

Marriage That Works: Seeking Wisdom

Isaiah 60:1-9, Matthew 1:1-12 by Patty Friesen (Jan.7/18)

The other day, Patrick asked what I was working on and I said I was working on my sermon series on marriage. He said, “Why don’t you actually work on your marriage?” I told him, “Because it’s as good as it is going to get!”

Today’s scriptures remind us of new beginnings in the New Year and that we need the Holy Spirit to daily empower us and transform us into better marriage partners. We need Christ and his reconciling power of forgiveness as symbolized in communion. Marriage doesn’t have to be as good as it gets. It can always get better with God’s help for our own sake as marital partners, for the sake of those around us and as a reflection of God’s life-giving love in our lives.

Why do the deacons recommend three long weeks of sermons and Sunday School discussions on a winter study on marriage? Because it is the most important relationship of our lives and demands as much attention in its’ discipleship and discipline as any other act of faith and service. In fact, observing our parents’ marriage is where we first learn about intimate love between humans, where we learn about trust and forgiveness, where we learn the brutal realities of our strengths and weaknesses. Marriage is the most vulnerable thing to talk about and therefore the least talked about thing, but talk about it we must, for the sake of the success of the next generations.

Much of what I say applies to all kind of relationships with our parents, children, friends and co-workers, not just to people who are married but there are particular needs for two people who live together intensely and share a bank account and children that

requires specific theological and psychological reflection so that's where we are headed these next three weeks.

After meeting with couples that were getting married last fall, and struggling with whether I should require pre-marital counseling before I agree to marry them and becoming disillusioned with how much time I've spent in pre-marital only to have couples break up anyhow, has left me kind of jaded on the value of pre-marital counseling. We really need to talk about the realities of marriage and living together before anyone even announces an engagement, or sends out a Save the Date. We need pre-pre-marital counseling before anyone even goes on a date or even makes eyes at another person! Consider these next three weeks as pre-pre-marital counseling for a whole congregation. We are all ill equipped for this most important of relationships and yet we continue to walk down the aisle, generation after generation, committing ourselves to something we have no clue about. What is it that we hope for or believe marriage can be or do for us? And then what happens when reality doesn't meet our expectations?

I've titled this series Making Marriage Work: Fake It Until You Make It because marriage takes work and when it works with God's help, it's the most wonderful life-giving thing in the world. Our sermon next week is on sex and it's life-giving power within a loving committed relationship. I expect everyone to come back for that. Our third sermon is about when marriage doesn't work, what makes marriages go sideways and become soul depleting and irreconcilable and how can we divorce without killing anybody.

We will pair these sermons with Adult Ed discussions here in the sanctuary. Today we will interview two couples who have survived marriage for 50 years – the

experts, the masters at the art of marriage. They will all say they are not masters at it. But simply to have survived marriage 50 years is to have mastered it!

Marriage therapists Julie and John Gottman describe the marital masters versus the marital disasters. The Gottmans share that from all their years of observing and counseling couples that the ones who weather marriage the longest and happiest are those who have worked on their friendship. Not worked on their romance, and not even worked on the conflicts but worked on their friendship – the very thing that attracted them to each other in the first place. They are the ones who have learned to continue to look for and express the fondness and appreciation for their partner that they felt at the very beginning of the relationship. At the beginning it is easy to tell our dear friend that we like how they look or how they cook or whatever. The problem is that over time we forget to show and tell that fondness and appreciation. We will survive marriage if we can continue to find and express fondness and appreciation even if we have to fake it.

It's true. Research shows couples stay together who kiss when they get home even if they don't really mean it. It's the daily habits of showing affection that make us know we are loved. Patrick and I don't kiss every day. I know that is shocking but kissing isn't "someone's" "love language" but we both enjoy birds and birding is something we enjoy in our friendship so when we come in the door, we do the two-tone chickadee whistle that chickadees do to call their mates. I know it's sappy and but it always says, I'm glad you're home. We also whistle that chickadee call in the store when we're ready to go, which is so much healthier than eye rolling and complaining about our partner's slowness and indecisiveness in shopping. Actually it's better if we don't shop together. Anyhow moving on...

Daily habits of friendship also include saying thank-you for what our partners do – for taking out the garbage, for making the bed – even when it is their turn to do so and they shouldn't have to be thanked for it, even if we have to fake our thankfulness. It is the daily habit of scanning the marital landscape for ways of showing appreciation. When the Friendship base is good in the marriage, it can find its' way through the conflicts. Conflicts never change in a marriage. We can ask our long committed people but my guess is that 50 years later, we are still fighting over the same things we fought over in the first year. It's the core issues of power and sharing and independence that fuel the little things like taking out the garbage. While the conflicts do not change, we can learn to joke about them and take the heat and intensity out of them. Humour is the #1 key to surviving the decades long cycle of conflicts.

We've had two golden anniversaries this year – Jake and Louise in May and John and Deanna in August. Both had great parties – Jake and Louise at Shekinah and John and Deanna at the Radisson. No one wanted to renew their vows for some reason but I got to share a bit of these following reflections and poem at John and Deanna's party.

John and Deanna; when you got married on that hot and windy August 12, in Saskatoon, 50 years ago, you were young and good looking and you had no clue, like most young couples, where your paths would take you. You made your vows in good faith and blind hope, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health. You didn't know that life would take you to so many communities crisscrossing the valley from Saskatoon to Tisdale to Saskatoon, to east Osler to Osler, to west Osler, to and from Warman, and to Calgary and back to Saskatoon full circle; teaching and playing ball and contributing to your communities. You didn't know of the scary times in sickness and in health with your young children and Deanna. You didn't know what lay ahead of you but you walked down the church aisle all the same and promised to stick it out whatever came down your path, trusting God to help you in your journey.

It's that daily sticking it out, come what may, which gets you to 50 years before you know it as described in the poem The Longly-Wed Know by Leah Furnas.

The Longly-Wed Know
That it isn't about the Golden Anniversary at all,
But about all the unremarkable years
That Hallmark doesn't even make a card for.

It's about the second anniversary where they were surprised
To find they cared for each other more than last year.

And the 4th when both kids had chickenpox
And she threw her shoe at him for no real reason.

It's about the 11th and 12th and 13th years when
They discovered they could survive crisis.

And the 22nd anniversary when they looked
At each other across the empty nest, and found it good.

It's about the 37th year when she finally
Decided she could never change him.

And the 38th when he decided
A little change wasn't that bad

It's about the 46th anniversary when they both
Bought cards, and forgot to give them to each other

But most of all it's about the end of the 49th year
When they discovered you don't have to be old
To have your 50th anniversary!!!

Let us pray giving thanks for the gift of marriage and pray in preparation for communion. Gracious loving God who has given us the gift of intimacy and love and commitment to enrich our lives and the lives of those around us. It would have been nice if you could have made this gift a little easier but we pray for the wisdom and humility to be kind and understanding, to listen well and laugh and forgive well in order to grow in all our relationships. You have shown us the way in the gift of your own life and

forgiveness. Bless us in the celebration of your life and love as we take a bit of bread and juice and pray for your help. Amen.