



Christian Education

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From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
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Title: Marriage: Rules, Exceptions, Compassion
Comment: On Marriage in the Modern World; the Christian role of marriage and the view of the Anglican Church; Discussion of Hebrew, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox traditions.
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One of the themes running through the Scripture readings today is marriage. Now what, you will ask, does Fr. Strand know about that? What can a life-long bachelor tell a congregation of mostly married folk about an institution in which he has no immediate experience? [I could be cynical and respond that you married people have no idea what it's like being a 52 year-old single man, but I won't.] I have been around long enough to see how marriages work. I have prepared enough couples for marriage to see what is often ignored in wedding planning. And I have had to help pick up the pieces from all too many marriages that have ended not to have learned something along the way. Being the product of a marriage that ended in divorce also gives me the right to speak about what I have learned about when things go wrong. I also have the right to speak about what Scripture says; that's my job.

In most cases, the Bible speaks of marriage as a given, a part of the created order that everyone accepts as necessary for the propagation of the human race. Today's first reading, for example, taken from one of the two versions of Creation that we find in the book of Genesis, suggests not only that human beings were made before any other animal, but that originally there was just one version of the product, the male one, who eventually got so lonely that God decided to subdivide it and make a female version, too. This is the origin of the famous image of "Adam's rib." That, explains the story, is why we have marriage: the two versions of humanity somehow wanting to get together again. It's an interesting concept, but not as satisfactory as the other version of Creation in Genesis in which man and woman are created simultaneously as the crown of an already rich and varied world.

For most of the Old Testament, marriage is seen as a part of the fabric of Hebrew society. God warns about the sin of adultery and lets folks get stoned to death for it,

but He seems to be happy with, or at least resigned to, polygamy: men having more than one wife (and never the other way around.) This can lead to complications for us today if we try to live according to all of the Bible's teachings. I had one episode in my career when a parishioner insisted quite seriously that if King Solomon could have more than one wife, he should too. His current wife was *not* as happy with his biblical interpretation!

The challenge of living according to the Bible's teaching is found in today's Gospel reading, too. Here Christ is approached by some of his least-favorite people, the Pharisees, who are once more trying to catch him up in the fine points of Jewish law.

The question they put to him is not so much about marriage, but about Jewish *divorce law*. According to this, a man could divorce his wife by renouncing his rights over her- rights which treated her as little more than a piece of property. In her defense, this repudiation (as it was called) *did* allow the woman to remarry, but it was still a man's world in which he was the one to instigate the process. Unless he did, the woman could not remarry without being guilty of adultery.

Jesus' response to this legal nicety is to put the man and the woman on an equal basis, but also to make the marriage bond absolute. He challenges the Jewish law by saying that remarriage on the part of *either* party is adultery, and the use of the fine points of Jewish Law to get out of life-long commitment is wrong.

This is one of Jesus' revolutionary sayings that get little press today. Why? Because marriage, Christian or otherwise, is now an endangered institution. Two out of three marriages now end in divorce in most Western countries. It has become a matter of supposed basic human freedom to be able to get out of a commitment that no longer suits us, whether the vows to be faithful and monogamous were taken in front of a judge or God Himself. And lest you think I am being insensitive to the religious fidelity of this country, let me remind you that separation and annulment perform virtually the same role in the Philippines, it just takes longer and costs more. If marriage doesn't seem to work, for any reason at all, there are escape clauses. Even the Church has them.

A thousand years ago, the Eastern Orthodox half of the Church ruled that some marriages could be a mistake and allowed those who divorced legally to remarry up to two more times in church. The Western, Catholic tradition, never really liked that, although annulment was a handy tool (just look at Henry VIII!) Our Anglican tradition, at least in the United States, decided to allow for remarriage in the church

after divorce as a matter of pastoral care: allowing those who had learned from their mistakes to have another chance. The Church of England is now following suite. Of course, this can be abused, but the alternative is making loveless or even abusive marriages "God's Will," and that must never be said.

Most people consider this provision to be a very kind and loving thing. Many people have come into the Episcopal Church for the very reason that they found us a place where they could live a Christian married life after divorce and not suffer the agony of excommunication that other churches (who shall remain nameless) still officially impose. Indeed, we'd go out of business here at Trinity if we were to revert to the older, stricter observance of Church rules and teachings, and I'm not about to do so.

However, before we all heave a great sigh of relief about living in the enlightened world of contemporary Episcopalian Christianity, let us remember the price that is paid by such compassion. The provision for remarriage runs contrary to the explicit teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ Himself. The most solemn words of the marriage rite remain Christ's own: "Those whom God has joined together, let not man put asunder." The Church's provision for remarriage is the result of prayerfully, compassionately attempting to live out our Christian Faith in a fallen world, not a "new improved" one. The very fact that we can dare to make more than one supposedly lifetime vow of fidelity and exclusivity means that we trust in a God who is willing to forgive our blatant inability to live up to our best intentions. The teachings of Christ in regard to marriage are clearer than many others, and I would be a fool of a priest to teach you that the absolute standards of Christian marriage are no longer valid. Rather than feeling relieved that we have "gotten away with" something, we ought to be on our knees both asking God for forgiveness for our sins of unfaithfulness and also thanking Him for His superhuman compassion in allowing us a second chance to aim for the high standards that Christ presents.

An attitude of penitence, thankfulness and compassion might, if we let it, temper our righteous indignation when other, ideal biblical standards are challenged. The Church's attempts to reach out to and nurture other persons condemned by Scripture besides the divorced should be seen in this same context. If your rector doesn't ask couples living together outside of marriage, of whatever gender or orientation, to find some other, less biblical church to worship in, it's not that he doesn't believe that the Church's teachings about marriage and fidelity are true, but that they must be lived out personally in the lives of real-life human beings, not ideal

test cases. The compassion and encouragement that we show in bringing people to Christ so that they can discover the wisdom of God's way and God's laws for themselves is the compassion that we already receive from our Lord who knows just how far we still are from living them out in our own lives. If we throw people out of Church, are we so sure that we ourselves may stay?

My final words are ones of encouragement, not condemnation. Read the Scripture for the inspiration it provides for faithful relationships, both in friendship and in marriage. Pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to make your relationships true vessels of love, of concern and of the kind of committed relationship that God offers in His relationship with us. Don't tempt the God of mercy with the arrogance of feeling justified in breaking commitments and vows to each other, because He is also the God of justice. And perhaps most of all: let the love that fills your marriages and your friendships be shared with those around you as examples of God's compassionate, faithful love to a broken and sinful world.

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