

MARRIAGE MATTERS
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Haggai 1:15b-2:9

The latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity.

Luke 20:27-38

God not of the God dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive.

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Once upon a time a delegation of concerned people who knew the Scriptures inside out came to quiz Jesus. "Jesus, they said, you are a teacher of Israel so you must know Moses decreed that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, that man must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.

I do know that, said Jesus.

Well, then, what about this situation?

Once there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married the first brother's widow, and so on in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died.

So, tell us: in the after life whose wife will the woman be? For she had been married to seven different men." (Luke 20:27-38)

There's more to this lesson including Jesus' answer but I'll stop there because that's enough to let us know that the institution of marriage is a complicated thing and customs vary from culture to culture and from one era to another.

For example, 300 or so years ago European missionaries swarmed into Africa and converted many Africans. *Now that you are a Christian, said the missionaries, you must get rid of all but one of your wives because God requires us to be monogamous.* Which would have been news to several of the revered polygamist in the Bible such as Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon.

The African husbands, wanting to please their new God and new friends, did as the missionaries said. And just like that their divorced wives became prostitutes.

Oops.

To their credit, the missionaries realized something was wrong with that picture. They conferred, re-read the Bible and agreed on a compromise. *You may keep all your wives, they said, but when one dies, don't replace her.* Even that proved naive and detrimental to the African economy that desperately relied on at least a few children from a polygamist family surviving high mortality rates.

Marriage has never been one universal practice. It has evolved over time. Until fairly recently it had little to do with romance and every thing to do with property and status.

In this country daughters were once given away as a piece of property. No more. Not in this church at least. And so I ask the father of the bride: Who *presents* this woman to be married to this man, which is a whole lot different than who *gives* this woman to this man and, oh, by the way, where's the dowry?!

The meaning and practice of marriage keeps evolving. Circumstances change. Values change.

Inter-racial marriage was once banned in the United States because of Christian values. God, Christians said, disapproved of such marriages. The Bible says so. And back then—in those “glory days”—Christians ruled. But in 1967 the Supreme Court over-turned that law making it legal for consenting adults to marry whomever they chose regardless of race.

So what about same-sex marriage?

This past April, a same sex marriage was blessed here. The marriage itself was established in Maryland, which is one of 14 states that issue such a license. West Virginia does not.

If West Virginia were to approve same sex marriage, I'd be in a real bind. In case you didn't know, Presbyterian ministers cannot officiate a marriage celebration unless the couple has a license from the state. We must see the license first. And when ministers sign the license we sign not as ministers of the Church but rather as proxies of the civil court. Currently, Presbyterian ministers are forbidden to sign a same sex marriage license or officiate such a marriage.

But it's a little tricky because marriage is not a sacrament in the Presbyterian Church. Which is to say, Presbyterian ministers do not create a marriage; we only bless what the state ordains. In other words, I've never “married” anyone although I have officiated some 250 weddings!

The constitution of the PCUSA church defines marriage as a covenant between one man and one woman. Period. So technically speaking a “same sex marriage” is not a marriage by Presbyterian definition *even if a state government should say it is*. Up until now the Presbyterian church has always deferred to the state to define and regulate marriages.

And when you think about it, that's the way it should be in a secular, democratic nation. Two otherwise qualified consenting adults should not be denied the civil right to marry. It's called “equal protection under law” for all citizens. The state must not discriminate. Period.

However, a church or other religious body can discriminate. A church can offer or withhold a blessing of a marriage. That's always been the case. I've never been required to bless any and all marriages approved by the state. I have the right to bless or not. The constitution of the United States protects religious rights—up to a point.

So what will the Presbyterian Church decide when its General Assembly convenes next summer in Detroit to deliberate the matter of same-sex marriage?

In 2012 the General Assembly asked all its congregations to engage this subject prayerfully and thoughtfully in the light of science, new experiences and new insights. For as much as Presbyterians cherish tradition, we cherish truth, justice, freedom and knowledge even more. We are, as you know, “reformed and always reforming,” and reforming, reforming and reforming. (Sometimes I wish I were Amish!)

For more than a thousand years the Catholic Church and other churches have said marriage is all about and only about procreation because that's what the Bible says. And thus marriage must be male and female to make that work. After all, the say, it's in the Bible—Genesis chapter 2. The story of “the rib.” *A man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife. And they say become one flesh.* That happens to be the single most influential Biblical passage for Christian and Jewish beliefs regarding marriage.

But there's more than one way to read the "rib" story.

Five hundred years ago the Puritans in this country said to the Catholics, *not so fast*. There's more to marriage than making babies. You see, the Puritans read that story differently than Catholics. And I've learned to read it differently myself.

Once upon a time, according to the Great Ancestors, there was an "Adam," an earthling, a humanoid—initially neither male nor female—living alone on earth in a beautiful, tree-filled garden. Just this one earthling, a garden and nothing or nobody else. Remember this isn't science. This is a mythic folktale from the Great Ancestors.

Look at that earthling all by itself, said the Creator. That's not good. It's not good for the earthling to be alone.

And so God furiously made animals and brought them one by one to the earthling to see if any would be suitable as a mate. Can you imagine that scene in a Disney movie? It would be fun to watch, especially when "dog" showed up. Anyway, according to the tale, the earthling gave names one by one to all the animals of the earth. But not a single one was suitable as a mate.

This is serious, said God. So the creator put the earthling to sleep and surgically removed a rib and stitched up the wound. And from that rib God fashioned another creature almost exactly as the first.

The earthling woke up and said, *WOW! Beautiful. At last bone of bone, flesh of my flesh.* Which, as it turns out, is an expression found throughout the Bible in regard to *kinship*, and never in regard to marriage.

God took a rib. Not a head bone to kneel beneath; not a foot bone to trample upon, and not a pelvic bone. The Creator took a rib from beside the heart as if to say, you are meant to be side by side. And thus it was that Man and Woman found a suitable companion.

The point of the story, if you can see it, is not the difference, anatomical or otherwise, but rather the likeness. *Flesh of my flesh. Bone of my bone*—like me but just a little different. It's more about companionship than procreation per se.

And the other point to be seen is the freedom God gives to choose one's soul mate. Not just anyone will do.

Our Puritan ancestors changed the paradigm of marriage. They saw marriage not for procreation primarily but rather for companionship—humankind's deepest, primal longing. Of course, they would not have approved of same sex marriage, but unwittingly they laid the foundation for the conversation we are now about to begin.

Many of us can be happy and fulfilled without marriage. Marriage isn't a requirement for a complete life. It's a choice, we might even say a "calling."

When we find that one true companion that we love with all our heart, mind, soul and body, with whom we long to be one and with whom we want to walk beside until our dying day, should the church deny such a couple—same or opposite sex—the full blessing and protection of a marriage covenant sealed in the presence of God and in the company of family and friends?

Well, that is *the* question. And that's the question before us in this season of discernment.

So I urge you—especially those who hold the Presbyterian Church and its polity dear—I urge you to participate in the marriage seminar next month. It's not about changing you or anyone else. It's about becoming informed about something that matters to this

particular church and to our society. We are all invited to listen to the living spirit stirring in our nation and in our church.

For as Jesus put it at the end of the lesson for today: God is not the God of the dead. But rather the God of the living. So here we go again trying to keep up with the Spirit.

Good luck!