

Sunday December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2020

Advent II

Matthew 1:18-25

“Christmas for Difficult Marriages.”

Gayle Urban tells of an interesting trip to her local Christian bookstore. As she was browsing, she happened across a shelf of reduced-priced items. Among the gifts on the shelf was a little figurine of a man and woman, their heads lovingly tilted toward one another. *Happy 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary* read the inscription. It appeared in perfect condition, yet its tag indicated *DAMAGED*.

Examining it more closely, Urban found another tag underneath that read: *WIFE IS COMING UNGLUED*. Prophetic isn't it? Contrast that thought with a very moving speech by Ryne Sandberg when he was inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame. In his speech came this moving moment, when Sandberg's eyes welled up and his lips began to tremble. Sandberg went on to say that his induction to the Hall of Fame was the second-best thing that had ever happened to him.

He went on to say, “My wife, Margaret, is the best thing that has ever happened to me. Margaret is my best friend. She is the love of my life. She is my salvation. She is my past, my present, my future. She is my sun, my moon, my stars. She is everything good about life, and I thank her for entering my life at a time when I needed her most.” Wow! So which experience best describes your marriage?

The husband or wife coming unglued, or the sentiments that Sandberg shared? Over the course of my 33 years of ministry, I have performed dozens of weddings. I cannot think of one couple who, when I first met with them, didn't dream about a marriage like Ryne and Margaret Sandberg. All of them wanted a Hall of Fame marriage, not a survivor marriage.

The kind of marriage where your children and grandchildren, look at you and exclaim, “Dear God, let my marriage be like theirs.” Maybe you are blessed to have a marriage like this, or perhaps you are longing still after many years, for a connection in your marriage like this. Perhaps you are not even interested in marriage, because of all the tragedies you have witnessed and heard about in marriages.

So, maybe it is time we all met a couple who also struggled to make a difficult marriage into something special. I know you've heard of them, but maybe you've never thought about what their marriage was like. We cannot state for sure how Mary and Joseph's relationship began. It is possible they just fell in love, but more likely, given their culture, their families made an arrangement. Either way we just don't know.

By the time we meet this couple, things are already going wrong. Maybe that is the first lesson they can teach us; as hard as it is to face reality, it is really important to admit it when things are looking bad. “This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about,” Matthew 1:18 reads, “His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph (like an engagement), but before they came together”—that is, before they had sexual relations—“Mary was found to be with child.”

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It doesn't get any worse than that. Nothing is harder on a marriage than the appearance, or the reality of infidelity. But if truth be told, most affairs are really only the end result of a relationship that has been going cold for a long time. It's scary isn't it, but let us think about what are the little steps that move a relationship from better to worse?

Humorist Dave Barry gives us a light hearted example of this when he remarks: "At this point in the Christmas season, your standard man has purchased zero gifts. He has not gotten around to purchasing an acceptable gift for his wife for last Christmas. He did give her something last year, but he could tell by her reaction to it that she was not dreaming of getting an auto-emergency light, even though it was the deluxe model with booster cables and an air compressor, Clearly, this gift violated an important rule, but the man had no idea what this rule was, and his wife is too upset to tell him."

When I was a young pastor talking with couples going through some rough patches, I could never understand how stories like that fit into the collapse of something as wonderful as a marriage. How could a couple go from gazing lovingly at each other at the altar to saying things like, "Whenever we were out with friends, and I'd offer an opinion on something, and she'd roll her eyes."

How about this one, "He has left me waiting on dinner so many times." Then I'd wonder, "You want to give up your marriage over rolled eyes and cold potatoes?" Yes, they would say, and a million other annoyances and now with some experience in life maybe I'd understand. Romance it seems, grows by leaps and bounds at the beginning, but dies by little degrees-little steps of injury and disrespect.

You know the things that seem so small, but over time create layers of scar tissue over a heart. We start by complaining about little things, like dirty clothes on the floor. Then we criticize behavior, and eventually we outright condemn someone's worth. Such developments sweep in on us, making us: defensive, resentful, distant and eventually we just stop caring for the other person.

On the outside we still give the impression everything is okay. We get our chores done, like getting out our Christmas cards. We may still even couple up in bed, but he or she is no longer our moon, our star, or our best friend. We could go on and ignore the reality of our pain, but like Mary's pregnancy, it just grows and grows right in front of us. "It's your fault", Joseph may have wanted to say. "No, this thing is bigger than me, Joe," Mary might have answered.

But sooner or later, they had to admit that something of the original contract; the original vision of their lives had changed. Have you faced the reality of what is going on in your home? I pray that it is wonderful. But I fear there are some of us who wonder at times if we married badly. That this relationship is no longer what either of us had intended for it to be.

So, our first step to wholeness in our marriage, is recognizing that things are not going well. The second thing to realize is that we have options.

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Even Joseph had options and he considered them carefully. The most obvious option that many people choose is a very loud, and very ugly divorce. Joseph, according to the Jewish law code, had every right to divorce Mary. In fact, Matthew 5 says that God even allows divorce for such a reason as Mary's pregnancy. Joseph could have made a real scene, and brought great disgrace on Mary and her family.

He could have, out of his pain, created misery for everyone, including himself. However, another option was to divorce her quietly. It takes a better man to do that, and the bible says that Joseph was a "righteous" man- in other words, a man of character, and aligned with God's purposes. Because he wanted to spare Mary the disgrace of a messy public divorce, he chose to end things quietly.

Some couples choose to end things amicably; to make the best of a bad situation. They say "Look it didn't work out. We tried, but let's end it now before we shred each other's dignity, or hurt the children any more than they already are." Some other couples try to hold on through the pain; maybe until the children are a bit older. Some couples hold hands, not because they are madly in love, but because they are afraid if they let go, they will kill each other.

Mary and Joseph could have just shut up and kept up appearances. You know they had family and friends watching. How many people stay in a bad marriage, giving up the hope that things could be better? Now I say all this not to beat up on anybody, but to lead us all too some hope. Especially some hope if we are living in a marriage more defined by the worse than by the better.

And even if you just couldn't live in your marriage any longer for whatever reason, I want to tell you all that the God we worship is a God of second chances, and renewal, and reconciliation. Even out of the ashes of destroyed hopes and dreams, God can bring something beautiful and wonderful.

The bible says, "After Joseph had considered his options, and angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph son of David, do not be afraid.'" This raises an interesting question; how much of our relational breakdowns are caused by fear. "Don't be afraid," said the angel, "to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived is from the Holy Spirit. Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save people from their sins."

In other words, the angel is telling Joseph that the very circumstances that he fears will kill his relationship with Mary, will actually be the beginning of his salvation. Wow! Is that even possible? Is it possible that in the very midst of the death of all our dreams and visions for our marriages, God can come and create a new beginning-to save us? The message from the angel is meant for us as well.

What is needed from us, in the face of a difficult marriage, is fresh faith and courageous obedience. Now I know you want to understand what that looks like for us. Well, certainly it means we go to God in prayer, regularly for all our relationships.

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How long has it been since you asked God for his dream for your marriage? How long has it been since you prayed, “Lord, give me the reason again why you brought us together. I know there was a purpose. I knew it once. Help me see it again.” Ask your spouse to pray the same prayer and maybe pray it together. Pray that God might give you, supernaturally, the love and respect your partner craves-that person who, once upon a time, was the best thing that ever happened to you.

Proverbs says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding. In all ways acknowledge God and he will direct your paths.” Why not ask God to do a miracle in your marriage. Finally, Proverbs also states, “Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance.” Are you open to guidance? There is lots of help out there for couples.

Books, conferences, marriage enrichment seminars, and of course couple’s therapy: God has given us so many resources to help us, why not use them? Why not explore what good can become of our marriages. Anything and everything are possible with God; just look at Mary and Joseph.

Slats Grobnik sells Christmas trees in Chicago. He tells the story of one year when he met a couple on the hunt for the right tree. The man was skinny with a big Adam’s apple and a short receding chin; the girl was sort of pretty, but the two of them wore ragged clothes that could have come from the bottom of the bin at the Salvation Army. They didn’t have much money either.

Finding most trees on the lot too expensive; the couple settled on a Scotch pine that was okay on one side, but bare on the other. Then a bit further on they found another that was hardly any better-full one side and bare on the other. The couple bought both rough looking trees. A few days later, Slats was walking on the street when he happened to be looking into a large picture window on the ground floor of a building and he saw a spectacular Christmas tree.

He was then shocked to see coming across the window that same couple who bought those ugly trees. Curiosity got the best of him, so he went and knocked on the door. He just had to know where and how they’d managed to pick up this finer tree. They then told Slats that they did bring home the two trees he sold them and that they were what he saw in the window.

They then proceeded to tell Slats about how they worked the two trees together. They shared how they brought the two sparse sides together, interlacing the branches, and how they bound the two trunks together until the branches overlapped and formed a tree so thick you could not see the wire.

“So that’s the secret,” said Slats. “So that’s the secret. You take two trees that aren’t perfect-that might even be homely, that maybe nobody else would want. But if you put them together just right, you can come up with something really beautiful.”

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Do you think that's possible- that God can do something miraculous with a man and woman willing to work in faith and obedience into the dream of God? Do you think that's possible? The gospels speak of a time when it apparently happened, with *real people*: "Mary said, 'let it be unto me according to thy Word.'" And, "When Joseph woke up; he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. He had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name of Jesus."

Jesus-the name of the Savior who still takes two imperfect people, and with grace and truth, binds them together to make something truly beautiful, wholesome and finally one.