there is no way that losing part of you by losing him or her, is even possible. Death may end the physical presence of the other, but it does not end the loving which even death cannot end. We are never far from those we love when we are close to God, who gave them to us in the first place and breathed into them and into us the very same breath of life.

Why would you go through the costly emotional loss of marriage you might ask. "Till death us do part," we say in the vows. And the truth is that even death does not end the love... if you are lucky.

Craig Barnes counseling young Mike in the last session before the wedding advised the young lover,

"...the best possible scenario for your marriage [is] to share a love so incredible and so long with Sue that it almost kills you to give her up at the end.

...That way every morning when you find her next to you, you can rejoice in the temporary gift you can still enjoy.

What Barnes meant was that Mike should accept that it is better to have your heart broken out of love for the other person, than it is not to have had the love at all.

Fortunately, Mike decided that the better part of wisdom was to love and lose Sue someday, better to love her completely today, than not to love her at all and miss whatever would lie ahead, for however long it might be.

Craig Barnes adds a codicil on the story of Mike and Sue. About twenty years had passed and over the years Barnes and Sue and Mike had been through a couple of moves, and they lost track of one another, though Barnes had often preached and told the story of Mike and Sue in various pulpits to illustrate the risk of loving. After he had spoken one Sunday as a guest preacher at a church, he received an email from someone who knew the couple he was describing.

The email said that unfortunately Mike had died last November of a heart attack at the age of 50. So it was Sue who was left behind.

Barnes wrote a condolence note to Sue and her response included a photograph of Mike wearing a "Best Dad Ever" t-shirt, surrounded by their two kids on Father's Day.

It is one of the great joys of a minister's life to be able to stand with the couples that I marry, straight and gay, and pray for and bless their commitment to each other before God and their families and friends.

Not everyone is meant to marry, nor is given that gift, but given other gifts in life instead. May God bless them all.

And God bless all those who in good faith marry but cannot make it all the way home, even though they have tried. And God bless those who have tried, and made it all the way home together.

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¹ I Cor 7:9

² This "Faith Matters" column entitled "The Temporary Gift of Marriage," appeared in the June 21, 2017 edition of *The Christian Century*, p 31. I move in and out of Barnes' account throughout what follows.

³ Paul Monette, *Borrowed Time: An AIDS Memoir*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: San Diego, 1988. 314-315.