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Preaching about **Love, Sex & Marriage**

Adam Hamilton

Randy and Susan were the fourth couple to step into my office in one day, amidst a flurry of phone calls, meetings with staff, and other pastoral care visits. Like the three couples that preceded them, Randy and Susan came to tell me they were considering a divorce.

They had been through months of counseling with a marriage therapist. But Susan still found it impossible to forgive Randy for the pain he had caused her. And Randy, on his side, still did not feel in love with his wife. Even their therapist was giving up. As new members of the church, they had decided to come see me, thinking that their recently discovered faith might provide one last ray of hope for their marriage.

What I offered Randy and Susan was a new understanding of what God intended marriage to be. I spoke to them about God's grace and the implications of their faith for how they were to live in relationship toward one another. And I shared with them stories of how Christ has enriched my own marriage over the last sixteen years. As Randy and Susan left my office that day, visibly encouraged, I was struck with the conviction that most people, especially those born after 1945, do not have a clear understanding of marriage, and the role their faith should play in it. It was this conviction that prompted me to preach a series of sermons entitled, "Biblical Perspectives on Love, Sex and Marriage."

This series of sermons had a dramatic impact on our church family. Worship attendance increased by over 300 per Sunday, with nearly two-thirds of these newcomers being previously unchurched. The sale of tapes of our sermons soared (over four thousand tapes of these sermons have been sold). Hundreds of couples reported that this series had a significant impact on their marriages. And for a majority of those in our church family, both single and married, this series represented a fundamental shift in their own understanding of what marriage is meant to be.

I have attempted to summarize here some of the highlights of this series, key resources that were helpful in its preparation, the topics addressed in these messages, and the scriptures which formed the basis of each sermon.

Congregational Survey

We chose to conduct a congregational survey to help identify the specific topics to be addressed in this series of sermons. The survey was distributed and filled in during the worship service one Sunday morning. It had one set of questions for youth, another set for singles, and another set for married couples. Key demographic data was solicited including age, gender, frequency of church attendance, and, if married, number of years married. A series of questions about relationships were included, as well as an invitation to suggest sermon topics. (*See sample questionnaires.*)

On the day we handed out the survey, we took time at two junctures in the worship service to ask members to fill in the data. This took about ten minutes in total. We knew that if we simply mailed the surveys out, we would receive a response rate of less than 10%, and that this 10% might not be a good cross section of the congregation. By filling the survey out during worship, we received responses from 1,400 of the 1,800 youth and adults in worship that day. These surveys were invaluable both as a means of providing specific issues to be addressed and as a means of creating interest among members of the congregation in this series of sermons. The survey gave the congregation ownership of the sermons. I was not preaching about problems I had read about in a book, but about the issues our own people had identified via their surveys.

As we read the surveys, the following issues surfaced again and again: Key differences between men and women, communication, finances, the problem of unmet needs and expectations, divorce and remarriage, sexuality, and concerns about how to make a marriage last. As part of our work with the surveys, we developed a list of attributes married men most appreciated in their spouse, or which single men rated as most important in a potential mate. We did the same thing with the women in our congregation. This information formed the basis of two of our nine sermons.

One of the most enjoyable parts of this series of sermons came when I personally interviewed couples in our church who had been married 40 years or more. I had several goals for these interviews. The first was to allow the older members of our congregation to see themselves as mentors for the large number of baby boomers and older "Xers" in our church family. The second goal was to help these persons remain connected with this series of sermons which otherwise might have seemed less relevant to persons who had successfully maneuvered through 40 years of marriage. The third was to gain insights from people who had actually managed to build successful marriages over the long haul. And finally, I hoped to lift these couples up as examples of the fact that it is possible for marriage to last a life time! You could have heard a pin drop the day I preached this sermon to our predominantly 30-something crowd!

This series of sermons represented a tremendous opportunity for evangelism, as both single and married members of our congregation invited their unchurched friends to worship with them. Their friends came because they were interested in the subject matter. But in the process, they learned of the difference that faith in Christ makes in our relationships and our day to day lives. This was also a tremendous opportunity for discipleship as we helped our own members understand the implications of the scriptures for how they live their lives. We challenged them to become deeply committed disciples each week. And finally, the series proved to be an opportunity for pastoral care for our congregants, as we addressed the issues and concerns they struggled with in their interpersonal relationships.

Sermon Titles and Scriptures

How Venus and Mars Got Their Start
Gen. 2:15, 18-25

The Ministry of Communication
Jam. 3:6-10

The Key to Financial Compatibility
Matt. 6:19-21, 25-27, 33

What Women Wish Men Knew About Women -- *I Cor. 13:4-7*

What Men Wish Women Knew About Men -- *Eph. 4:29, 5:2, 5:21-28*

Making Love Last a Lifetime
Col. 3:5-10, 12-17

Christianity and Divorce
Matt. 19:1-10

Christianity and Sex
I Cor. 6:18-20; I Thess. 4:1-8

The Ministry of Christian Marriage
Ps. 103:8-12; Josh. 24:14-15; Col. 3:12-17

Throughout this series we offered what would prove to be a major paradigm shift for many people regarding marriage. We submitted that Christian marriage *is a sacred calling from God*. It represents a *mission* one accepts for life. It is less about feelings than about actions. Being a husband or wife for another person is a holy office which fulfills a part of God's plan. The calling is to tend the other's spirit, to stand by their side, and to be a tangible reminder of the presence of God in their lives. Marriage is about being a *companion* and *helper*. If one is called to marry, then successfully fulfilling this calling becomes *part of your purpose in life*. Finally, we helped our listeners to understand that a deeply committed Christian faith has a huge impact on a marriage relationship. 🏡

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Sample Questionnaires

How's Your Love Life?

A survey of attitudes, experiences, joys and frustrations of those worshipping at the Church of the Resurrection aimed at giving shape to our pastor's new sermon series, "Biblical Perspectives on Love, Sex and Marriage."

Married Women...

This section of the survey is for currently
married women only.

Youth...

This section of the survey is for youth only.

Guys

What grade are you in?

Are your parents married or divorced?

Would you consider yourself a Christian?

Describe the ideal girlfriend.

If you get married someday, what will your wife be like?

Describe what you think the man's role should be in a happy marriage:

What are your thoughts on premarital sex?

If you get married, how will your marriage be different than your parents' marriage?

Girls

What grade are you in?

Are your parents married or divorced?

Would you consider yourself a Christian?

Describe the ideal boyfriend.

If you get married someday, what will your husband be like?

Describe what you think the woman's role should be in a happy marriage.

What are your thoughts on premarital sex?

If you get married, how will your marriage be different than your parents' marriage?

Personal Information: (please circle)

Age: 18-20 20's

30's 40's 50's

60's 70+

Is this your first marriage?

How many years have you been married?

How old were you when you married?

How frequently do you attend church?

weekly 2/month

occasionally seldom

How frequently does your spouse attend church?

weekly 2/month

occasionally seldom

1. How would you describe your marriage?

2. What three things do you value most about your spouse?

a.

b.

c.

3. What three things would you most like to change about your spouse?

a.

b.

c.

4. When do you feel closest to your spouse?

5. When do you feel distant from your spouse?

6. What are the three most frequent sources of marital conflict between you and your spouse?

a.

b.

c.

7. How frequently do you and your husband go out for a "date" without children?

8. What recreational activities would you most like to do on a "date" with your spouse?

9. How would you characterize your physical relationship with your spouse?

10. How much time do you spend daily in conversation with your spouse? Is it enough time?

11. Do you ever pray with your spouse? If so, when and how frequently?

12. In what ways do you integrate your Christian faith into your home and family life?

13. If you have ever been divorced, what were the primary causes of your divorce?

14. Topics I hope Adam might address in this series of sermons on Love, Sex and Marriage?

Non-Member

Weddings

We've all received the call, "My fiancé and I would like to get married in your church. We're not members, but we love your sanctuary. How much will it cost?" Many pastors and churches discourage non-members from holding weddings in their facilities, but at United Methodist Church of the Resurrection, we see each call as an opportunity to reach and minister to people who need Christ. Over 80% of all unchurched couples who are married in our church eventually become active members. And nearly every wedding results in a handful of new visitors in Sunday morning worship. What follows are a few of the keys that make this ministry work.

1. Friendliness. From the secretary who first speaks to the couple on the phone, to the business administrator who handles the scheduling, to the pastor's secretary who sets up premarital counseling, to the organist, wedding coordinator, custodian, and finally, the pastor, each of our staff treat the couple with warmth, friendliness, and Christian love.

2. Invitation. We tell folks up front that our goal is that they might consider becoming a part of this church family. We want to be there for them at this critical time in their lives, but we hope to see them become active in church. Before we schedule a wedding, we ask that they attend worship at least three times. We explain that this will give them an opportunity to check out the sanctuary and the pastor, and to see if this is the place they wish to be married. It also gets them into worship and begins to establish a habit in their life.

3. Pastoral Care. One of the goals of our three required premarital counseling sessions is that one of us becomes this couple's pastor. We tell them this right up front. We express this through our love for the couple, by taking an interest in their lives, and by praying for them at the end of each counseling session.

4. Witness. The last thing we talk about with a couple in their third session of premarital counseling is the role that a strong faith plays in creating a solid foundation for a great marriage. We talk about what it means to be a Christian, and share personal experiences of how our faith has impacted our own lives.

5. A Great Wedding. We try to make sure that, to the best of our ability, each wedding is outstanding. We personalize the wedding by sharing something of how the couple met and fell in love. We share a seven minute homily at each wedding, bearing witness to the concept of Christian marriage, and we try to lead such a terrific worship experience that those present will want to come back for more.

A word about fees for weddings: It is important to have appropriate fees for weddings, but there are two mistakes many churches make regarding the setting of fees. One is to charge too much, and thus to eliminate the possibility of performing many weddings for the unchurched. The other is to give a discount for church members, thus encouraging non-members to join so that they can get the discount. We've solved the latter problem by charging the same amount for members as for non-members. Then we tell everyone that any offerings they have given in the past year will count toward the sanctuary use fees. In this way nearly every member will avoid having to pay additional funds, while non-members will not be tempted to join just to save money.

-- Adam Hamilton