

To Have and To Hold

A Sermon on Marriage and Repentance

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards
December 16, 2012 ~ The Third Sunday of Advent
Luke 3: 1-18

[A note to the reader: This sermon was preached two days after the gun murders of 20 children and 6 adults in Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, CT, by a mentally ill twenty-year old resident of the town. Knowing that some people came to church on account of this tragedy, I began the sermon with some extemporaneous words about it, then went on to preach the sermon I had prepared. The paragraphs below that concern the tragedy represent my best attempt to put what I said into written form.]

I know that many of you are here this morning because of the terrible tragedy in Newtown on Friday. Fr. Peter will speak more directly about this at announcements time, but since you may be expecting a word of counsel from the pulpit, let me offer a few words. First of all, especially if you have children, may I suggest that you turn off your televisions. Our feelings about this tragedy are so deep and so intense that compulsive TV viewing will only flood us and overtake us. This is just a commonsense suggestion.

Theologically, I think it's important to remember the Christian understanding of evil. When God made the universe, he set it and us free. This is not a puppet show here on earth, with God as a grand puppet master in the sky, pulling strings to make sure bad things don't happen. Our freedom comes at a great price, which is suffering and evil. In a sense, love is not possible without the possibility of suffering. It wouldn't be a real world otherwise.

I have seen many comments online and elsewhere from people stating that they will never be able to forgive Adam Lanza for what he did. I want us all to remember that Jesus' death was for all. Forgiveness is not a feeling. Forgiveness is not about giving someone an excuse for what he or she has done. In a sense, forgiveness belongs to God. *To forgive someone is to hope that they will be restored to relationship with God.* We

have no right to try to withhold that from anyone. And so Jesus died as fully for Adam as he did for you and me. (And how ironic it is that his name was "Adam" - the first human to sin in the Bible). To withhold forgiveness from anyone is to say that Jesus died for nothing.

Adam was almost certainly a deranged young man who was afflicted by the same evil that he perpetrated. And so it was Adam Jesus was speaking about when he said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." He was speaking about you and me, too. Because all sin and evil partake of a kind of ignorance.

And so I implore you to pray for all the children who died, for their families, for the children who survived, for the teachers, and for everyone in Newtown. I also ask you to pray for Adam Lanza, that poor, tortured young man.

John the Baptist and his message of repentance are with us every Advent, and this morning I thought I would talk specifically about repentance as it pertains to marriage. We sometimes talk about divorce in church, but we don't talk much about marriage, except at weddings. Yet it is always on our minds,

especially as the Christmas season assaults us all with images of the “perfect family” and the “perfect marriage,” which none of us have because neither has ever existed anywhere, for anyone.

The wedding industry is the second largest industry in the United States – second only to McDonald’s. And so marriage is actually *marketed* to us. When a couple gets engaged, they can easily fall into what I call the Wedding Vortex – a vast selling plan that can make even the most modest couple begin to want a wedding that is beyond their means and sometimes even their desire. I met with one couple once whose parents had generously given them \$36,000 to fund their wedding and reception and when this couple went around interviewing “wedding vendors” (the people we used to call florists and caterers), they were told that with that budget they could afford only a “do it yourself” wedding.

And so weddings have become disconnected from real life. They have become enactments of luxury and glamour that supposedly image the “perfect” relationship they celebrate. Dangerous stuff. Because once you’ve had the so-called perfect wedding, once you’ve peaked at age 30, real life afterwards can be kind of disappointing.

Modern popular Christianity has been somewhat complicit in this distortion of marriage. We often picture marriage as part of God’s plan for us and the only way to happiness, and we talk about the “sanctity” of marriage (which can lay a heavy load of guilt on divorced people). But if you look at the core of the Christian tradition itself, including the teaching of Jesus, you will see that Christianity is profoundly realistic about marriage. For starters, the Bible does not put up marriage as an ideal. The entire Old Testament, and much of the New, is a witness to marriage as a more or less utilitarian institution to which the subjugation of women is key. Nothing romantic or particularly fulfilling about it.

Sounds grim, but the good news is that Christianity puts marriage into a really helpful perspective. From the very beginning, people like St Paul began to say that Jesus’ resurrection changes the way we understand everything, including how to live and what makes us truly happy and what draws us closer to God. And so the Epistles of St Paul begin to give hints that *marriage is not the defining human experience*.

What’s most important is the human person, in him- or her-self, that person’s new life in Christ through baptism, and how he or she lives it out as God’s person in the world.

I bet you’ve never noticed how much sexual irregularity there is in the Bible. It’s the divinely inspired writers telling us that sex and marriage are theologically speaking not central, and that God often works around them, not through them. This is one of the reasons why the gospels present Mary and Joseph as an engaged couple, not a married couple. Jesus is born illegitimately to a virgin. This is not some kind of fairy tale. It is God’s way of saying that He needs neither sex nor marriage to save the world. We see hints of this all the way through the Old Testament, too. There are plenty of non-marital unions and births throughout the history of salvation. If you look at the genealogy of Jesus that begins Matthew’s gospel, you will see how many of Jesus’ forebears were not married and yet they and their out-of-wedlock children had key roles in God’s work. And so what is hinted at in the Old Testament comes into full bloom in the New Testament: The Savior of the world is born illegitimately to a virgin. No sex involved. No marriage.

And so when people say that there are too many divorces these days, I want to say, “Hmm. Maybe there are too many marriages.” Because the fact is that many people who *are* married never *were* married in the first place.

Let me explain. The vows we take when we get married include the phrases “to have and to hold,” “as long as you both shall live,” “until we are parted by death,” and “for better, for worse.” Every engaged couple I have ever counseled has immediately agreed that they are ready to take those vows. But when I later ask if they can imagine any deal-breakers in their marriage, anything the other could do that would cause them to leave the marriage, every couple says “Of course! Cheating. Drug addiction. Jail time.” And so I say, “So this is not really an unconditional relationship we’re talking about here. There are some conditions on it.” And I think that if most of us here were really honest, we would admit that there may be conditions on our marriages, too.

Some marriages are just mistakes, blighted from the beginning. They have to end if one or the other

partner is to survive. Others are easy matches. There's a kind of "luck of the draw" element to marriage for sure. And every priest knows that there is no predicting which marriages at which they officiate will endure. The best-matched, likeliest couples sometimes explode after a few years – kaboom! Other unlikely matches – Greek belly dancer marries Nordic antiquarian bookseller – work out just fine.

We are frail creatures. Most people do their best at marriage. No one ever sets out to hurt their spouse, even though it may look like that in retrospect. *No one ever sets out to hurt their spouse.* But marriage is strenuous for all of us, mainly because we don't understand what we are entering into. We can't. As our seminarian Justin said in his sermon about divorce a few weeks ago, when you fall in love, you don't know what is happening. You don't know what you're falling into. It's a form of temporary insanity. You just....fall.

And then you land.

This is why Jesus performed his first miracle at a wedding. Because he knew that marriage is the human condition in its most concentrated form. The newly married couple at the wedding in Cana is celebrating, and what happens? They run out of wine. In Scripture, wine represents the Kingdom of God and the restoration of our relationship with God, as well as the joy and fulfillment of human life at its best. Only two hours into the marriage, they've run out. It's a foretaste of their future.

That's why Mary goes right to Jesus. She's not worried about the wine list. She's not worried about a mistake a vendor has made. She's worried about the lives of this couple. And so she says to Jesus: "They have no wine." They are only human. And so Jesus turns water into wine...and he does it invisibly. Because in life, *invisible things are the things that really matter.* The couple doesn't even know what he's done. And so the wine is a pure gift.

Do you know what factor plays the greatest role in marital success? It's not common interests; it's not patience; it's not communication. It's self-knowledge. Any marriage's success depends on whether or not both partners know themselves, are continually reflecting on and exploring their personal and

spiritual histories, and are always trying to grow into mature, compassionate adults. This is essentially a spiritual quest. When that is not happening, the marriage doesn't grow because one or both partners are expecting the other to be God for them. Marriage is in one respect like parenting: *The goal is to set the other person free.* The German poet Rilke said: "Marriage is two solitudes, saluting each other." It's not two solitudes, trying to join at the hip. I was at a wedding once where the minister began by saying "Today is the day two become one. The question is: Which one?"

Our reluctance to allow our spouses and partners to be free accounts for the power dynamics that afflict our marriages. Someone is always trying to be the boss. Like the recent New Yorker cartoon that has a husband saying to his wife: "Honey, when is the hazing part of our marriage going to end?" This grab for power and control is just part of being fallen human beings. We are such frail creatures that we are always looking for a toehold somewhere and so we try to manipulate our mates into thinking, speaking, eating, behaving, and even breathing just like we do.

I'll give you an example from my own life. Just last night, my husband wanted to wrap a Christmas gift. I had put all the Christmas wrapping stuff on the kitchen table, including a lot of ribbons I have saved from previous years and want to re-use. He came to the table and got some paper and took a piece of red ribbon and I jumped right on him. "OH NO YOU DON'T!" I shrieked. "I'm SAVING that piece of ribbon! That piece of ribbon is TOO BIG for your package! Don't WASTE that ribbon!" His face fell about a mile, and he walked away from the table a smaller man than he was a minute before.

Men can try to control their wives by treating them either like employees or like little girls, the compensation being gifts, money, second homes, some kind of status. It's doesn't work. All it creates is an angry, depressed woman. On the other hand, since our culture still discourages the free expression of power and assertiveness in women, lots of women try to exert their natural power within the small container of marriage. This is a really bad deal for men. It's like living with the daily fear of burning with the unquenchable fire of judgment and blame. This is the dangerous part of marriage: that in some sense we really do "have and hold" our spouses within our

power. And so there can be great suffering, even treachery, in marriage. Being married can make you feel like you have been cut down and thrown into the fire.

When John the Baptist exhorted his listeners to repent, they wanted to know specifically what he meant. They said, “What then should we do?” I think that’s our question also, about marriage, about how to repent of the distorted understandings we have about marriage and live faithfully and fruitfully in a relationship with someone who will always be - at least in part - a stranger. Someone whom God made and who thus embodies the unknown and unknowable. Someone who does not mirror back to you anything like the image of perfection and connection their very person seemed to promise...before you married them. What then should we do?

I think the marriage vows hold an answer. The vows are not supposed to be a life sentence. *They’re supposed to give us the opportunity to create something.* When we enter marriage and live within marriage as a life-long commitment, *no matter what*, then that commitment opens up the space for both people to breathe and to have the safety in which to live as the people they are and will become. If there are conditions on the relationship, even unspoken ones, neither person will ever feel safe enough to reveal themselves within the marriage, for fear that their partner may leave.

So I always tell engaged couples, even before their wedding: *Begin creating something that can withstand anything. It must be built day by day. It doesn’t have to be perfect; it just needs to be sturdy.* If you wait to start building it until someone has an affair or loses a job or gets arrested, it might be too late, because there might be no real marriage there to withstand the onslaught of life. There are just two people who happened to have been living together for awhile, with a big problem on their hands. Lots of water, but no wine. And – for those of us who never began to build something intentionally – well, it’s never too late to start. Because since we have and hold our spouses in our hands, we can always try to choose mercy and compassion over judgment and blame. In that way, we can be the love of God for the people God loves. With God’s help, we can turn water in wine.

It’s always helpful for me to remember the way Greek Orthodox Christians do weddings. The bride and the groom each wear a crown. Not because they are a prince and princess for the day. They wear the crowns of martyrdom. The crown signifies their understanding that marriage means repentance in the largest sense of the word. It means repenting of our cultural stereotype of marriage as marketed, commercialized, bought, and sold. It means remembering that every human being is a frail creature who will not flourish unless he or she is treated with respect, even reverence. It means repenting of our often unconscious and sinful assumption that our needs must be met and that other people are supposed to make us happy and meet our expectations. If your marriage is going to thrive, then you need to sacrifice yourself to the invisible life that exists between you. *This is what love is.* It means personal loss. It also means joy.

And that’s why all of Scripture talks about the Kingdom of God as a wedding feast. One day, God willing, all of us frail creatures - the married and the unmarried, the widowed, the single, the divorced, all of us who long to love and be loved – will meet again within the heart of God, our lives purified and our loves made whole.

But in the meantime, I have a suggestion. This evening, sit down with your spouse and remember your wedding vows: To have and to hold, until we are parted by death. Then pour a glass of wine (or ginger ale) and toast each other as frail and much-loved people of God.

Amen.