

“In Celebration of Love and Marriage!”

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*1st Presbyterian Church
Wilkes-Barre, PA
Genesis 2:23-24; 24:62-67*

Always concerned to be of help to you here are things not to say on your Valentine's date...

1. I really don't like this restaurant that much, but I wanted to use this 2-for-1 coupon before it expired.
2. People say I remind them of Eddie Haskell.
3. I used to come here all the time with my ex.
4. I never said you NEED a nose job. I just said it wouldn't hurt to consider it.
5. Could you excuse me? My cat gets lonely if he doesn't hear my voice on the answering machine every hour.
6. I really feel that I've grown in the past few years. Used to be I wouldn't have given someone like you a second look.
7. And I won the trophy in the inter-fraternity belching contest.
8. I know you said you don't eat anything with a face. But a good butcher will cut that part off for you if you ask.
9. It's been tough, but I've come to accept that most people I date just won't be as smart as I am.

Now, Alert! Alert! For you husbands, boyfriends – today IS Valentine's Day! No, it's not a specifically Christian Holiday – but if you have forgotten, you may need prayer, and a monumental excuse! But, even though Valentine's Day is not a Christian Holiday it is no stretch to see the linkage between the “heart” of Valentine's Day, and Christian Love.

This morning taking the chance that all of us want to love, and be loved, I am going to spend some time celebrating a primal, ubiquitous, glorious institution – marriage! Whether you are married or not – on a deeply human/social level – you (all of us) should be grateful for and celebrate marriage! It should come as no surprise that in the earliest chapters of our Judeo/Christian epic – our story – marriage factors highly and significantly. In the second story of creation, which is actually the earlier one – God takes from the newly created man, a rib, and forms it into a woman. Recognized is that man and woman are of the same essence, we are intimately related. We are of the same flesh – and there is nothing wrong with that, in fact that's very good! Thus as the man and the woman mature, it is right, natural to leave one's family, embrace each other, and begin another family.

This uniting, this marrying is about happiness, but more than happiness also. It is about love in multiple manifestations. It is about friendship, support, economics, childcare, trust, commitment, and much, much more!

How many of you married folk remember the first time you met your beloved, your spouse, your mate? I first met Shawn in 1971, on the steps of a Bible School in Lyndora – just outside Butler, PA. Shortly after that I asked her out, and she without hesitation said, “No.” But I did not give up. It turns out she had heard some

things about me that were not true, at least some of them. Finally she agreed to go out with me. Something she has never regretted. (Ops, I am recording this.) She told me later that she first fell in love with my voice. Well, it is a start. This year we will celebrate our 38th wedding anniversary!

To be loved and to love!

Here's a love story. As I share it, think about how "it all began" with the one you love.

Sarah dies and Abraham and his son Isaac bury her in Canaan, the Promised Land. Recall Abraham had purchased this land. He had the deed for this area in Hebron. Abraham, now quite elderly is concerned about his son Isaac, and the promise of living in the Promised Land – for his posterity he wants his son to marry! He makes his servant promise to find Isaac an appropriate wife from among his own people. The servant, after some discussion agrees to go back to the home country, to find Isaac a wife. Off he goes, without Isaac – as instructed – to Mesopotamia.

Outside the city of Nahor he stops at a well. It's evening the time when the women go out to draw water. The servant sees this as an opportunity. He prays to God that the woman who agrees to offer him water and to water his camels – that she will be the one for Isaac. Lo and behold Rebekah arrives! She is carrying a water jar on her shoulders. She was very attractive! Rebekah gets the water needed for the night. The servant runs to her and requests some water. Without hesitation she offers the water. And then she waters his camels. Rebekah had to go back to get more water. The servant is convinced – "She is the one!" He asks about her family and gives her some jewelry (remember the ancient Hebrew saying. "every kiss begins with K") The servant goes to meet Dad and the rest of the family. The servant tells his story. Dad is elated! Mom and brother want Rebekah to delay for several day, but the servant wants to return to Abraham and Isaac. They decide to ask Rebekah (nice move). They ask, "Will you go with this man to marry Isaac?" She answers "I will go." Resolute. Determined.

Off they go.

On a particular evening Isaac was out in the field just thinking about life. He looks up and sees camels coming toward him. And from aloft of one of those camels Rebekah also looks up and sees Isaac. She jumps down, off the camel, asking the servant, "Who is that hunk?" (Hebrew translation.) "Why, that's Isaac," he replies. Their eyes meet. It is love at first sight. They are introduced. Their story is told. We read Rebekah became his wife and Isaac loved her! They were married! That was important!

Listen to Rev. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's letter written in 1943 while in a Nazi prison – soon to be executed. He wrote these words to a young couple who had just married:

"Marriage is more than your love for each other. It has a higher dignity and power, for it is God's holy ordinance, through which he wills to perpetuate the human race until the end of time. In your love you see only your two selves in the world, but in marriage you are a link in the chain of the generations, which God causes to come and to pass away to his glory and calls into his kingdom. In your love you see only the heaven of your own happiness, but in marriage you are placed at a post of responsibility towards the world and mankind. Your love is your own private possession, but marriage is more than something personal – it is a status, an office."

I hope that doesn't sound too strange in 2010 – it probably does – but it shouldn't! Marriage is more than, that other one always fulfilling my needs and desires! Marriage must be understood to have a higher dignity and power! Bonhoeffer knew, and wanted these young lovers to know that in marriage, you are linked to the chain of generations. In addition to your shared love and happiness you are responsible beyond yourselves. Marriage in all its personal splendor – Is a status. Would to God our culture would once again regain this insight!

Thank God for this intimate love between husband and wife! But it is more!

So much has changed over the last 40 years. Marriage has taken its lumps. Caitlin Flanagan's intelligent article in Time, last year titled, "Is There Hope for the American Marriage?" speaks to this grave concern.

"An increasingly fragile construct depending less and less on notions of sacrifice and obligation than on the ephemera of romance and happiness as defined by and for its adult principals, the intact, two-parent family remains our cultural ideal, but it exists under constant assault. It is buffeted by affairs and ennui, subject to the eternal American hope for greater happiness, for changing the hand you dealt yourself. Getting married for life, having children and raising them with your partner – this is still the way most Americans are conducting adult life, but the numbers who are moving in a different direction continue to rise. Most notably, the Centers for Disease control and Prevention reported in May that births to unmarried women have reached an astonishing 39.7%."

She goes on to share, "There is no other single force causing as much measurable hardship and human misery in this country as the collapse of marriage."

Marriage needs to be celebrated! It needs to be understood, lived, and correctly explained to our children – the future generations! Explained not only in words, but in action – in how we live in relationship and responsibility to husband and wife, to our family and to our community.

Flanagan concludes: The fundamental question we must ask ourselves at the beginning of the century is this: What is the purpose of marriage? Is it – given the game-changing realities of birth control, female equality and the fact that motherhood outside of marriage is no longer stigmatized – simply an institution that has the capacity to increase the pleasure of the adults who enter into it? If so, we might as well hold the wake now: there probably aren't many people whose idea of 24-hour-a-day good times consists of being yoked to the same romantic partner, through bouts of stomach flu and depression, financial setbacks and emotional upsets, until after many a long decade, one or the other eventually dies in harness.

Or is marriage an institution that still hews to its old intention and function – to raise the next generation, to protect and teach it, to instill in it the habits of conduct and character that will ensure the generation's own safe passage into adulthood? Think of it this way: the current generation of children, the one watching commitments between adults snap like dry twigs and observing parents who simply can't be bothered to marry each other and who hence drift in and out of their children's lives – that's the generation who will be taking care of us when we are old.

I understand relationships are complicated. I understand that the rules have changed in dating and in entering into a monogamous relationship. I understand that some marriages just don't work. But, we must, we need to celebrate Marriage! In our brokenness and frailty we need to love and to be loved. And we need to be mature and responsible.

On Valentine's Day be sure to say "I love you" to the one you love.

And may all of us realize the importance of marriage for wife, husband, children, relatives, community, civilization!

Celebrate marriage!

Amen.