

What is Marriage For?

by the Rev. Angela Herrera
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Well the title of this sermon is an impossible one. You just can't ask what marriage is for, without qualifying the question. What is marriage for...when? What is marriage for...where? And it's only half the picture if you ask what marriage is for without asking what it is *not* for. So let me start out by saying that marriage is NOT for... everyone.

One of the tricky things about preaching on this issue is the baggage around it. American society has long looked upon unmarried people with suspicion—especially if they have never been married and don't have a boyfriend or girlfriend and they aren't pulling their hair out about it. Society would like to think that married people are somehow more responsible; that they keep community and family going. In fact, *single* people tend to be much more involved in their communities. They are more likely to show up at political rallies or join a community organization, and more likely to be helpful to their extended families. 67% of men who have never been married offer routine help to their parents, while only 38% of married men, do.

84% of never-married women help their parents, compared to 68% of married ones. Even singles with children—single parents—are more likely than their married friends to contribute outside their immediate family.

Marriage has its costs for society. Married people also pay less in taxes, and get lots of benefits that unmarried people do not. Social security, family visitation rights in hospitals and prisons, veterans benefits, access to “family only” services like reduced rates to gyms or zoos, the right to make medical decisions and inherit property.

There are over 1000 rights and benefits just for married people. Those are 1000 of the one million reasons why we need marriage equality for same sex couples. It's so good to see big progress on that in the last election. And for the rest of this sermon, when I talk about “marriage,” that includes committed same-sex couples.

But, we'll always have our singles, too. In fact, they make up about half of the adult American population. So marriage is not for everyone, and, I'm sorry, but it is also not forever. While some singles are people who never have married and never will, others counted in that number are people who married and then divorced, and many who have been widowed—something that is pretty much inevitable for one person in a marriage that lasts. About one-sixth of all unmarried adults are 65 and older.

Many people marry more than once for these reasons, and while that used to be a complicated thing with lots of rules about who could divorce whom and who could remarry, it's much simpler these days... on the legal side.

As far as our hearts go, though, well, that will never be easy.

Marriage is not for everyone, it's not forever, and—you know this is true—it's not for wimps.

We make extravagant promises to each other when we marry. We enter into something that is going to rip our hearts out from time to time, as does anything that has to do with love. When the marriage equality movement picked up speed, one comedian said, “The gays want to get *married*? Haven't they suffered enough?” And a couple of months ago, someone I know who is

going through a tough time in her marriage said, “Who ever thought this marriage thing was a good idea? Why do we *do* that?” But we’ve been doing it a long time. Getting married. So long, that some people are attached to what they perceive as the tradition of it. We hear a lot of chatter in politics about “traditional marriage,” right? What is that?

It seems to be code for one man and one woman, probably in their late twenties, who date, fall in love, marry, buy a house, have kids, and grow old together. In its most sinister sense, traditional is also a code word for patriarchal, so we might imagine the wife in this scenario limiting herself to childrearing and domestic tasks, and submitting to her husband’s authority, at least outwardly. Who knows? On the side she could be working as a government spy and having a lesbian affair, but that’s not part of the stereotype.

The funny thing is, real marriages have always been much more complicated than that stereotype, and...in fact...that stereotype is anything but traditional.

Now, traditional is often also code for biblical. In the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, there is no word in the original Hebrew for “marriage,” specifically. The word translators write down as “wife,” is actually just a word for woman (“ishshah”). The New Testament is also ambiguous. So when it comes to figuring out tradition, we’re on shaky ground right from the beginning. But even if we ignore that and move on, we quickly find that marriage in the bible does not look very much like what we think of as traditional marriage today.

In the Biblical world, the unions we would think of as marriages were pre-arranged. There was no falling in love and dating beforehand. Instead, when a girl reached puberty, her father would “give” her to the man she was promised to. Often, the man was significantly older. Usually, money was exchanged.

Men could also collect wives through war (plundering a village and stealing a woman or two) and judging from stories in the bible about Abraham, Isaac, Solomon, David and others, polygamy was the norm, at least for men who could afford it.

Those are biblical traditions. Then there are some rules. According to the Bible, a man is obligated to keep his new wife even if she displeases him on the wedding night (Deuteronomy 22:13-21), and he is obligated to marry a woman he has raped (Deuteronomy 22:28-30), unless she is his slave, of course, in which case rape is considered normal. It makes you wonder whether advocates of “biblical family values” have ever actually *read* a Bible.

Even the scripture readings you often hear at weddings aren’t what they seem. Consider the classic reading from 1 Corinthians.

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Beautiful. But the apostle Paul isn’t speaking at a wedding here. He is writing a letter to a congregation in conflict. He wants them to stop fighting with each other. Paul actually encourages most people not to marry, saying that marriage should be reserved for those who either cannot stand to “make themselves eunuchs for Christ,” which I truly hope is just a metaphor for celibacy, or who were already promised in marriage before they found God.

And what did Jesus have to say?

First, let’s remember that when we talk about the books within the Bible, we are talking

about a collection of ancient scriptures that was put together in its current form about three hundred years after Jesus died, and wasn't made official until the 1500's.

There were many different scriptures to choose from. The ones that were rejected were labeled heretical and fell out of favor. Most of them have been lost to us. A few are still floating around. A treasure trove of rejected (or non-canonical) gospels were found in Nag Hammadi Egypt in the 1940's.

There were a lot of reasons certain texts were chosen and others weren't, and certain people were part of that decision making and others weren't. (Another sermon!) The result is that most Christians regard the canonized ones—the chosen ones—as the truest ones, and most people don't even know that other scriptures exist.

Now in the Bible's scriptures, Jesus doesn't have a lot to say about marriage. He certainly never mentions gay marriage, or even gay people. At all. Let's get that up front.

He does condemn divorce. He's clear on that. It's funny because there are many more heterosexual divorces than same sex marriages, and yet divorce is not a big focus in our public debate. Hmm.

Jesus's advice is not to get married in the first place. In the Bible, he is portrayed as unmarried and celibate. That's why Catholic priests are unmarried and celibate.

And, that's why it was such a shocker when Harvard professor Karen King presented to the world a newly discovered fragment of an ancient scripture in which Jesus says the words, "My wife."¹

King announced the finding at a conference in Rome. The fact that she dropped this bombshell of an announcement so close to the Vatican is a coincidence, she says. The conference happened to be there. Just lucky, I guess.

Karen King was one of my professors at Harvard. You may have heard me say before that if the Bible says don't do something—like when Paul says women shouldn't speak in church—it's a pretty good indication that that's exactly what people were doing. (Otherwise, why bother to tell them not to?). I learned that in Karen King's class.

King looks for the biases that played a role in which scriptures became part of the Bible, and which ones are called heretical. She and other scholars have noticed that some of the rejected texts have a pretty different take on women. Especially Mary Magdalene.

Mary, who is the first one to discover Jesus' empty tomb in the resurrection stories, has been a figure of controversy and intrigue. For a long time it was rumored that she was a prostitute, which effectively prevented people from wondering why she is not called a disciple.

But one of the Nag Hammadi texts, the Gospel of Philip, describes Mary Magdalene as a "companion" of Jesus "whom the Savior loved more than all the other disciples and [whom] he kissed often on the mouth."

The gospel of Mary, which was rediscovered in the late 1800's, also portrays her as very central in Jesus's life, as a disciple and *confidante*, and says that he loved her "more than all the other women." In that text, the disciples ask her to tell them things that she knows

about Jesus but they don't.

In these and other non-canonical gospels, the disciples frequently reject Mary because she is a woman, but Jesus comes to her defense.

Now this new fragment, which King refers to as "the gospel of Jesus' wife," is provocative in seeming to take Mary and Jesus' relationship to a new level, but it does not prove that Jesus was married.

The fragment is smaller than a debit card, and most of the words on it have been so faded and worn down over the last sixteen or seventeen centuries that they are illegible. The lines we can read mention Mary, and then say in three separate incomplete sentences

my wife...

...she will be able to be my disciple...

I dwell with her in order to...

That's it.

There are a few other lines but they don't complete these thoughts. We don't know the rest of the context for these words. For all we know, Jesus could have been saying, "My wife! I don't have a wife!" Or "'My wife, my wife.' All you ever talk about is your wife, Judas!"

However, what this text probably demonstrates is that, whether Jesus was married or not, some early Christians told a story about him in which he was, and they may have believed he was.

And that, in turn, tells us something about the role of women in Christianity—that it was not a given for women to be on the sidelines, that there was a hard fought debate over their importance and legitimacy as family members, disciples and leaders, and that this debate played out in texts that have been forgotten for a long time.

Every time a new text is discovered and shared with the world, it opens people's eyes to the role history played in our beliefs today, and helps soften the rigidity with which some people adhere to church doctrines that are anything but timeless.

But then, the nature of marriage today is changing with or without the support of the most rigid church doctrines, isn't it.

I had just decided to work on this sermon when someone returned a stack of books from our church library. I noticed them sitting on the table in the office workroom. One was What is Marriage For? by E. J. Graff. (Thanks!)

It was one of several prompts from the universe. I had been waffling about the topic. I was worried about making our congregation's single people feel excluded. That was part of it. But I was also worried that I might not be able to answer the question: What is marriage for?

I am married. I've been married since I was nineteen years old. All my adult life. But whatever the norm is these days, that's not it. So I wondered, could I come up with an answer that would apply to everyone?

The book's author tried to answer the question by researching the social history of marriage. At various times, she says, marriage has appeared to be about **money**. That was

the case with dowries, or when families married strategically to consolidate wealth. Nowadays, we see money involved with things like tax credits for married people, but also in the fact that people tend to marry in the same socio-economic class, keeping wealth from moving much between the tiers.

She says marriage has also sometimes been about **sex**—making a legitimate place for it, when it was considered sinful. These days, it is acceptable for consenting adults to have sex outside of marriage. Marriage may make sex more accessible, but then not all marriages involve sex. Health problems or other issues can get in the way, and a marriage can still be good even when that happens.

Some have said that marriage is about **babies**, and have even argued that this is why same sex couples should not marry. But of course, not all heterosexual married couples can or want to have children, anyone can adopt or bring in children from a previous relationship, and while a two-parent household can be a great structure for raising children, there are other options.

How about **order**? she suggests. Maybe marriage is a way of ordering society—a handy unit for social scientists. That’s part of the picture.

Marriages help bring order to families, too. For a long time my sister had a partner that she loved but did not marry. They bought a house together and he came to family gatherings but even though we could tell they were committed, we were never quite sure what to call him. Was he my kids’ uncle? After several years, we guessed so. My brother in law? I guessed not—that sounds pretty legalistic, and they were keeping it informal. A marriage marks a relationship not only between spouses, but between the married couple and the family and community around them.

And then, of course, there’s **love**. Ancient marriages may not have been about love, but we certainly expect marriage today, in this country, to be. And yet, even love changes over a long marriage. I’ve heard it said that there’s really no such thing as one long marriage, rather every long marriage is really a series of different marriages between the same two people.

When a couple is first married, their marriage is marked by romance and dreams. If they have children, their marriage becomes about a shared project, about growing into serious adulthood. Even if they don’t have children, the romance and dreams change into a new, shared reality of living side by side.

When life throws the couple some challenges, and it will, marriage changes again. The thing they thought defined it may fade away.

People change, too. We humans don’t stay the same and neither do our relationships. Seven year itch? That’s the seven year *transition*, if you’re savvy about it. Throughout all these phases, the answer to “what is marriage for” will vary.

For this sermon I interviewed a couple in our church that has been married about twice as long as I have. I challenged them to think about long marriages in the context of American culture.

When a new couple makes those extravagant promises to each other at their wedding, “in good times and in bad,” they rarely have the life experience to know just how bad “bad” can be, or that their marriage is going to change, even under the best of circumstances. Divorce is so common

these days. Why keep those vows? Isn't commitment for commitment's sake an outdated value? Keeping a promise that is heart-wrenching sometimes, and which no one really *expects* you to keep, isn't that outdated?

This couple kept looking at each other's eyes, and squeezing each other's hand, and interrupting each other, and laughing and tearing up as they tried to put their answer in words. But in the end, words were beside the point. It was obvious that what they had developed in the course of all their years and experiences together was love grounded in a deep sense of partnership.

There are few ways to achieve that with another person. Marriage is one of them. A special, old way. A way that has changed and keeps changing, and that is unique to every couple.

Old friends can also get to that place. So can some siblings. Some parents and children maintain such close connections all through their lives. In fact, we need connections with lots of different people, so that one person does not have to be our everything. Even the best spouse or friend cannot meet our every need.

A Unitarian Universalist congregation is another kind of relationship in your life that can endure life's changes. A place where you can connect with other people, but also with your God, or the ground of being, or with the universe.

We need enduring relationships with one another and with something larger than ourselves all our lives.