

**“How the theology and praxis of Christian marriage have been shaped
by Scripture, tradition, and experience and how that informs the church’s
current response to non-traditional marriage.”**

by

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INTRODUCTION

In this project I will explore the Christian church's historical responses to cultural issues as they affect the theology and praxis of marriage, paying special attention to the development of sacramental theology within the Christian tradition. I will trace the Judeo-Christian, Eastern Orthodox, and Roman Catholic roots of the Anglican tradition which led to the current theology of the Episcopal Church as found in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.

Chapter one offers an historical review of Judeo-Christian theology and practices of marriage. It also traces the development of Scriptural preferences for certain types of marriage as well as cultural influences on the course of that development. Chapter two examines new perspectives on marriage and sexuality through seven case studies (structural stories). These perspectives are seen through the lens of an ethics beginning with our identity as a Christian people, which includes our Baptismal promises and Christ's commands to us. Chapter two also addresses the pastoral implications of clergy acting as agents of the state in traditional marriages. Chapter three reviews the sources of a variety of modern-day wedding traditions and customs and explains why understanding their origins is important for the couple's understanding of the sacramentality of the marriage and the details of the marriage rite. Chapter four proposes new pastoral approaches and practices using tools developed for pre-marital and post-marital counseling, planning a wedding liturgy for traditional marriages and/or a

blessing liturgy for non-traditional marriages. These tools are included in the appendices to the project.

This exploration will show that the church has traditionally responded to the complicated circumstances presented in each era by making some attempt to move forward pastorally and faithfully, expanding its biblical understanding, and adapting its theology and praxis by developing liturgies and canons which reflect the new revelation being confronted and integrated and for the good of the people being served. In each era, women and children have been the primary vulnerable populations for whose benefit these changes and adaptations have been made. In the current circumstance homosexuals, the children of same-sex unions, the elderly, and victims of abuse would be added to this list.

I will also show that the church's historical decision to act as civil agents of marriage has led to a certain amount of conflation of authority and presbyteral responsibility resulting in a corruption of its present ability to respond pastorally and faithfully, especially in light of the present American circumstance in which lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) issues are being considered and legislated both in the church and in the courts of the land. Finally, this project will posit that there has been a shift in thinking in cultural and religious spheres, across age groups and religious/non-religious backgrounds, on the necessity and/or value of the "institution" of marriage, the marriage ritual/liturgy, and the role of the Church in marriage.

Included in this project are pre-marital counseling tools and handouts which are sensitive to the complicated issues of people in today's culture who desire marriage, including lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) issues, issues of abuse and violence which impact the ongoing sacramental life of the couple, and issues involved in the plurality of ethnic, spiritual/non-spiritual backgrounds of many of today's couples.

The social location of the author is an integral part of both the motivation for this project and the social bias found within it. It has been through my personal experience in and with marriage and the church that the issues at hand find their relevance and open the way for conversation with the vulnerable groups being discussed. It is also relevant to the development of the counseling tool provided.

As a priest in the Episcopal Church, a household of God caught up in its own moment of transformation on the issue of marriage, I have been motivated to write this project to support the church I love and serve. Even as I write this project, the Episcopal Church has just approved its second bishop who is gay and living in a committed relationship. These bishops, the Right Reverends Gene Robinson and Mary Glasspool, are currently excluded from the legal and ecclesial benefits of marriage. While a rumble will surely be heard around the world on this latest action by the Episcopal Church, these two faithful Christians continue to be excluded by the very people who promise at least four times a year to

“proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ... to seek and serve Christ in all persons... and respect the dignity of every human being.”¹

My experience as a pastor has given me opportunity to listen to and provide pre-marital counseling to a variety of people who want to be married “in the church” as well as post-marital counseling/intervention to those already married “in the church.” I have also had the opportunity to work with some very committed church members who seek the sacraments of the church, but not the sacramental rite of marriage based on their previous experience with either marriage or the Church. My experience as clergy in a parish setting has provided even more depth to my understanding arising first from the uncomfortable pit in my gut that develops each time I act as an “agent of the state” and fill out the forms for marriage, and secondly, from the conversations I now have with people ahead of the process of marriage, helping them as they consider whether or not to enter into this kind of covenant, and working with others as they decide whether or not to stay in it.

As the social stigma around sexual abuse fades and revelations of this abuse are brought to light, in all of their complicated contexts and swelling numbers, the church must inform itself so that we can compassionately place our mission, the restoration of “all people to unity with God and each other in Christ”² in front of

¹ The Book of Common Prayer, 305. <http://www.bcponline.org/>

² BCP, 855.

our adherence to social conventions, ecclesial institutions, and a pharisaical approach to rules and canons. Jesus modeled a ministry of inclusion that challenged the status quo of the social and spiritual institutions of his time. As followers of Christ “pressing on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus,”³ we face similar challenges.

Historically, The Episcopal Church has heard and responded to this call and we hold this response important enough to maintain its place in the Historical Documents section of our Prayer Book. The Articles of Religion, section XXXIV, entitled “Of the Traditions of the Church” reads,

It is not necessary that the Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and *may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men's manners*, so that nothing be ordained against God's Word... Every particular or national Church hath authority to ordain, change, and abolish, Ceremonies or Rites of the Church ordained only by man's authority, so that all things be done to edifying.⁴

In another section of the Historical Documents is found the Chicago-Lambeth Quadrilateral adopted by the House of Bishops in 1886. This document identifies four essential elements we hold to be key to “the restoration of unity among the

³ Phil 3:14. All Biblical quotes in this project are taken from *The New Interpreter's Study Bible (NISB), New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2003).

⁴ BCP, 874. Emphasis is mine.

divided branches of Christendom.”⁵ Leading up to these four essential elements is a statement, also in four parts, that articulates the traditional Anglican approach to unity. It is the third of these four points that is of particular interest to this project:

That in all things of human ordering or human choice, relating to modes of worship and discipline, or to traditional customs, this Church is ready in the spirit of love and humility to forego all preferences of her own.⁶

It seems clear then, that rigidly clinging to rites or customs that exclude believers from the body of Christ is not the traditional approach for Anglican Christians. It is our tradition humbly and compassionately to build the body of Christ in the world, foregoing our attachment to our own status quo when necessary.

Finally, I have spent nearly my entire adult life and career working with the issue of marriage, and it is the people, whose real-life experiences are contained within this work as structural stories, who have truly motivated me to study and speak on this issue. These are people the Church exists to serve.

The canons of our church provide us an important structure upon which to stand while we serve. When the structure becomes an impediment to the care of God’s people, however, it needs to change. Canons and church structure are not

⁵ BCP, 877.

⁶ BCP, 876.

sacrosanct. The Church is alive and dynamic when it is responsive to people with the Good News, news of freedom, love, and beloved-ness, shared in the name of God. This is our tradition, our history, and our Christian duty.

SOCIAL LOCATION OF THE AUTHOR

I am a 51 year-old woman of Latina and Irish descent who has been married for twenty-one years. My husband and I had each been married and divorced once prior to marrying each other. Both of us were raised in church-going homes, he as a Presbyterian, and I as a Roman Catholic.

My first marriage was a violent one and the violence escalated, as often happens, when we had a child and again when we separated. The divorce issues took three years to settle but the custody battle plodded on for nearly a decade. All the while there was an imminent threat of violence that only truly ended sixteen years later when my ex-husband's plan for a murder-suicide was foiled when he was struck down by a fatal heart attack, just as he prepared to enter his car for the drive to my home in Georgia.

Upon the completion of my divorce action, I had informed my Roman Catholic parish priest of the details of this relationship and was informed that I could receive the sacraments of the church only as long as I did not remarry without an annulment. To ensure I understood my position within the church, I was sent by my parish priest to a workshop for divorced Catholics.

Four years later when I became engaged to remarry I was given a pro-forma annulment since my first marriage was never considered valid by the Roman Catholic Church: my first husband was Jewish and the marriage had been presided over by a judge. My husband-to-be, however, had a valid Christian marriage as defined by the Second Vatican Council, and therefore, had to submit to a two-year long annulment process so that we could be married in the Roman Catholic Church. Hence, my first-hand experience with the Roman Catholic process of annulment and the commonly applied adaptation of the “Pauline Principal” approved at the ecumenically-focused Second Vatican Council in the 1960’s.

After a decade of therapy and a successful first career in marketing, I ended up being invited to work for a struggling non-profit that wanted to become a shelter for battered women. My previous personal experience with this issue combined with my marketing skills and volunteer work in non-profit start-up made me especially well suited for the work. At the time, I had been re-married for about eight years. I successfully established the shelter for battered women in Selma, Alabama, and then had the privilege of being the Executive Director of a similar shelter in Valdosta, Georgia. This shelter became one of fastest growing in the state as well as one of the first to add to its list of programs services specifically designed to help victims of violence in homosexual relationships.

My work with people needing to be set free from the prison of a life-destroying marriage brought me into conversations with too many pastors whose understanding was shallow and rule-based or who applied an eisegetical interpretation of the letter to the Ephesians, specifically the fifth chapter in which a faithful Christian household is described. Their “pastoral care” led at least of couple of women I knew to their deaths. The Church failed them. It also failed the men who killed them, and the children who survived them. The church continues to fail them and others like them when it applies a narrowly interpreted cultural structure of early Christian culture to modern day life.

The comparative freedom for women expressed in Ephesians 5:22 seems to have been missed by many ministers of the Gospel in our day. Submission, as it is so often misapplied by eisegetical or literalist interpreters, creates a potentially deadly condition for many married Christian women in that the implied biblical support of an imbalance of power within the marital covenant, together with the implied ecclesial position that women lack certain freedoms in the context of marriage, increases the potential for actual violence to be manifested and grow. This is especially true for those women living in regions of the country where conservative Christianity reigns, marking them as another vulnerable population needing attention in the Church.

My connection to the homosexual community, which started while I was a high school student and prospective art major, eventually became a personal one. I am the parent of a gay adult child who came out to me when she was in high school, a

time during which I had been very active and very public work in gay rights advocacy. This led to my volunteer work during seminary as a chaplain for the Gay-Straight Alliance, an organization that works to bridge the hetero- and homosexual populations while providing counseling and advocacy services to the gay community among college-aged persons. In my experience with this group, the issue most often discussed in this setting, after the coming-out process, had to do with the legal complications for homosexual persons living in committed relationships without the benefit of marriage; issues such as next of kin, beneficiaries on insurance policies, property/inheritance, etc.

My connection to the vulnerable population of the elderly, particularly elderly women, comes from my personal experience as a member of the “sandwich generation,” that is, the portion of the “baby-boomers” who are responsible for caring for our elderly parents as well as for our children. Both of my parents and my husband’s mother are living. Having been raised in actively Christian homes, my parents and mother-in-law bring their generation’s understanding and experience of marriage into their “golden years” with all of the accompanying complications about marriage, re-marriage, and how these affect their Social Security and other retirement age benefits.

CHAPTER ONE: SCRIPTURE AND HISTORY

The creation stories in Genesis are often used to corroborate the notion that marriage has been designed as life-long, monogamous, and heterosexual from the beginning by God who made, as they say, “Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve.” These creation stories, however, when faithfully read, are not instructive in defining the limits of the institution of marriage. Both the Yahwist and Priestly versions tell of God’s creation of humankind (Heb: *’adam*)⁷ who were made male and female in the image of God. Both versions speak of the relationship between God and humankind and of humankind one to another. The creation stories are about humanity as a manifestation of the divine image and they instruct us on how human relationships reflect the nature of God who is community in unity. They also affirm the loving nearness and merciful presence of God in all human activity. As Episcopal priest and teacher, John Morris, says in his book, *First Comes Love? The Ever-Changing Face of Marriage*,

I see (the Hebrew creation story) as a painting of the primordial couple for whom companionship is the purpose of their being. Humans were created for relationship, mirroring the very Being of God, whom we Christians imagine in our notion of the Trinity as being ultimate Relationship ...Looking back through the mists of myth and history, we see the divine desired to have humans overcome isolation as they set out as partners on the great adventure of becoming children of God.⁸

⁷ *NISB*, Footnote, Gen. 1:26, 7.

⁸ John C. Morris, *First Comes Love? The Ever-Changing Face of Marriage* (The Pilgrim’s Press, Cleveland, 2007), 12-13.

Deriving a static, eternal definition of the limitations of marriage as a monogamous, heterosexuals-only union, with males and females having pre-ordained roles in the partnership from the creation stories in Genesis requires a telescoped view, misinterpretation, and misuse of the sacred text and its purpose. Found within even just the book of Genesis are a variety of forms of marriage and marital practices meant to protect Israel's identity and its most vulnerable people, key issues in Israel's covenantal relationship with Yahweh.

Remembering that the context of the ancient Israelite story-tellers from which these stories originated was a patriarchal, patrimonial, and patrilocal culture, modern readers of this text are cautioned to “recognize the patriarchal cast of (that) ancient society as it is reflected in the biblical narratives... and be careful about using ancient social norms as models for modern ethics.”⁹ To do otherwise is to deny the creative freedom of God whose plan of salvation has been shown over and over again to bring transformation through change. It also denies the continuing revelation of God in the world and the call for a faithful response to that revelation. Each generation of God's people is called to follow God's leading just as Abraham and Moses were. This kind of faithful following requires God's people to let go of what is familiar and comfortable and continue on, trusting God's leading. The more recent human journey from slavery to the

⁹ “Excursus: Gender in Genesis,” *NISB*, 11.

civil rights movement in the 1960's and 70's is a modern day illustration of this ancient truth.

It is my position that the current need for a static, codified definition of an institution that has a history, historically and biblically, of being dynamic and evolving is reflective of a modern cultural and religious insecurity, not moral fortitude. When people of faith need to develop a tradition that isn't there in order to enforce their belief or understanding, they have stepped outside the bounds of faithfulness to God and into the realm of intolerance and oppression, and no matter how many of them agree in this historical moment, they remain a minority voice in the big picture of the continuing story of the people of God. The essence of Christian faithfulness is the will and willingness to trust God to act mercifully in circumstances that are changing, and furthermore, to trust that God will guide us to be merciful to one another, just as God is merciful to us. Change and transformation are a part of the story of the people of God. Rigidity and intolerance have no place in our continuing story or in our understanding of the institution of marriage. In order to engage in a conversation that honors our identity as people of God and our command to protect the most vulnerable among us, it behooves us to review the path that led us to where we are on the topic of marriage.

In ancient Israel, and in early Roman society, marriage was a family matter not a religious or church-centered event. In both of these patriarchal cultures, the fathers (patrons) of the families (households) held all of the power for legal

decisions and arranged to ‘sell’ their daughters, who were their property, into marriage, exacting a ‘bride price’ or dowry.¹⁰ It was a common practice, for example, for a girl to be abducted from her family and ‘taken’ in marriage. Eventually, this practice fell out of use and was replaced by a ritualized abduction where the “husband would carry the bride over the threshold of his home and feed her a piece of sacred cake.”¹¹

Patriarchal family systems were understood as reflective of God’s relationship with humanity, the familial patron being in the position of head of the family as God is the head of all creation. Obedience offered toward the familial patron was, therefore, also held as obedience to God and God’s plan for creation. This gave the patriarchs nearly absolute authority, but also required much from them in terms of hospitality, mercy, protection, and fidelity to the Law. Patriarchal privilege afforded fathers/patrons in ancient culture the ability to enter into marriage contracts by their own choosing, regardless of the daughter’s age or willingness to consent. The contracts were property exchanges, daughters being held as the property of their fathers or husbands. Infidelity in marriage was, therefore, less a moral issue than it was an economic one.

In that culture women, who were the property of their fathers or patrons, had no rights in the marital arrangements. They could neither accept nor reject a

¹⁰ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred, A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church, Revised and Updated Edition* (Ligouri/Triumph, Ligouri, Missouri, 2001), 353.

¹¹ Martos, 353.

marriage proposal brokered by their “owner,” nor could they divorce once married. Likewise, children were the property of their father or patron. Male children had no rights until they received their inheritance. Female children never achieved such status, moving from the patronage and ownership of their fathers to the patronage and ownership of their husbands. A divorced or widowed woman, if she had no sons to protect her and no other male to take her under his patronage, was subject to a life of desperate poverty as were fatherless children. These two populations represented the most vulnerable populations in ancient culture.

Since ancient Israelite culture was patrimonial and patrilineal, wives who were childless could force their female slaves into sexual relationship with their husbands and legally take any children born of that union as their own thereby protecting themselves from dishonor and potential destitution. The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar is an example of this form of marital practice and is discussed further below. It wasn't until the Second Temple era, the second century CE that Jewish culture began to trace its lineage through maternal lines, a practice that continues to this day.¹² According to Professor Shaye Cohen of Harvard University, this practice was probably borrowed from Roman law in response to the great number of Jewish women being raped by their Roman occupiers in an effort to prevent the children born of these non-Jewish fathers

¹² Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 263.

from being social outcasts.¹³ Theologically, the practice is supported by reference to Deuteronomy 7:3-4 which reads, “³Do not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴for that would turn away your children from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.”

Levirate marriages in which a surviving brother was expected to marry and bear an heir for the deceased man by his widow,¹⁴ was an honorable and expected practice meant to preserve the family identity and assure the proper passage of land and property (including slaves) to the next generation of family ownership. While there was an option for the brother’s refusal to meet his levirate duties, to do so was to bring public humiliation to the family. The distribution of wealth and property also motivated the culture to promote endogamous marriage, that is, marriage within tribal or familial lines. Exogamous marriages, marriage with foreigners, were the exception.

Notably, it is often through the exogamous marriages that the biblical narrative shows God acting to shift the course of human history in a new direction according to God’s continuing purpose. The stories of Tamar and Ruth illustrate this point. Tamar the Canaanite was the wife of Er (Judah’s son) who died before

¹³ Shaye J. D. Cohen "The Origin of the Matrilineal Principle in Rabbinic Law," *Judaism*, Winter, 1984.

¹⁴ Deut 25:1-10.

Tamar conceived a child. Judah instructed his son Onan, “Go into your brother’s wife and perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her; raise up offspring for your brother.”¹⁵ But Onan refused, so Judah asked Tamar to remain a widow in her father’s home and wait for Judah’s young son, Shelah, to grow up and father offspring for her. Tamar did as she was asked but fearing that she might never bear the offspring due her (from the contractual agreement), Tamar ended up tricking Judah, her father-in-law, into sexual intercourse and bearing twin sons from the union.

This is significant on many levels, but for the purposes of this project it is significant because Tamar ended up being included in the genealogical list of the Messiah found in Matthew’s gospel¹⁶ despite her trickery and “whoredom.”¹⁷ Even Judah concedes that, given the marital practices of their day, Tamar was “more in the right” than he was and he rescinded his order to have her burned to death.¹⁸

In the story of Ruth and Naomi, Ruth represents another divinely directed shift in the course of human history utilizing marriage, a shift of special significance for Christians. Naomi, an Israelite, and her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpa,

¹⁵ Gen 38:8.

¹⁶ Mt 1: 3.

¹⁷ Gen 38:24.

¹⁸ Gen 38:26.

both Moabites, find themselves in one of the worst situations women of that culture could confront. Their husbands were dead and they had no sons and no other patronage available to them. Naomi invited her daughters-in-law to leave her and establish for themselves better lives in Moab. Orpa left, though not without distress, as she loved Naomi deeply. Ruth, however, refused to leave Naomi uttering those now famous and powerful words of unconditional fidelity, a fidelity not even death could disrupt:

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me...¹⁹

Recognizing the grace of Ruth's fidelity, Naomi brought her Moabite daughter-in-law with her to Bethlehem, Naomi's homeland. Ruth, a woman with nothing - no husband, sons, or patronage and no wealth of her own, a woman who is a member of an enemy race, is now living in Israel gleaning the scraps from the fields set aside for the poor to keep herself and her mother-in-law alive. Ruth's establishes a reputation of uncommon fidelity by her tireless care of her mother-in-law, but it was in Ruth's giving of her entire self, i.e. her body, her reputation, and her life to Boaz upon Naomi's request, that Ruth makes the ultimate demonstration of fidelity. Boaz marries Ruth, voluntarily accepting the levirate responsibility for the widow, refused by the nearest relative.²⁰ The two were

¹⁹ Ruth 1:16-17.

²⁰ Footnote, *NISB*, 389.

blessed by God with a son, Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David, the ancestor of Jesus.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke acknowledge the presence of the foreigner, Ruth, in their genealogies of Jesus, though only Matthew actually names Ruth. Luke offers the traditional patrilineal listing. Ruth's powerful fidelity and her voluntary offering of self on behalf of another could be understood as a foreshadowing of the ultimate kenotic offering of her descendant on the cross at Calvary.

Biblical preference in the forms of marriage

In the Old Testament narrative, a variety of forms of marriage are presented, all of them reflective of Jensen's perspective on the need for ordering of societal and personal relationships. Indeed, these various forms can be identified as "institutionalized" in that they were acceptable practices even when they strayed slightly from what was considered normative.

The earliest discussion of marriage in the Bible was the monogamous, unifying relationship between the archetypal humans, Adam (Heb: '*adam*, meaning humanity)²¹ and Eve (meaning mother of all living).²² Presented as the climax to

²¹ Footnote, Gen 1:26, *NISB*, 7.

the Yahwist account of the creation story, God brings to the male, who was created first, a companion to which the man replies: “‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman (Heb: *ihshah*) for out of Man (Heb: *ish*) this one was taken.’ Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”²³

This phrase, still used in most modern marriage ceremonies, remains the basis for our current cultural experience of the social ordering historically engendered by marriage, our theological understanding of marriage as a covenant relationship, and our legal application of marriage as a contractual agreement. Yet when viewed in its time and context, this phrase also represents the dynamic responsiveness of the institution of marriage, in that, it is the vehicle used to be responsive to an underclass in the human community. As William Roberts writes, “The Genesis creation account...was put in written form about the 10th century B.C., quite probably by a member of David’s royal court. At that time in the Near East, polygamy was an acceptable way of life, and infidelity on the part of the male spouse was tolerated. The wife, on the other hand, was bound to one husband; she was literally his property.”²⁴ Infidelity for a woman most often led to fatal consequences.

²² Footnote, Gen 3:20, *NISB*, 12.

²³ Gen 2:22-25, including the footnote on the Hebrew interpretation of Eve.

²⁴ William P. Roberts, *Marriage, Sacrament of Hope and Challenge*, (Samuel French Publishing, NY, 1983), 11.

Speaking of marriage in terms of the intimate unity of “one flesh,” the drawing of two whole persons into a greater whole while not sacrificing each one’s identity, is a radical change of focus, raising up the vulnerable, often oppressed class of women to equality with men in the marital partnership. Roberts goes on to explain that the term “helpmate”²⁵ in the Genesis account does not imply that the female is inferior or subservient to the male, but rather establishes equality between them. Citing the Psalms, Roberts points out that the term “means refuge or support, the staff upon which we can lean, the one in whom we can trust and in whom we can find security.”²⁶ Theologically, to become one flesh is to become reflective of the nature of God whose Being is community in unity,²⁷ and speaks to the sacramental nature of marriage. To become one flesh is to enter into a journey or process leading to a synergistic transformation with each becoming more together than they can be alone - the source of the synergy being God.

In the fourth chapter of Genesis, the first son of the first humans, Cain, is recorded as having a single (unnamed) wife. Literalists would have to assume that Cain’s wife is his sister since there are only two human parents thus far, yet one hardly hears of a call from any side of the marriage discussion for more marriages among siblings. Monogamy is also the form of marriage employed by Cain’s son, Enoch, and the pattern continues for several generations. The first

²⁵ Gen 2:18.

²⁶ Roberts, 13-14.

²⁷ The ordering of these terms reflects a Western Christianity perspective. It also could have been listed as unity in community, reflecting the perspective of Eastern Christianity.

person in the ancient lineage identified as practicing polygamy is Cain's great-great-great-grandson, Lamach, who took two wives, Adah and Zillah. No reason is given for this change and no judgment, positive or negative, is passed on the choice. The Biblical models of marriage presented thus far include endogamous monogamy and endogamous polygamy.

When he was one hundred eighty two years old, Lamach became the father of Noah. When the world was destroyed by flood, the practice of marriage employed by the patriarch who would repopulate it was monogamy.

Interestingly, while Noah's progeny are listed, there is no mention of their wives, so no conclusions can be drawn about the practices of marriage employed by them. The reason is: marriage was not the story being told. The story was about God's presence and activity in covenant relationship with humanity.

Abraham, the next Patriarch in the biblical narrative, has only one wife, Sarah, for the greater part of the Abrahamic narrative. Mindful of God's promise to Abraham and impatient with her barrenness, Sarah chooses to produce an heir by forcing her Egyptian slave, Hagar, to bear her husband's child, then claiming that child as her own. Hagar's terrible situation, made worse by her subsequent exile by Abraham for 'lording' it over Sarah, was redeemed, however, when God extended a promise similar to Abraham's to Hagar, promising to make a great nation of her son, Ishmael. As a result, God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation with descendants more numerous than the stars was fulfilled through both of his sons.

The non-traditional approach employed by Abraham's wife worked, in the end, to enhance not inhibit God's purpose. It also added to the biblical model for marriage the option for surrogacy through exogamous polygamy. Later Abraham takes another wife, Ketura, and though she and his other concubines²⁸ are mentioned as receiving "gifts" upon his death,²⁹ Abraham leaves his entire inheritance to Isaac, his son with Sarah.

Genesis also records that Abraham's son, Isaac, had only one wife, Rebekah. This marriage reasserts the importance of endogamous monogamy. In this story, Abraham sends a servant to his homeland to find Isaac a wife from among his own people. Abraham held no power being a resident in an alien land, so his prospects for finding a suitable wife were dim. The story, however, reveals that Abraham's powerlessness is redeemed by God's faithfulness in that Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel and sister of Laban, consents to marry Isaac. Through this marriage, God's covenant promise to Abraham, to make his descendants as plentiful as the stars, was reaffirmed and made real.³⁰

Isaac's son, Jacob, had two wives, the sisters Leah and Rachel who are Laban's daughters. In addition, Jacob had two concubines, that is, two secondary wives

²⁸ Footnote, *NISB*: "The term 'concubine' appears to designate secondary wives," 47.

²⁹ Gen 25:6

³⁰ Footnote, *NISB*, 45.

with whom he bore children, Zilpah and Bilhah, the slaves (maids) of Leah and Rachel. In this part of the biblical narrative, the concubinage of Rachel and Leah's slaves is presented as an accepted cultural practice. What seems to us, as modern observers, a "Big Love"³¹ kind of non-traditional family, is presented in the story of Jacob as normal and acceptable.

Sinful marital practices are also presented in the book of Genesis. The story of Lot and his daughters presents incest as a marital form, albeit a shameful one. Still, offspring are produced and presented as a teleology of the Moabite and the Ammonite peoples, hated enemies of ancient Israel.³²

The story of Dinah presents another sinful form of marital practice: rape, which even when tender words are used, is punishable as sin. When Dinah's father and brothers avenge the wrong done to them (she was after all their property) they take Dinah out of her husband's house and return home with her, but only after killing all of the men who lay in pain from their circumcisions, part of the bride-price they paid for Dinah.³³

For the Israelite people, their identity as the people of God was paramount and influenced their practices in marriage. Men were expected to marry kin or at

³¹ HBO © television series about a modern, polygamous, fundamentalist Mormon family in Utah, 2006-10.

³² Gen 19:30-38.

³³ Gen 34.

least people of the Israelite nation in order to preserve their identity. In the story of Samson found in the book of Judges, for example, Samson desires a Philistine woman and wants her to be his wife. Samson's parents try to discourage him, saying, "Is there not a woman among your kin, or among all our people, that you must go to take a wife from the uncircumcised Philistines?"³⁴

Although various forms of marriage are presented in the Old Testament, there is a clear preference for endogamy and monogamy. Exogamy and polygamy are also acceptable practices, however, and are employed as such by patriarchs and other beloved biblical characters. What is absent from the ancient narrative, however, is the need for a single, rigid definition of this institution.

Marriage as a prophetic metaphor of covenant

The forms of marriage found in the Old Testament fit within the patriarchal cultural context of ancient Israel as well as the theological context reaffirmed by the prophets who used marriage as a metaphor to illustrate the nature of the covenant between God and humanity. To be sure, as with all metaphors, the similarities are limited. The mercy of God made available to God's people as part of the covenant extends far beyond that which humans can offer one another in relationship. Still, the metaphor of marriage as covenant is compelling in its illustration of the intimate nature of the covenant relationship and the effects of the loss of that love on the Lover making this metaphor particularly useful to the

³⁴ Jud 14:3.

prophets who continually call the people of God to return to righteousness. Probably the most familiar of the prophetic metaphors for marriage is found in the book of Hosea in which Israel (i.e., the people of God) is portrayed as an adulterous wife, adulterous because she has been tempted to stray out of her covenant relationship with God by other (false) gods.³⁵ God, as the wronged husband, exposes his spouse in her shame, humiliating her before her lovers and the world,³⁶ then works to win her back, lavishing on her forgiveness and grace upon grace.³⁷

Unfortunately, some men have interpreted this text as biblical justification for abusive behavior toward their wives whom they believe to be, or have caught, in adulterous situations. It is unfortunate because this story was never meant to be descriptive of the human institution of marriage. It was certainly never meant to justify interpersonal violence of any kind. That is not the goal of the metaphor.

The prophet Hosea simply used the metaphor of marriage as a device to illustrate how hurt and betrayed God feels when we, who are in a covenant relationship with God, practice idolatry. Hosea also uses this metaphor to illustrate how forgiving God is (unlike most humans) despite this betrayal, always opening the way for us to repent and return to right relationship. The power of the metaphor lies in our ability to identify with the feelings expressed. Most people know what

³⁵ Hos 1:2-6.

³⁶ Hos 2:1-13.

³⁷ Hos 2:14-23.

it's like to feel betrayed by someone we love. The grace of the metaphor is found in the divine mercy that exceeds what we humans can imagine or accomplish.

This same metaphor and theme are found in the writings of other prophets. In the book of the prophet Isaiah, God, who is the husband in the metaphor, acknowledges that he has cast out Israel, the wife, turning his face from her in a fit of anger. Amazingly, however, God seems to repent of what may have been an overreaction to Israel's infidelity³⁸ and promises everlasting love and compassion. Recalling the promise to Noah, God swears that God will never again resort to anger or abandonment, promising instead steadfastness of love and a covenant of peace.³⁹

In the book of Proverbs, God, personified as Lady Wisdom, calls the rulers and people of God to mature faithfulness and knowledge of God. Wisdom warns her children against idolatry which distracts them from following the path of righteousness, promising deliverance for the faithful from their temptation: "You will be saved from the loose (Heb. *strange*) woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words, who forsakes the partner of her youth and forgets her sacred covenant."⁴⁰

³⁸ Footnote, *NISB*, 1032.

³⁹ Isa 54:5-10.

⁴⁰ Prov 2:16-17.

The prophet Malachi accuses Israel of profaning its covenant through idolatry: “Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god.”⁴¹ In other words, Israel has shared the intimacy of her love outside of their covenant, she has ‘become one flesh’ with a foreign god.

In the New Testament, the gospels of Matthew and Mark extend the marriage metaphor to Jesus as the bridegroom at a wedding banquet being thrown by the King (God).⁴² This new covenant (new marriage) affirms and fulfills God’s pattern of steadfast faithfulness, even in the face of infidelity on the part of the people of God. It also affirms the pattern of shifting the course of human history through transformation of the status quo.

There is further discussion of marriage in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, the ordering of family systems in the letter to the Ephesians, and behavioral and household codes found in the pastoral letters.⁴³ In the same way that the ethics of the ancient Israelite culture can’t be literally or directly applied to modern culture, these letters are instructive on how we can work to live out our gospel

⁴¹ Mal 2: 11.

⁴² Mt 25:1-13; Mk 2:19-20.

⁴³ 1Cor 7:1- 39; Eph 5:21-33; Col 3:18-4:6; 1 Tim; 2 Tim; Jam 4:4-10.

imperative in the context of our own cultural norms and in light of our identity as followers of Christ.

The development of marriage as a religious/civil institution

As the Roman Empire reached across the Mediterranean and Europe, war changed the dynamics of the ancient cultures and legal systems and, therefore, of marriage practices. Men were called away to battles leaving women in charge of family affairs. This change in the social/familial systems eventually led to the demise of the practice of a 'bride-price.' In its stead grew the custom of a betrothal, sealed by a ring. Marriages, which had long been arranged, were now becoming consensual.⁴⁴ During this time, however, marriage remained a private family matter. It was not, at this point, a civil/legal or religious issue.

During the first three centuries of the Christian Church, issues such as the nature of God, the Trinity, and Christological controversies, took priority in theological debates. Under the Emperor Constantine, marriage remained a private, consensual agreement, but now consent could be given either by the parties of the marriage or their parents. Marriage entered the sphere of civil law only when contested cases of divorce were sent to the magistrates. Although Constantine allowed some Bishops to act as magistrates, there is "little indication that they were given any marriage cases to decide."⁴⁵ At this point the church had little to

⁴⁴ Martos, 353.

⁴⁵ Martos, 360.

no involvement in marriage nor were there any “uniform ecclesiastical regulations regarding marriage.”⁴⁶

The patriarchal bias found in ancient Israel persisted in the Eastern and Western Christian Churches through the patristic era, during which time the monastic tradition was beginning to develop and the issue of celibacy arose as a vocation preferable to marriage. Soon “sexual abstinence became increasingly associated with moral perfection.”⁴⁷ During this time also, divorce by mutual consent was outlawed entirely, supported by the writings of such theologians as Ambrose and Augustine of Hippo.

It was Augustine, a Manichaeist by training, who first declared that procreation was the only “legitimate reason for having sexual relations.”⁴⁸ It was also Augustine who first described marriage as “a sacred sign, a *sacramentum*, of the union between Christ and the church... (and) apart from Augustine, no one (else) spoke of marriage as a sacrament.”⁴⁹

Once this idea took hold, as Augustine presented it, the church had a way to justify an increased involvement in the establishment of marriage bonds. Priests

⁴⁶ Martos, 351.

⁴⁷ Martos, 361.

⁴⁸ Martos, 366.

⁴⁹ Martos, 366, 367.

and bishops began to take more active roles in the marriage, first blessing the civil unions, then later developing marriage liturgies to be held in the churches. By the fifth century priests and deacons were required to receive “an ecclesiastical blessing on their marriage” but it wasn’t until the eight century that liturgical wedding ceremonies became common practice.⁵⁰

As the Roman Empire fell under the continued pressure of Germanic invasions, all of Europe fell into the Dark Ages. The practices of the Germanic victors were integrated into Roman customs and marriage once again became “property arrangements by which a man purchased a woman from her father or guardian [in exchange for a]...bride price.”⁵¹

The legitimization of a marriage at its consummation was a Germanic custom which conflicted with the present Roman understanding that a marriage was legalized at the moment of consent by the parties (or their parents). This mattered only when the marriage was heading toward divorce, which was an increasingly relevant issue at the time due to the popular practice of clandestine marriages, a practice that enabled people to enter unions they could later renounce on little or no grounds, a practice lamented as “the greatest threat to the sacredness of marriage”⁵² of the time.

⁵⁰ Martos, 364, 363.

⁵¹ Martos, 368.

⁵² Martos, 382.

These clandestine marriages re-created previously attended vulnerable populations: women, with no legal recourse against a spouse who deserted her, and the children born of that marriage. In an attempt to stop the increasingly damaging consequences of these clandestine marriages, the Roman Church issued a pastorally motivated declaration that marriage was only legal and valid if blessed by a priest.⁵³

By the eleventh century, all marriages in Europe effectively came under the jurisdictional power of the church.⁵⁴ Liturgical wedding ceremonies began to develop but it wasn't until the twelfth century that clergy-run ceremonies held in the church were established as customary.⁵⁵

Later, in the twelfth century, Pope Alexander III ended the debate over whether a marriage became valid at the moment of consent versus the moment of consummation by declaring that a valid marriage was established at the moment of consent, but could be annulled if it had not been consummated. Since, the marriage bond was otherwise indissoluble, owing to the Augustinian teaching of the sacramentality of marriage, divorce was not an option except for the "Pauline

⁵³ Martos, 371.

⁵⁴ Martos, 372.

⁵⁵ Martos, 372.

Principle” which allowed for marriages established outside of the Catholic Church to be dissolved if one of the persons converted to Catholicism.

During the Middle Ages, the Church continued to struggle with its aversion to sexual activity, which it viewed as the conductor of original sin to the generations.⁵⁶ This led to discussion about the consent given by the couple to each other in marriage (*sacramentum*) and the bond of the marital union (*sacramentum et res*) which, like the union between Christ and the Church, was considered indissoluble. This led the Roman Catholic Church to establish an “absolute ...prohibition against divorce...as a canonical regulation supported by sacramental theory, and as a theological doctrine buttressed by ecclesiastical law.”⁵⁷

Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, spoke of the *sacramentum* of marriage as more than consent. As he understood it, it was the marriage itself because he believed that marriage, which existed prior to the Incarnation of the Word, was a natural institution, a “social institution ...ordered to the good of society...and a sacrament...ordered to the good of the church.”⁵⁸ For Aquinas, the “‘matter’ of the sacrament was...the human reality of marriage...[and] the ‘form’...consisted of the words of mutual consent spoken by the spouses” and permanently sealed in

⁵⁶ Martos, 377.

⁵⁷ Martos, 377.

⁵⁸ Martos, 378.

the consummation.⁵⁹ This remains the theological position of the Roman Catholic Church to this day.

It wasn't until later in the thirteenth century that the issue of sexual relations within marriage was revisited. John Duns Scotus, the Franciscan theologian, proposed that marital sex could be legitimate outside of the goal of procreation.⁶⁰ While this idea was radical enough, it was Scotus' teaching that the ministers of the sacrament were rightfully the persons getting married (not the priest) that was truly revolutionary. Using canon law as it existed, Scotus reasoned that if a couple who married outside of the church were validly (if illegally) married, and if validly married people received the sacrament of marriage (per canon law), then the ministers of the marriage must necessarily be the couple, not the priest.⁶¹

The Reformation Era saw the sacramentality of marriage and the place of the church in it challenged by Martin Luther, John Calvin, and other reformers. Luther challenged Aquinas' teaching claiming instead that marriage "was a natural and social institution which...fell under natural and civil law, but not church law."⁶² At the same time, the Council of Trent (1545-63) re-affirmed the permanence of the marriage bond and its prohibition against divorce originally

⁵⁹ Martos, 378.

⁶⁰ Martos, 379.

⁶¹ Martos, 379.

⁶² Martos, 380.

codified at the Council of Florence (1439), which established marriage as one of the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church.

It was the French Revolution at the end of the sixteenth century, however, that marked the beginning of the end of ecclesiastical control of marriage in Europe as well as a major shift in the practice of marriage. With the governmental mandate that marriage would now be solely a civil institution, French Roman Catholics suddenly found themselves in an impossible position. Their Church required marriage by a priest, but the government was allowing only civil ceremonies. The Roman Catholic Church responded to this newly emerged vulnerable population by affirming that the ministers of the sacrament are the couple, not the priest, reminding everyone that “it had long recognized that baptisms even by heretics and schismatics were sacramentally valid... [therefore, in like manner, the marriage] contract cannot be separated from the sacrament.”⁶³ With this affirmation, valid marriages could once again be established outside of the church and its authority.

In the Episcopal Church, the first resolution on matrimony was offered at the General Convention of 1808 and allowed for the remarriage of a person who was divorced if they were the innocent victim of adultery in their marriage.⁶⁴ Also

⁶³ Martos, 384.

⁶⁴ *Canon Law Institute, “Matrimony.”* Source: http://www.canonlaw.org/article_matrimony.htm Copyright © 1998-2005 Canon Law Institute. All Worldwide Rights Reserved. March 18, 2010.

during the nineteenth century the Anglican Church relaxed its prohibitions on divorce, aligning itself more closely with the Eastern Orthodox Church on this issue.⁶⁵ Anglicans also took the position that while the marriage rite is sacramental, marriage is not a sacrament, that is, it is not necessary for everyone as are Baptism and Eucharist. This remains the theological position of the Episcopal Church today and it is reflected in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer. Listed under the title, “Other Sacramental Rites” in the Catechism, the Prayer Book describes “Holy Matrimony [a]s Christian marriage, in which the woman and man enter into a life-long union, make their vows before God and the Church, and receive the grace and blessing of God to help them fulfill their vows.”⁶⁶ In the section called, “Concerning the Service,” the Prayer Book defines marriage as: “a solemn and public covenant between a man and a woman in the presence of God.” One person in the couple must be a baptized Christian and two witnesses must attest to the completion of the ceremony, the details of which must conform to all state and canon laws.⁶⁷ This means that, in the United States, state-issued forms such as a license to marry must be presented, and other state-issued forms must be completed by the officiating clergy, signed by the witnesses, and sent to the office of the Secretary of State for filing.

At its 1904 Convention, The Episcopal Church added the “Matthean Exception” to

⁶⁵ Martos, 381.

⁶⁶ *Catechism*, BCP, 861.

⁶⁷ BCP, 422.

the canons on marriage. This resolution refers to Matthew 5:32, which says: *But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.* The Matthean Exception allowed for remarriage of the innocent party who could provide proof that their divorce resulted from adultery on the part of their spouse. Remarriage could only occur, however, following a mandatory year-long waiting period.⁶⁸

At the 1930 Lambeth Conference, Anglican bishops approved contraception for those married couples for whom “there is such a clearly felt moral obligation to limit or avoid parenthood, and where there is a morally sound reason for avoiding complete abstinence.”⁶⁹ The Roman Catholic response was quick and harsh. In his encyclical on marriage and family, *Casti Connubi*, Pope Pius XI, characterized the Anglicans and their position as misled: “there are those who, striving as it were to ride a middle course, believe nevertheless that something should be conceded in our times as regards certain precepts of the divine and natural law. But these likewise, more or less wittingly, are emissaries of the great enemy.”⁷⁰ The Pope clarifies the Roman position: “amongst the blessings of

⁶⁸ *Canon Law Institute*. Source: http://www.canonlaw.org/article_matrimony.htm, March 18, 2010.

⁶⁹ “The Lambeth Conference Official Website, Resolutions from 1930, Resolution 15, The Life and Witness of the Christian Community - Marriage and Sex.” Source: <http://www.lambethconference.org/resolutions/1930/1930-15.cfm>

⁷⁰ *Casti Connubii*, Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Christian Marriage, December 32, 1930, Paragraph 47. Source:

marriage, the child holds the first place. ...Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.”⁷¹

In 1931, the Episcopal Church added a list of other “impediments” to a marriage, besides adultery, which would allow for the nullification of a marriage by a Bishop. The list included such things as: consanguinity, lack of free consent, lack of reaching the age of consent (pubescence) on the part of one or both parties, insanity or mental deficiency, undisclosed impotence or venereal disease, and bigamy.⁷² In 1943, Convention separated the canons about marriage from the canons about how to solemnize a marriage.⁷³ This change in the canons is especially relevant to current discussions and resolutions on the issue of marriage. The Convention of 1946 added fraud to the list of impediments and charged the Bishop with making a determination that the couple wishing to re-marry was legally able to meet the canons and demonstrated the intention to

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121930_casti-connubii_en.html

⁷¹ Pope Pius XI, *Casti Cannubii*, Paragraphs 11, 54.

⁷² Canon Law Institute. http://www.canonlaw.org/article_matrimony.htm, March 18, 2010.

⁷³ Canon Law Institute. March 18, 2010.

enter a “true Christian marriage.”⁷⁴

Also during the twentieth century, modern culture collided with traditional theology resulting in a dramatic shift in the understanding of marriage from “a social duty ...(to) an individual right.”⁷⁵ Love took precedence as the motivation for marriage and the primary purpose of marriage was no longer procreation but personal fulfillment.⁷⁶ Vatican II reflected this change referring to marriage as “an intimate partnership...a covenant.”⁷⁷ In 1983, Pope John Paul II codified this concept into the Code of Canon Law.⁷⁸

The response of the Episcopal Church can be found in the 1979 revision of The Book of Common Prayer which describes marriage as a

bond and covenant [which]...signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church...The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God’s will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Canon Law Institute. March 18, 2010.

⁷⁵ Martos, 386.

⁷⁶ Martos, 386-387.

⁷⁷ Martos, 388.

⁷⁸ Martos, 390.

⁷⁹ BCP, 423.

This description places procreation last in the list of the purposes of the marriage and even allows for the possibility of no procreation at all. By this description people formerly excluded from the purpose of this sacramental union have been included, i.e., people of non-childbearing years, people who are unable to have children, and people who don't desire children.

Feminism, homosexuality, and the politics of marriage

The rise of feminism in the mid-twentieth century changed the cultural, theological, and legal face of marriage once again. The cultural pressure for women to marry into the security of a patron/husband eased and women began to focus on their own careers outside the home. The sexual revolution, a cultural phenomenon that began in the 1920's but came to fruition in the 1960's, made sexual activity outside of the bond of marriage commonplace, as negative cultural judgment for it began to fade. In addition, the availability of female contraceptives and the Roe vs. Wade decision which made legal abortions more readily available, gave women the power to decide for themselves whether or not to get or stay pregnant. All of this meant that some marriages, particularly those entered into to "legitimize" sexual activity or pregnancy, were no longer necessary.

In the 1970's, domestic violence victim advocacy groups grew out of the women's movement of the 1960's and began establishing safe houses for women trapped in

violent marriages. This decade also saw a dramatic rise in the overall rates of divorce and the complications of that: children of divorce and blended families among remarried parents. At the same time cohabitation began to increase among young adults who no longer felt compelled to be legally married and saw fewer examples of successful marriage around them. Meanwhile, the Episcopal Church relaxed its prohibitions on divorce and remarriage further at its 1973 Convention, allowing for the remarriage of persons whose marriages were considered valid and whose “former spouse was still living.”⁸⁰

The issue of homosexuality became an open discussion in American culture during the 1970’s and 1980’s, with gays in all aspects of society beginning to “come out” and live openly. The introduction of the AIDS virus, which ran nearly rampant in the male homosexual community, drew proclamations of the judgment of God against homosexuals from some segments of the Christian community. It wasn’t long before science settled the fears of most Americans about the transmission of the HIV virus and fears about homosexuality began to ease as well – except in a significant portion of the Christian community.

Significantly, in 1976, the 65th General Convention of Episcopal Church affirmed that “homosexual persons are children of God who have an equal claim upon the love, acceptance, and pastoral care of the Church.” This was reaffirmed at the 67th

⁸⁰ Canon Law Institute. March 18, 2010.

General Convention in 1982 which added “that homosexual persons are children of God and are entitled to full civil rights.”⁸¹

The 1990’s and early 2000’s saw the rise of the Christian right, a conservative and sometimes extremist segment of the American Christian community. In their book, *Religion and Politics in the United States*, Kenneth Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown state, “The conservative position is most commonly associated with organized religion. Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Mormons, and conservative Protestants (including fundamentalist [sic], evangelicals, and charismatics) subscribe to the view that homosexual behavior is prohibited, ... marriage is between a man and a woman, [and] there are no options to renegotiate that which has been divinely established.”⁸² Evidence of this is found in the 1998 adoption of the “submission statement” by “the largest Protestant denomination in America, the Southern Baptist Convention: ... ‘A wife is to submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband even as the church willingly submits to the headship of Christ.’”⁸³

Conservative Christians entered the political scene in great numbers. But as Wald and Calhoun-Brown assert, “the debate about homosexual rights is about much more than the politicization of sex. It reveals individual and societal beliefs

⁸¹ *The Archives of the Episcopal Church, The Acts of Convention*.
<http://www.episcopalarchives.org>, March 18, 2010.

⁸² Kenneth D. Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and Politics in the United States, Fifth Edition* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, MD, 2007), 336.

⁸³ Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 105.

about fundamental components of democratic governance, including freedom, equality, the appropriate role of government, majority rule, and minority rights. [In other words, it] reflects a discussion about the nature of life and the social order.”⁸⁴

Riding the wave of fear and hatred aimed at gays, fortified by fear arising from the acts of terror on 9/11, conservatives began a movement to amend the American Constitution with a codified definition of marriage that would limit the union to a man and a woman only. In his presidential address dated February 24, 2004, George W. Bush said:

The Constitution says that full faith and credit shall be given in each state to the public acts and records and judicial proceedings of every other state. Those who want to change the meaning of marriage will claim that this provision requires all states and cities to recognize same-sex marriages performed anywhere in America. Congress attempted to address this problem in the Defense of Marriage Act, by declaring that no state must accept another state's definition of marriage. My administration will vigorously defend this act of Congress.

Yet there is no assurance that the Defense of Marriage Act will not, itself, be struck down by activist courts. In that event, every state would be forced to recognize any relationship that judges in Boston or officials in San Francisco choose to call a marriage. Furthermore, even if the Defense of Marriage Act is upheld, the law does not protect marriage within any state or city.

⁸⁴ Wald and Calhoun-Brown, 329.

For all these reasons, the Defense of Marriage requires a constitutional amendment. An amendment to the Constitution is never to be undertaken lightly. The amendment process has addressed many serious matters of national concern. And the preservation of marriage rises to this level of national importance. The union of a man and woman is the most enduring human institution, honoring -- honored and encouraged in all cultures and by every religious faith. Ages of experience have taught humanity that the commitment of a husband and wife to love and to serve one another promotes the welfare of children and the stability of society.⁸⁵

The legal battle on this front continues to be waged in the uniquely American way – state by state. To date, five states (New Hampshire, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts and Vermont), one tribe (the Coquille in Oregon), and one federal district (Washington, D.C.) grant same-sex marriages. California had been included in that list for a time, but a successful voter initiative known as Proposition 8 banned same sex-marriages in that state. This ban is currently being challenged in federal court. Three states recognize same-sex marriages but do not perform them: New York, Rhode Island, Maryland. Eleven states currently have amendments to their constitutions that define marriage as heterosexual only: Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Ohio, Utah, and Oregon.⁸⁶

⁸⁵ Bush Speech on Defense of Marriage Act. Source: <http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/02/24/eleco4.prez.bush.transcript/>

⁸⁶ *50 state rundown on gay marriage laws*: <http://www.stateline.org>, March 18, 2010.

In the chapter entitled “Bad Things Happen when Church and State Mix” from his book, *Church-State Matters*, J. Brent Walker comments, “when the church and state get mixed up together, one of two things always happens – and both are bad. At worst, consciences are violated initially and persecution results ultimately. At best (if it can be called ‘best’), state-controlled religion – even in the hands of a benevolent government – waters down religion and strips it of its vitality.”⁸⁷

Wainwright and Tucker confirm the “dangers of a strong religious presence in national party politics,” citing a 1969 study by Rose and Urwin

of seventeen nations with strong electoral traditions. In approximately half of the countries, the principle line of electoral conflict was defined by religious affiliation or practice... [and] the countries with the strongest religious divisions has experienced much more strain, violence, and political instability than those whose politics were largely free of religious controversy. In some cases, religious conflict... had even contributed to the collapse of governmental systems and the emergence of antidemocratic politics.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ J. Brent Walker, *Church-State Matters, Fighting for Religious Liberty in Our Nation's Capital* (Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 2008), 82.

⁸⁸ Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, Eds., *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 353.

Currently, clergy find themselves in the midst of this potentially dangerous mix. Since clergy act as agents of the state in regard to marriage, the only instance I can find in American culture where church and state are not held to the Constitutionally mandated status of “separated,” the current situation creates a potentially difficult situation for pastors and church authorities to reconcile, as Walker predicted it would, but the difficulty is in the pastoring, which is (or should be) our priority: how do we provide pastoral care using the rites and practices of the church in the face of legal restrictions on certain populations, especially as those restrictions continue to change?

For clergy, the legal floor keeps shifting and with it, therefore, the pastoral issues that arise. In the state of California, for example, only those same-sex marriages performed prior to the ban in November of 2008 remain legal marriages, even though they are not federally recognized. In addition, five U.S. senators have sponsored a bill to repeal the Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell policy, the military’s solution to dealing with homosexuality among their ranks, and a repeal of California’s Proposition 8, which bans gay marriage, is currently being considered in federal court. The problem for the clergy becomes one of authenticity: how to proclaim the good news that salvation is for the whole world while a specific group of God’s people is being discriminated against by some state authorities and not by others. In California, clergy are contending with persons who were, for a time, included and validated, only to be excluded and derided shortly thereafter.

In the big picture, this situation isn't actually all that different from the one faced by believers during the French Revolution, if we could learn from our own history. In that case, the church responded pastorally to the state edict that churches were no longer permitted to perform marriages by making a pastoral-theological adaptation declaring that the ministers of the marriage were the couple, shifting the authority about the validity of a marriage to the couple. In that way, marriages performed by the state would also be considered valid in the church.

The difference between these two historical moments is that in thirteenth century it was the state imposing restrictions on the church's ability to serve a couple seeking marriage. In the current situation, both the state and the church are imposing exclusionary restrictions on couples seeking marriage.

The conflation of state authority and pastoral responsibility regarding marriage has led to the jeopardizing of a faithful pastoral response to a vulnerable population within the people of God in our time, specifically homosexual believers seeking marriage. Some Episcopal clergy find themselves in a predicament keeping their ordination vows to "love and serve the people among whom [we] work, caring alike for young and old, strong and weak, rich and poor ... [and being] a faithful pastor to all whom [we] are called to serve."⁸⁹ Some Episcopal bishops find themselves particularly challenged to keep their

⁸⁹ BCP, 531, 532.

ordination vows to “guard the faith, unity, and discipline of the Church [while also being] a faithful pastor... to the whole flock.”⁹⁰ At the same time, the current canons of the church and the laws of a majority of states clearly limit marriage to couples reflecting the heterosexual ideal and many truly faithful bishops, priests, and lay members of the Episcopal Church hold to this ideal.

For many Episcopal and some Anglican clergy, keeping these ordination vows may put us at odds with other members of the worldwide Anglican communion, and even with the Archbishop of Canterbury himself. The reason is, The Episcopal Church’s membership is driven by a constant reminder of the promises of our Baptismal Covenant, as often as four times a year according to the Additional Directions found in the Book of Common Prayer.⁹¹ Other members of the world-wide Anglican Church don’t have this set before them as we do. Regularly hearing and renewing our Baptismal vows motivates the members of The Episcopal Church to serve the people of God not the institution of the Church. This is our tradition. Faithfully following the Savior means there are times when the family experiences the sword, not peace, as Jesus indicated would happen.⁹²

⁹⁰ BCP, 517.

⁹¹ BCP, 312.

⁹² Mt 10:34.

In 2003, The Episcopal Church elected and consecrated its first openly gay bishop, The Right Reverend Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, who was (and is) living in a committed, long-term, homosexual relationship. Since civil and ecclesial restrictions prohibited the bishop from “marrying” his partner, a cry arose from portions of the Christian community about the sinfulness of their cohabitation.

In response to this landmark event, one Episcopal Bishop, Neil Alexander of the Diocese of Atlanta, shared about his personal transformation of thinking on this issue in his book, *This Far by Grace, A Bishop’s Journey Through Questions About Homosexuality*. Describing the Episcopal Church as “pragmatic,” Bishop Alexander explains that Episcopalians are “a variegated tapestry of theology and experience and [that] we are all the richer for it ... [that] we keep our differences in perspective, ... recogniz[ing] that ultimately nothing will divide those who are willing to stand together before God’s altar to sing, to pray, and to receive the gift of God’s eternity.”⁹³

That said, a large part of the worldwide Anglican Communion responded with shock to the election and consecration of Bishop Robinson - some expressing support for the decision and some expressing outrage. Some branches of the Anglican family tree began calling for the expulsion of the Episcopal Church from the Anglican Communion while others, including the Anglican Church in Canada,

⁹³ Neil Alexander, *This Far by Grace, A Bishop’s Journey through Questions About Homosexuality* (Cowley Publications, Cambridge, MA, 2003), 5.

which had approved public rites of blessing for same-sex unions, confirmed their solidarity with the Episcopal Church and Anglican lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered persons throughout the world.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, responding to a call from the Primates of the Communion, quickly gathered a group of theologians together to respond. The Lambeth Commission, as it was called, with The Rev. Dr. Robin Eames, Archbishop of Armagh as its Chair, was mandated to “seek a way forward which would encourage communion within the Anglican Communion.”⁹⁴ This commission issued the Windsor Report in October, 2004 in which can be found the seeds of the current work on an Anglican Covenant by the Covenant Design Group established by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 2006. A final draft of the Anglican Covenant was distributed to the member churches worldwide at the end of 2009. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has also posted a message to the churches via YouTube video calling for discussion and adoption of the Covenant “by as many provinces as possible.”⁹⁵

For the institution of the Anglican Church the issue, it seems, has become one of authority – who has it, how much do they have, and how/when can it be applied to enforce compliance within the “bonds of affection” we call the Anglican

⁹⁴ *The Windsor Report*, 1. Source: <http://www.anglicancommunion.org>, March 18, 2010.

⁹⁵ YouTube video embedded on the webpage: *The Windsor Process – An Anglican Covenant*. <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/commission/covenant/index.cfm>, March 18, 2010.

Communion. Lost in the discussion is the important pastoral issue of the exclusion of some of our believers from the sacramental benefits and privileges of marriage.

While it's true that the discussion on sexuality, specifically gay sexuality, in the Christian body is polarizing, politically and theologically, Christians are called to reconciliation. When the sword has been drawn and used, this is particularly difficult work. In his book, *Sexuality and the Christian Body*, Eugene Rogers argues that theological issues, including the issue of gay and lesbian marriage, are political and must be dealt with in the political milieu because "theology is always concerned with the question of life with God; life with God is a life in community, ...and politics is at best a reflection of what life in community ought to be."⁹⁶

As polarizing as this issue is the body of Christ, the faithful, are challenged to maintain a relationship with one another that allows for continuing conversation. Rogers quotes the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, as saying that although Christians can begin with the same premises they can end up with different conclusions. Williams urges Christians, therefore, not to "completely void the commonness of their starting point. It is really a matter of having a language in which to disagree rather than speaking two incompatible or mutually exclusive tongues."⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Sexuality and the Christian Body* (Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, UK, 1999), 29.

⁹⁷ Rogers, 26.

CHAPTER ONE: CONCLUSION

One of the greatest deceptions we humans suffer is the notion that we can find safety and security by projecting our sense of what's right in the present moment as an eternal truth. We fall into the mistaken notion that if everyone else believes as we do, and if this is so over time, even centuries, then we must all be right. The truth is, no matter how many of us believe something, and no matter how long we believe it, we can all be wrong. A case in point: slavery.

The idea that marriage is and always has been a church-centered, life-long, monogamous, indissoluble bond between one man and one woman, that it is the only morally approved context for sexual activity, and that it has always been so is a fallacy that is simply not borne out by Scripture or history. Marriage has moved historically from contractual property exchange between patrons to consensual agreements of commitment and/or covenant. It began in ancient Jewish culture as a private family affair, evolved into a civil issue, but didn't involve a priest or rabbi in the marriage ceremony until centuries later when the Church stepped into new territory and imposed its authority. In fact, in ancient culture priests only intervened in troubled times to interpret the Law (Torah) and when necessary, granted divorce. In modern culture, rabbis, priests and ministers act as agents of the state in the creation of the marital bond but have no

place in the legal dissolution of a marriage, except in the case of annulment in Roman Catholic ecclesiology.

The argument against the indissolubility of marriage is domestic violence. A marriage that has become destructive of one of the partners in the covenant no longer reflects the purpose of God which is salvation for all; it no longer reflects the covenant between God and creation, a covenant which has always promised kindness and mercy, forgiveness, renewal, abundant life and salvation. A marriage wherein one partner exercises capricious violence (whether physical, emotional, or spiritual), coercion, domination, humiliation, and/or entrapment over the other partner can not be considered sacramental regardless of the origin of the relationship or the legal/sacramental ties that bind the couple. This is the kind of “hard-heartedness” to which Jesus was referring when he explained in the gospel of Matthew why Moses allowed for divorce.⁹⁸

Modern culture has seen the development of laws and response systems meant to protect the rights of women in marital partnerships, legally established or not, as well as any children produced or involved in that partnership. Still developing are systems that help victims of abuse heal prior to recreating abusive relationships in their adult life. Here the Church bears responsibility for providing persons a real opportunity for discernment and preparation for the covenant of marriage. With current information available on teen dating violence, sex trafficking, child sexual abuse, and intimate violence, a significant

⁹⁸ Mt 19:8

number of people, particularly women, entering into discussions of premarital counseling will have issues of past violence or abuse to process prior to entering a sacramental covenant. It is incumbent upon the clergy providing pre-marital counseling to be educated and prepared to have these important discussions.

New vulnerable populations deriving from the complexities of the current cultural and economic situations also challenge us to respond. Widows who remarry, for example, must forego the Social Security benefits from their departed spouse upon their remarriage. For many women, especially elderly women, this represents the proverbial rock and hard place: choosing to live in the sin of immorality, marriage still being held by many of that generation as the only approved context for sexual activity, or giving up the hard-earned security of their economic futures. In fact, a woman today who is widowed twice could end up as vulnerable as a widow in ancient times because her second husband's Social Security benefits would go to his first wife and heirs. Having lost her first husband's benefits upon her remarriage, the twice-widowed woman is simply out of luck. Since many women of that generation didn't work outside the home, they may also have little to no Social Security benefits of their own on which to rely. As a result, many among the elderly are now cohabitating without benefit of church marriage, accepting the guilt and risking the promise of eternal damnation in order to avoid becoming homeless and destitute in their 'golden years' putting a whole new spin on what makes a population vulnerable.

Homosexuals whose lives bear witness to the sanctity of their relationships continue to have the rite of marriage denied them by Church and culture. Yet if we were to apply John Duns Scotus' thirteenth century argument, a couple who marries outside the church is validly, if illegally married, and if validly (though illegally) married people have received the sacrament of marriage, then the homosexual "marriages" in our time must be similarly valid and sacramental. The challenge for the Church then, is how to work to transform the social, legal, and ecclesial systems that exclude and marginalize those persons who fall outside of the procreating, heterosexual ideal, whose dignity must be respected according to our baptismal vows.

Going back to the point of the creation stories in Genesis as presented earlier, the divine plan for humanity is one of righteousness, that is, right relationship. As we consider how to move forward in our understanding and practice of marriage, especially as it relates to the issue of same-sex marriage, it behooves us to remember the words of Eastern Orthodox theologian, Fr. William Basil Zion: "To impose an ideal as an absolute in a way which would permit no physical contact between two persons of the same sex, particularly where the surrounding material evil is destructive of the realization of any ideals, is to turn moral theology into a tyranny out of touch with all reality."⁹⁹

⁹⁹ William Basil Zion, *Eros and Transformation, Sexuality and Marriage, An Eastern Orthodox Perspective* (University Press of America, Inc., Lanham, Maryland, 1992), 319.

There are no dowries or bride-prices to be paid anymore since people are no longer considered property. In addition, property and inheritance issues in modern culture are no longer family affairs but are governed by a variety of laws designed to meet the requests of the deceased in the distribution of property, whether fair or unfair in the eyes of society and God. In the absence of a rigid patrimonial culture, a person may leave all of their property to a pet if they so choose.

Since women can own property and have personal estates for distribution at the time of their death, they are not, as a population, as vulnerable as women in ancient culture were. Today's society sees new vulnerable populations emerging, however, in the context of the issue of marriage: the elderly who subsist on Social Security benefits, homosexuals, victims of sexual and intimate violence, and children of divorced parents.

The practices of marriage derived from the stories in the book of Genesis simply don't fit the complexities of modern, pluralistic, American culture and, therefore, can't be used as models for our ethics. The status of women and children is radically different in modern society, as is the understanding of family systems, patriarchy, and the distribution of personal property through inheritance. Modern culture is transient, not tied to the land, as was ancient Jewish culture. American culture in particular derives at least some of its strength from its pluralistic identity, proudly referring to itself as "a melting pot" (some now prefer the moniker "stew pot" since the individual ingredients remain identifiable even

in their blended sauce, but that definitely isn't as pithy a name). Americans also pride themselves on the gifts gained from the presence and intermarriage of many races, ethnicities, and cultures within our borders.

An ethics that is more relevant for our time is presented by Stanley Hauerwas in his book, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. For Hauerwas, who we are as Christians is the context for understanding the process by which we decide what to do in any situation. Christians are participants in a narrative, a story of relationship with God and with each other in community. Therefore, "the 'situations' we confront are such only because we are first a certain kind of people" - Christians.¹⁰⁰

Christians have been tempted, Hauerwas says, to approach ethics deontologically. The problem with that approach he says, is that we "lose our imaginative power to offer the world a new possibility by being a different kind of people," a people driven by the Christian narrative.¹⁰¹

Hauerwas proposes that the proper approach to ethics will "emphasize the narrative form of our moral convictions, [and] the necessity of virtues as a background to our decisions."¹⁰² He argues that "by noting the narrative context

¹⁰⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom, A Primer in Christian Ethics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 116.

¹⁰¹ Hauerwas, 128.

¹⁰² Hauerwas, 121.

that all...decisions assume...we see [that] the crucial question is how that ‘decision’ is to be understood.”¹⁰³

Hauerwas describes the art of narrative as our ability to describe ourselves individually and communally – to tell our story. Our communal narratives inform how we view ourselves and the situations we confront individually. “If it is true that I can act only in the world I see and that my seeing is a matter of my learning to say, it is equally the case that my ‘saying’ requires sustained habits that form my emotions and passions, teaching me to feel one way rather than another.”¹⁰⁴ These habits are nurtured, even compelled, by our communal narratives.

Hauerwas claims that deontology (especially Roman Catholic moral ethics), which he calls “the old morality,” begins at the wrong place - at the act description.¹⁰⁵ The old morality asks, what kind of act is that? In this ethical approach, a behavior or act is deemed ethical according to whether or not it violates certain basic principles.

¹⁰³ Hauerwas, 127.

¹⁰⁴ Hauerwas, 117.

¹⁰⁵ Hauerwas, 117.

The better question, according to Hauerwas, since situations do not have ethical meaning apart from our narrative understanding is, what kind of person am I?¹⁰⁶ That is, the ethical meaning is not found in a basic principle that is violated by a certain behavior, but in the virtues by which the community defines itself.¹⁰⁷

These virtues, which determine the habits that sustain the communal self-understanding, also determine the communal prohibitions. Hauerwas refers to McIntyre who points out that these prohibitions protect the “relationships ...necessary to achieve the communal good and for which the virtues are practiced.”¹⁰⁸ Violating the communal prohibitions means “one is no longer leading one’s life in terms of the narrative that forms the community’s understanding of its basic purpose [because these] prohibitions are the markers for the outer limits of the communal self-understandings.”¹⁰⁹

Communal narratives provide “the conditions of truth,” therefore, changing communal virtues means changing the way we understand ourselves – changing our story.¹¹⁰ Change happens as a response to challenges to our communal

¹⁰⁶ Hauerwas, 117.

¹⁰⁷ Hauerwas, 118.

¹⁰⁸ Hauerwas, 118.

¹⁰⁹ Hauerwas, 118.

¹¹⁰ Hauerwas, 118.

understanding of the truth. As a result, “we rightly discover that to which we are deeply committed only by having our lives challenged.”¹¹¹

Casuistry then, is not an examination of the ethical implications of a particular act description, says Hauerwas, because “descriptions of ‘situations’...are part of a larger narrative whole.”¹¹² “The primary task of casuistry [in Hauerwas’ approach to Christian ethics] is to help us understand our interconnectedness so that we can better appreciate how what we do not only fits within the story of our lives, but also how it is determined by and determines the ongoing story of the Christian community.”¹¹³

According to the story of the people of God recorded in Scripture, the ordering of our social and personal relationships has always been a complicated business requiring a recollection of our communal narrative, flexibility within our tradition, and the courage to establish new norms (canons) that lift vulnerable populations out of destruction and oppression. As Christians, the cries of the ancient prophets for righteousness and the command from our Savior to love one another as he loved us¹¹⁴ call us to see and notice the vulnerable populations in

¹¹¹ Hauerwas, 120.

¹¹² Hauerwas, 125.

¹¹³ Hauerwas, 130.

¹¹⁴ Jn 15:12.

our midst and respond to their needs with mercy and gracious hospitality, the kind shown to us by our Creator/Redeemer/Sanctifier.

The household of God is not a club that can exclude populations it deems unworthy. We are all unworthy, and yet, we are still chosen and called to serve. Given our call to love and respond, we must show the courage our forbears did as we let go any rigid hold we have on our definition of and traditions about marriage and be instruments of God who has been shown to shift the course of human history through transformative change. This means having the courage to open ourselves to the continuing revelation of God in our time and establish new norms, new praxes. This approach is the one that is faithful to our tradition and ethics, to the models we have in Scripture, and to our experience as baptized Christians in our time.

I suggest that responding faithfully might also mean re-examining the clergy's role as agents of the state regarding marriage. As one Episcopal priest responding to my survey put it, "I believe the church should no longer act as an agent of the state in officiating at marriage ceremonies. I do believe the church should continue to act as an agent of God's grace by offering pre-marital counseling and the blessing of couples who choose to honor and participate in the community and sacraments of the Church."¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ Narrative response from my online survey, Feb. 9, 2010. Used with permission.

A young, female, lay person also responding to my survey says this:

I think the gov't [sic] should issue civil unions to all persons who want to be legally bound to their partner (same sex included). This union should protect the couple's rights for benefits, children, etc ... Any couple who then wants a Christian marriage, Jewish marriage, etc ... would have this done at their church under their faiths' requirements. I think that for me a Christian marriage means more than just a legal contract, but I am aware that not everyone wants that. In the same regard, I think people who don't want the "legal" benefits of a union, but feel they want their relationship to be sacred in the eyes of God, could have a religious ceremony without a civil union but would be held accountable for the requirements their church upholds. Gov't [sic] should not be involved in the religious idea of what a marriage is, only the legal idea of a "union."¹¹⁶

Some countries already apply this kind of dual process for marriage: England and Wales, for example. Additionally, during a mission trip to Romania I learned that the Orthodox faithful might obtain a civil marriage a year or more prior to their marriage in the Church, allowing the couple and their families time to save up for the great reception following the nuptials.

¹¹⁶ Narrative response from my online survey, Feb. 3, 2010. Used with permission.

CHAPTER TWO: EXPERIENCE AND CULTURE

There are seven structural stories used in this project to illustrate the complicated and very practical issues faced by people today who are trying to be faithful, loving, and happy. Each of these stories represents a real-life situation¹¹⁷ and sheds light on how the Episcopal Church can begin to make its pastoral response, remaining faithful to our Christian identity and the promises made in our Baptismal Covenant: “Will you proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ? ... Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself? ... Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?”¹¹⁸

1. Yuvanna and Sam: the vulnerable gays, exiled from the Church

I first met Yuvanna while running a shelter for victims of domestic violence and rape. I hired Yuvanna, fresh out of her Master’s program in marriage and family therapy, to be an advocate during the evening shift at the shelter. Her job was to conduct nightly support groups and life-skills training sessions. Yuvanna was one of the best and most effective advocates on my staff. About a year after she was hired, Yuvanna allowed her sexual orientation as a lesbian to become known so

¹¹⁷ Although the information in these structural stories is used with permission, names and other identifying information of the persons involved have been changed. In some cases, the stories of more than one couple are combined within a structural story.

¹¹⁸ BCP, 304-305.

that she could advocate more effectively for the women who had begun calling us seeking comfort and safety from battering in homosexual relationships. As our shelter became known as a place that would and could advocate for lesbian victims, more and more began to call for help. Yuvanna moved on after about three years to run a program for women recovering from alcohol and drug addiction in a nearby town, but we remained good friends and stayed in touch as colleagues.

A few years later, Yuvanna introduced me to her new partner, Sam, a licensed addiction counselor with whom she worked. Yuvanna was a recovering, divorced, African-American, single mother of two. Sam was a single white woman, never married, with no kids and no personal issues of addiction/recovery. They were lesbian lovers in a tiny, South Georgia town who worked tirelessly with the poor, the abused, and the addicted.

One day while having dinner at my house, Yuvanna and Sam announced that they were “getting married” and wanted me to “officiate” at their wedding. I was shocked by their request, having never even witnessed a lesbian “wedding” at that point, so I asked if I could have some time to let them know. I felt like I needed time to discuss it with my spiritual director, my priest, and my Bishop - especially my Bishop since I was about to enter the process for ordination.

The truth is, although I had been an advocate for gay rights for many years, I had never finished thinking through how I felt about gay marriage. I needed time to

consider this in prayer. I also did some research. I found reputable studies showing that sexual orientation is determined biologically, not environmentally or socially. So the question became: if God created persons to be homosexuals, what did that mean?

My prayer led me to consider a context with which I was more familiar. My father is a recovering alcoholic.¹¹⁹ I am his A.A. baby, which means I was born in his sobriety; I have never witnessed him drinking. Having grown up well educated in Alcoholics Anonymous, and having taught the medical model of alcoholism as the Marketing Director for an inpatient substance abuse program, I was fully aware of the biological predisposition for the disease. If God created people with a biology that predisposed them to alcoholism, does that mean they should be left alone to live into their alcoholism? Is life as an alcoholic within God's saving plan? No - of that I was certain. Why? Because alcoholism is a disease that destroys life – the life of the alcoholic, and the lives of those who love them. Alcoholism isolates the alcoholic from awareness of the love of God and others, raising the 'self' to the position of utmost priority. Over time, alcoholism destroys the body, mind, and relationships of the alcoholic. It cannot, therefore, be understood as revelatory of God's covenant relationship. Nor can it be justified in light of Jesus' command to love God, neighbor and self as he, Christ, loved us.

¹¹⁹ My father has given me permission to break his A.A. anonymity for the purpose of this project, 04/10/2010.

Likewise then, if God created people with a biology that predisposed them to homosexuality, does that mean they should be left alone to live into their homosexuality? Is life as a homosexual within God's saving plan? I reflected on the relationship of my friends, Sam and Yuvanna, referring to the qualities and responsibilities of marriage as found in the rite of marriage in the Book of Common Prayer.

Yuvanna and Sam were wounded but devoted Christians who had been excluded from church membership and worship because of their relationship. Their devotion to God, however, hadn't failed. In fact, within their relationship each of them was manifesting renewed passion in their relationships to God.

Their love was life-giving, both within their relationship and extending out from them to their children, their clients, and their friends. Healing and new life happened in their personal and professional lives. As I considered it, their relationship as a couple *was* covenantal and it reflected God's covenant love for humanity as well as (even better than) some of the heterosexual relationships I knew.

In the end, I concluded that homosexuality, unlike alcoholism, would be found within God's saving plan, and that the sacramental of nature of marriage, that is the presence and reflection of Christ's saving love, could be appropriately applied to homosexual relationships. I decided that I would help write their marriage liturgy and officiate at their "wedding." That was over a decade ago.

Sam and Yuvanna entered into their married life together without the continuing support of a church family. There was no church near them that would welcome them and their children. They tried driving the 50 miles to my church, but soon found the distance just too much to manage. They lived too far away to have any part of the church's life except on Sundays. The children, then pre-teens, were unable to participate in the youth events. After a while, the family gave up trying to accomplish the 100-mile round trip, even on Sundays.

Yuvanna and Sam's marriage of twelve years finally ended in separation, but not because of their sexual orientation or the pressures they faced as a bi-racial, lesbian couple in the deep South. Like many marriages, Yuvanna and Sam suffered together through the vicissitudes of life, including the death of their infant son born to them by in vitro fertilization, Sam's cancer diagnosis which put to rest all hope of Sam ever conceiving or maintaining a pregnancy to full term, Yuvanna's career change, the challenges of raising Yuvanna's teen-aged children, and their continuing efforts to adopt a child since having one was no longer an option.

Unfortunately, Yuvanna and Sam had no community of faith to turn to, no church family to support and uphold them in their time of challenge. Because they were not welcomed in any churches within a reasonable distance from their home, this family was isolated and alone as they confronted the kinds of problems most families face. Their marriage was finally stressed beyond its

ability to survive. Shortly after adopting a son, Yuvanna and Sam separated. Both still actively parent their child who is now a child of divorce, actually, if not legally. Both are still devoted to one another, but neither is able to participate any longer in their marriage. They continue to live in the same small town in south Georgia, and they continue to have no church within a reasonable distance that welcomes them.

2. Evelyn and Bob: the vulnerable elderly

Evelyn and Bob were in their late seventies, still living in the same area of lower Alabama in which they'd both grown up. Evelyn had been attending the Presbyterian Church downtown for half a century, even serving for a time as an elder, while Bob had been a member of the Baptist Church, just down the block and across the street from the Presbyterian Church.

Bob suffered from congestive heart failure along with a constellation of other physical maladies. Evelyn was in excellent health though experiencing the beginnings of senile dementia. Both were retired and living on their Social Security. Evelyn's benefits included the Social Security from her late husband, a World War II veteran, who died about eight years earlier. Bob's retirement included a hefty package of benefits resulting from his years of success in business, an enterprise he had already turned over to the care of his children. Bob

ran into Evelyn just as his wife, who had been comatose for two years due to a long and difficult illness, was beginning to die.

Bob and Evelyn had dated fifty years ago when they were in college. Although Evelyn chose to marry Edward all those years ago, Bob never forgot his love for her. Upon their reunion, Bob and Evelyn began dating to the delight of everyone who knew them – except Bob’s kids. Their mother wasn’t dead yet and they saw Evelyn as a money-hungry opportunist trying to get a piece of the multi-million dollar pie that was their inheritance.

Bob and Evelyn knew that Bob’s time was short, maybe a year, but they were in love and they wanted to spend whatever time they could together. Evelyn’s family tried desperately to convince her to move in with Bob but not to marry him, but Evelyn wouldn’t even consider it. No matter how comfortable the world was with that sort of lifestyle, for her it was sin. Her family tried to explain that, unfair as it might seem, she would lose the Social Security benefits hard-won by her first husband, Edward. In addition, Evelyn’s own Social Security benefits wouldn’t be enough to provide her proper care should she need it long term; and as healthy as Evelyn was, long-term care seemed a good bet. Evelyn assured her family that God would see to her needs and she wasn’t about to lose this opportunity to love again.

Evelyn and Bob married within months of their reunion, only a couple of weeks after Bob’s wife died. Bob’s family didn’t attend the wedding.

Bob died just about a year later, leaving Evelyn only a small gift as her inheritance from his estate. The home Evelyn shared with Bob for their single year of marriage now belonged to Bob's children, who moved quickly to evict her. Evelyn had sold her own home in order to move in with her new husband and used the proceeds from the sale to renovate the home she shared with Bob. Evelyn was now homeless and Bob's children were unsympathetic. Evelyn's son bought her a small home nearby, but her dementia began to worsen rapidly following Bob's death requiring her to be placed in a high-level care facility, the cost of which now had to be shared by her children whom she could no longer recognize or remember.

Evelyn and Bob represent a situation currently faced by many elderly people. Due to outdated societal laws affecting their benefits, these people are faced with the choice of "living in sin" as they were taught to see any sexual relationship outside of marriage, or give up their financial security. This situation particularly affects elderly women who tend to live longer and are the recipients of their late husband's benefits, but only as long as they don't remarry. Most of these women didn't work outside the home at all in keeping with the social mores of their time. Those who did work outside the home often had shorter careers, entering the work force after their children were in school. In addition, the earnings of the average woman from that generation were far below the average man's reducing the overall value of the Social Security benefits available to them. As a result, when these women choose to remarry, many end up with insufficient funds to

cover their long-term needs and it is the families of these women who must carry the burden. When that isn't possible, these vulnerable women can end up homeless and on the streets.

Evelyn and Bob are also the products of a modern Christian Church that continues to teach an irrelevant theology: that a legally obtained marriage is the only moral and acceptable context for a loving, sexual relationship. Approaching this situation from an ethics that begins with who we are as Christians rather than on the sexual nature of this relationship, removes judgment about the sexual act and focuses our response on the nature of their relationship and the cultural circumstance in which their relationship has developed. Evelyn and Bob, like many in their generation and region, believed that violating this teaching would transform their eternal rest into eternal damnation. The Church that formed and served Evelyn and Bob and invited them to be married could have set them free from that which held them bound, i.e., the teaching of an irrelevant theology and deontological ethics focused on the acts instead of the persons, but none of the local pastors contacted by Evelyn's children would do that. The response of Evelyn's own pastor says it all: "It's sin. It's a shame for them, but it's sin and I can't condone it. Besides, (and here, I think, is the truth of it) if I were to give them permission to live together outside of marriage the elders would have my head."¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Personal conversation. June 10, 2002.

Bob's family had initially refused to participate in or attend his funeral, being held at Evelyn's church. Representative members of Bob's family did attend, though there were few niceties exchanged between these genteel southern families, even as hors d'oeuvres were being shared in the parish hall following the service. The families were overtly unreconciled. The two pastors made vain attempts to bridge the covert divide in the room, a divide that brings to one's imagination what the Red Sea might have looked like after being separated by God through Moses. Bob's family hovered near the rear door to the parking lot while Evelyn's family and friends spread across the rest of the room, never breaching the invisible divide in the room.

Following Bob's death, Evelyn's world descended into chaos outpacing the internal chaos being created by her dementia. The Christian virtue of Evelyn's family was ultimately challenged when a member of Bob's family, members of a neighboring downtown church, came to Evelyn's house to remove the paraffin wax machine Evelyn used to soothe her arthritic hands, purchased by her late husband and therefore, being reclaimed by his family.

Evelyn and Bob received little to no pre-marital counseling prior to their marriage. Evelyn's pastor, who married them, stated that he believed they were old enough to know what they wanted. He also seemed to have fallen under the spell cast by the romance of their story. A fifty-year-old love separated by time was being rekindled in the hearts of these sweet elderly people. As a result, he

never took the time to help this elderly couple think through the difficult and long-term economic realities that were about to confront them and their families.

Since the option of living together outside of the bonds of marriage was not an option for the pastor, it was not an option for the couple. Fornication, as the church describes any sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage, was to be avoided by good Christian people of any age in any time. So for the Christian community belonging to Evelyn and Bob, adhering to short-sighted rules of acceptable behavior took precedence over the welfare of these believers whose love sought consummation. If the pastors of these churches had not been acting as agents of God and of the state at the same time, they might have had another option open to them, an option that utilized the power of their imagination and arose from the Christian narrative: blessing a union of love within the church setting that, for reasons beyond the control of the couple and for the sake of their best interest, could not be accomplished in the legal sphere.

When this couple united their lives in marriage, their families were rent apart. Neither pastor made any attempt to help the families reconcile before, during, or after Evelyn and Bob's marriage. To this day the families remain unreconciled, entrenched now in the habit of seeing one another as enemies. This is no small thing for Christians living in a small southern town, and it is no small thing for members of the body of Christ.

3. Callie and Don: the vulnerable young wounded by institutional church

Callie and Don, both in their twenties, met in college. Callie was raised Roman Catholic, going to church regularly, even attending Catholic school through high school. Don was raised by, as he said, “rabid atheists,” especially his father, now deceased, who hated everything Christian. His father had been raised Roman Catholic and his mother in Reform Judaism.

Callie and Don lived together for three years prior to announcing their plans to get married. Although she identifies herself now as “non-religious, and definitely not Catholic,” Callie contacted her parish priest from her elementary and high school days to ask him to marry her and her fiancé, but the priest refused once Callie informed him that she was no longer a practicing Catholic. Callie was devastated by her exile from her former community. She and Don decided, therefore, to have a civil wedding – no church at all.

This grieved Callie’s Roman Catholic parents, but they remained hopeful that Callie would change her mind and return to her initial desire to invite God into the union in some form. According to Callie’s parents, Don didn’t seem terribly anti-Christian despite his upbringing, and he was a decent man who seemed a good choice for their daughter in every other respect.

Callie’s mother contacted her sister (me), who is an Episcopal priest, for advice on how to approach her daughter regarding her response to her exile from her

home church and the resulting lack of interest in having the church or God present in her marriage ceremony. She also asked if it might be possible for the young couple to be married in the Episcopal Church, or to at least be married by me since I was known and loved by the young bride-to-be.

Upon receiving approval from my Bishop regarding my pastoral approach to this situation, I was able to answer affirmatively and began to engage the young couple in pre-marital counseling. I made a pastoral decision (supported by my Bishop) to leave it entirely up to the couple to determine how much God-talk, sacramental symbol and liturgy would be part of their nuptials. The pre-marital counseling, using the tool I developed,¹²¹ was conducted via cell-phone and online video-phone because of the geographic distance between the couple and priest.

During the course of the pre-marital counseling, the couple was given a wedding booklet template which is taken directly from the “Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” rite from the Book of Common Prayer¹²². The template would give them a place to begin thinking through the details of their own ceremony. I also informed the couple that they had total freedom to add, delete, or change any and all parts of the ceremony, which they did to a considerable degree initially. As the counseling continued, however, and the couple’s understanding grew about themselves, the nature of the marital relationship, and how that relationship

¹²¹ See *Premarital Counseling Tool*, Appendix A.

¹²² BCP, 422-432.

connects them beyond themselves, they began adding back into their ceremony more and more features of the liturgy as found in the Prayer Book.

In the end, the marriage ceremony created by the couple reflected the Prayer Book liturgy nearly exactly, with a few changes in wording. A poem by Rumi was inserted into the spot for where the Gospel would normally be read, and the prayers for the couple were called “Wishes for the Bride and Groom,” even though very few changes in the wording of the prayers were made.

The marriage ceremony was conducted in a public venue (not in a church) and included enough ‘God-talk’ and liturgical symbols to make the Roman Catholic parents of the bride happy, i.e., candles (including a unity candle), priestly vestments (cassock, lace surplice and stole), blessing of the rings, and liturgically ‘tying the knot’ by wrapping the couples’ hands in the priest’s stole.

Surprisingly, several members of the groom’s atheistic family were likewise moved by the ceremony. One member of the groom’s family particularly liked the portion of the ceremony that described the purpose of the union and asked if the couple had made that part up. In reply, I opened the Book of Common Prayer and showed them the place they were describing to which the atheist replied, “If I’d known that 30 years ago, I might not be an atheist now.”¹²³ A response sang in my heart which, by the guiding of the Spirit, I made as a silent reply: “Glory to

¹²³ Personal discussion. August 31, 2008.

God, whose power working in us, can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in the Church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen.”¹²⁴

When a couple is seeking the presence of God to be part of the forming of their marital union, isn't it possible that it's the Holy Spirit calling to them, drawing them back into a community of faith which will support and uphold them as they grow in their married life together? The church is responsive to God when it welcomes couples like Callie and Don back into their midst and welcomes their desire for divine presence in the formation of their marital union as an opportunity for evangelism. The Church fails when we hold to rules that exclude persons from sacraments due to their lapsed membership status, or when we fail to remember that many who go astray are led home by significant moments in their lives, moments like marriage or the birth of a child, that call them back into a sacramental life and community.

The pre-marital counseling relationship is a wonderful means of evangelism in that it opens the way for a priest to enter into an authentic Christian relationship with the couple, a relationship that manifests the hospitality of the Trinity, welcoming all whom God has drawn near. The focus of the time is relationship building and spiritual listening so that voice of God whispering in them can be acknowledged, amplified, and manifest in their relationship. It is from within this

¹²⁴ Eph 3: 20-21.

authentic relationship that the practical aspects of the premarital counseling are most effectively discussed.

The mission of the church is to share the good news we've been given as generously as it has been shared with us by the One who died and rose again to give it to us. Trusting in the love of God, the power of our own liturgies, and the time-tested value of the Book of Common Prayer, we are free to enable young couples like Callie and Don to begin wherever they are and find their way, over time, to where they need to be. It is, after all, God who is guiding. It helps, however, when the Bishop who is the guardian of "the faith, unity and discipline of the church"¹²⁵ has our back.

4. Jo and John: the vulnerable children of divorce

Jo and John are twenty-somethings and good friends who met in college. Jo is a gay female. John is a straight male. While Jo and John co-habit as roommates, they are not a couple seeking marriage. In fact, according to Jo and John neither wants to get married "at all – ever! Why perpetuate a system that doesn't work?" Jo and John represent a great number of Gen-X'ers¹²⁶ whose understanding

¹²⁵ BCP, 517.

¹²⁶ A pop-culture term referring to the generation which followed the Baby-boomers generation born between the mid-1960's and the end of the 1970's. The term was coined by Jane Deverson in an article for *Women's Own* magazine in 1964. Source: <http://www.statemaster.com/encyclopedia/Generation-X>

about marriage derives from their experience as children of divorce. Marriage, as they have witnessed it in their lives, doesn't work. Jo witnessed domestic violence and infidelity in her parent's marriage. John experienced a bitter divorce beginning when he was a young child and continuing for years with legal battles involving custody and child-support issues.

According to Jo and John, people don't need to marry anymore. There's no stigma to living together or having children outside of legal marriage. Besides, they point out, the statistics show that nearly half of all marriages end in divorce and most of the ones that don't probably should. Their opinions are based on their own experiences with their parents and the experiences of many of their friends who are also children of divorce or wish they had been.

For Jo and John, the certificate of marriage seems quite obsolete. As they see it, when two people in a relationship are committed, they stay. When they aren't they go – no legal battles, no destruction of personal wealth and assets. Both point to an alternative reality offered by the culture of celebrities so prominent in modern American culture: Goldie Hawn and Kurt Russell, whose unmarried, committed relationship has lasted decades, or Nicole Richie and Joel Madden, together and unmarried for over three years and with two children. The Richie-Maddens have each other, a family, and do charity work together through a mutual philanthropic foundation. The only thing they and the Hawn-Russells don't have is a certificate of marriage – proof of a blessing by either the church or

the state on their relationship. To Jo and Jim, this is a good thing and probably why the relationships have lasted.

The childhood experiences of Jo and John are common in the current culture and have led them to see the glass as half-empty regarding marriage. Children of divorce often witness marriage and adult relationships at their worst, not their best. It is incumbent upon church leadership to help children of divorce discover a larger perspective that allows the half-fullness of the glass to be recognized and the hopefulness of covenant to find its place in their experience once again. That larger picture is discovered by encountering and engaging the mystery of God's transforming love.

The conflation of the legal and spiritual natures of marriage, manifest in the praxis surrounding our ritual for solemnizing these unions, often leads people like Jo and John to see the earthly manifestation of the covenant of marriage, bound up so often in the sinfulness and destructiveness of our human frailty and they miss the divine presence by which our human frailty is transformed. There is no amount of convincing that will be effective in addressing this problem. What works is bringing the mystery to their inexperience or connecting the experiences they may already have of divine presence to their understanding of marriage.

Sharing an instructed Eucharist, or better yet, a Eucharist which incorporates the Public Service of Healing found in the Book of Occasional Services, ideally in the

context of the full community of faith, gives people like Jo and John opportunity to feel and experience for themselves the amazing love and generosity of grace available to them by the Creator who counts them as beloved.

A frank discussion about sin, judgment, forgiveness, and reconciliation is also important. I find Paul Tillich's approach to this especially helpful. According to Tillich, humanity is created to be in perfect communion with God and with all God created. Sin disrupts that harmony of being. In his book, *The Shaking of the Foundations* Tillich describes sin as a three-fold separation: from God, from each other, and from ourselves. This separation, which is caused by the seeking of our own will instead of the will of God, distorts all of our relationships. It is only by God's grace and our willingness to repent that we are restored to righteousness, that is, right relationship.¹²⁷

Jesus also speaks plainly to us on the issue of repentance: "I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish"¹²⁸ and he goes on to explain what he means in the parable of the fig tree. In this parable, the lord of the vineyard sees a fig tree that isn't producing fruit, judges it as useless, and orders it cut down. The owner of the garden gives the tree one more chance but in order to live the tree and the tree's community must change how they're doing things... which is the point in this parable: repent, change how you and your community are living together or

¹²⁷ Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1948), 154-156.

¹²⁸ Lk 3:13.

you will die because the way you are living leads away from the will of God, and therefore, to death.

The good news, though, is that in God, who is “abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness”¹²⁹ sin and grace are bound together. As St. Paul tells us, “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”¹³⁰ According to Tillich, that sin and grace are bound together creates for us a struggle, best described by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...”¹³¹

Young people like Jo and John, members of the Gen-X’ers and children of divorce, may not realize that people don’t resolve this struggle, God does; that people don’t restore righteousness, God does. What is asked of us is faithfulness and a willingness to invite God in, to make room for the love of God to transform us and restore us to harmony.

When we sin (and we will sin throughout our lives) we are called to repent, trusting that God loves us and desires to restore us to righteousness. When we choose to repent, we may find ourselves “struck by grace,”¹³² as Tillich says, the

¹²⁹ Ps 86:15.

¹³⁰ Ro 5:20.

¹³¹ Ro 7:15.

¹³² Tillich, 161.

way St. Paul was on the road to Damascus, knowing deeply the truth that God loves us with an incomprehensible love, even though we are thoroughly unworthy of that love. Suddenly, as Tillich says, “a light breaks into our darkness and it is as though a voice were saying: ‘You are accepted...accepted by that which is greater than you...’ After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe better than before, but everything is transformed.”¹³³ Repentance opens the way for all of our relationships to be changed, empowered by the grace of God’s acceptance.

Another transforming experience for people like Jo and John is accomplished by inviting them to participate in the service of The Rite of Reconciliation of a Penitent. This service makes real the experience of God’s gracious offering of grace and forgiveness in the face of human frailty and sin. Hearing the words of absolution and the priest’s closing plea for prayers for her/his own human frailty¹³⁴ works... it just works. Something happens, something beyond words but not beyond notice happens when forgiveness and grace touch sin. Our liturgies can be trusted to do their work. All we need to do is offer them, practice them, and let them work.

Jo and John also expressed their own continuing pain from their childhood experiences, pain that could use a spiritual salve from the Good News we proclaim. Scripture offers much by way of hope and promise, but I have found

¹³³ Tillich, 162.

¹³⁴ BCP, 448.

that few people actually spend much time seeking their healing there. In the first place, many don't know how to go about that. More often, however, they find - or have pointed out to them - frightening judgment there. Teaching and practicing *lectio-divina* using whatever texts are offered from the Daily Office lectionary provides a three-fold benefit. It confirms the value of our lectionary, offers a discipline for daily prayer, and reveals the undeniable story of love, mercy, and saving purpose of God in our Scripture.

In my experience in conversations with believers, or with those struggling to understand what they believe, it sometimes surprises me how few people have given any serious time to contemplating the mystery of the Trinity. If marriage, however, truly is a reflection of the life of God who is unity in community, then some time spent encountering the mystery of the Trinity is not only helpful, but necessary.

For this experiential discussion, I turn to Celtic spirituality, i.e., St. Patrick's breastplate, St. Brendan's prayer, and Aidan's prayer,¹³⁵ together with some time in Centering Prayer to allow these prayers to reach deeply in and open a new way of being present in the mystery of God. Marriage re-framed in this way becomes less about personal actions, abilities, and responsibility, and more about participating in the life of the Trinity.

¹³⁵ These prayers are attached as a handout called Celtic Prayers found in Appendix C.

5. Tina and Mark: the vulnerable who have been divorced

Tina and Mark are in their forties, each has been divorced, and each has grown children. Tina's youngest, the only one still living at home, is about to head off to college. Tina and Mark bought a home together five years ago and have been living there together outside the bonds of marriage due to restrictions placed on her child support and custody by the courts. Both were clear that they wanted a traditional church wedding with Holy Eucharist and the presence of the members of their church family as well as their family and friends.

This couple admitted that their pre-marriage living arrangement put them in a bit of a theological bind as parents in that, they felt like they were “living in sin” while trying to teach their teenaged children the value of a committed marriage in the context of a church family, etc. Circumstances beyond their control made that impossible for a time for them, but they still felt like hypocrites and worried that their children wouldn't take seriously their guidance toward monogamous commitment, marriage, and church membership.

The good news for this couple is found in the gospel of Matthew where Jesus helps us understand how to differentiate between what belongs to and of the world and what belongs to God when these two come into apparent conflict. Jesus also clarifies who is and who is not a hypocrite.¹³⁶ When a couple is able to

¹³⁶ Mt 22: 17-22.

live honestly in the reality of their worldly circumstances, without fear of judgment from the ‘rules police,’ they are free to live as authentic Christians, witnesses of the freedom and fruits of salvation.

While rules provide tremendous benefit in the ordering of any social or ecclesial culture, for Christians, compassion trumps rules when it is discovered that the rules themselves have become an impediment to the will of God for God’s people. Jesus affirms this saying, “I desire mercy not sacrifice... for the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”¹³⁷ Sometimes couples need to hear this again, applied in the circumstances of their own lives, in order to truly receive the grace of it. Few modern Christians would judge the people in Jesus’ day for picking grain on the Sabbath in order to feed the hungry, nor would they condemn someone for paying taxes to the government. Yet, as this couple’s story illustrates, we so often condemn ourselves in similar ethical dilemmas.

For Tina and Mark it was helpful to remind them how welcoming and non-judgmental most of their parish family had been with them through these five years of their cohabitation and how much these same people looked forward to the day they could share in the celebration of their marriage in the church. Recognizing the true bond of love in their union, no one around Tina and Mark condemned them for dealing with the realities of their world the best way they could. Finally, neither were Tina and Mark condemning themselves.

¹³⁷ Mt 12: 6-8.

6. Karen and Doug: the vulnerable hangers-on

Karen and Doug recently baptized their baby in the Episcopal Church. Karen has been a member of the same Episcopal parish her whole life. Doug grew up in the Congregational Church, but has been attending with Karen and her family throughout their five-year relationship. Karen and Doug were each previously married and each suffered through an acrimonious divorce. Karen has a young child from her first marriage. Doug's children from his first marriage are grown and on their own. Karen and Doug live together in a committed relationship and share the parenting of their new baby. They speak of experiencing a peace they had never known before in any relationship. While neither is the least bit interested in "legalizing" their relationship, lest they "jinx" the good thing they have going, they wondered with some concern if that would keep them from baptizing their baby. It didn't.

During the preparation discussions for the baptism, Karen and Doug, along with the godparents they chose, expressed much excitement that they were learning a great deal about what it means to be a baptized Christian in the Episcopal Church, expressing surprise that they just hadn't understood so much of this before. These revelations about Baptism have opened up for Karen and Doug the possibility that there is more they might also learn about marriage, and they have expressed a new willingness, at some point, to talk about how they each have

understood and experienced marriage. For now, however, they are enjoying all that is good in their life together.

Just as with the marriage of Callie and Don, Karen and Doug were called by the Holy Spirit into relationship and conversation that would open up to them greater possibility for reconciliation with God, with one another, and with the church. To lose this opportunity for hospitality and evangelism truly would be a sin.

Like Jo and John, however, Karen and Doug are caught in the conflation of the legal and spiritual natures of marriage but from the other side of that coin, so to speak. For Karen and Doug, the spiritual nature of their union is already clear to them and to their community of faith. They continue to experience the lovely mystery of unity in community, the fruit of which finds expression in their lives. They are faithful to one another, a source of strength within their family and in their world, they have been blessed with a child, and they actively participate in reaching out in love in their active participation in the life and mission of their church. These are the fruits of covenant love as described in the Book of Common Prayer,¹³⁸ and like Yuvanna and Sam, who were likewise unmarried, though for different cause, these fruits are present and manifest in this union.

Unlike Yuvanna and Sam, Karen and Doug have ongoing opportunity to connect their bond of love to their experience of the life of God who is Trinity because of

¹³⁸ BCP, 429.

their regular presence in the life of their faith community, the Holy Eucharist, and continuing Christian formation opportunities. They are not living their union in isolation, but in community. The only thing their union lacks, in the traditional sense, is a license from the state. That hardly seems a pastoral concern, especially since the protections offered by the license: power of attorney, insurance beneficiary, and inheritance of property, have been arranged for legally by other means. A sacramental blessing of this union could be a benefit to the couple and their faith community even in the absence of a legally obtained certificate of marriage.

A discussion with Karen and Doug about how we as Episcopalians practice discernment, that is individually as well as in community, is also helpful in supporting this couple's experience of peace and harmony in their living arrangement, in that, their own sense of peace and harmony is continually affirmed by members of their community who journeyed with them through their divorces. Reminding this couple too of the lack of judgment against them (for the most part) on the part of their faith community, along with the welcoming of their gifts and leadership, and the community's joy over the baptism of their baby provides for them communal affirmation of the validity of their individual experiences regarding the spiritual nature of their union even in the absence of the legal confirmation of it.

7. Vera and Stan: the vulnerable survivors of sexual abuse

Vera is an accomplished business woman with a high-powered career. Vera is married to Stan, a gentle man who teaches fourth grade. Both were raised in mainline Christian traditions, Vera as a Roman Catholic and Stan as a Methodist. Both left active church participation during college. Neither expressed having any kind of theological crisis that caused them to leave church, they just fell into inattention and lost of the habit of going to church once they were on their own in college.

In the mid-1980's, after they had graduated college, Vera and Stan became engaged and went to their local Episcopal Church where they participated in the mandatory pre-marital counseling. In her shame, however, Vera never mentioned her early childhood rape experiences. Her fiancé knew of the incidents, but neither one could have known or considered the long-term affects these incidents might have on their marriage. According to the couple, the priest counseling them never asked either one about their previous sexual experiences. In fact, Vera and Stan report that there was no discussion of their sexual lives, past, present, or future, during their entire pre-marital counseling beyond the priest's proclamation that their intimacy was part of the joy of their marriage and that they should be on guard against temptations that might harm their marital bond.

Two decades and three children later, Vera begins to re-experience the early trauma of sexual abuse, reclaiming memories heretofore unremembered. The event was triggered while she and her husband were making love. Vera's hair got

caught under her husband's arm, yanking her head back in a way much like what happened during her early rape experience. Both Vera and her husband were caught completely off guard. Vera was overcome by the terror of that experience flooding over her again. Stan was clueless about what was happening, what he might have done to cause it, and how to deal with his wife who was making love to him one minute and screaming in terror the next.

The couple, finding themselves in crisis, sought marital counseling from a therapist and pastoral care from their priest. During the pastoral conversations, Vera, who had been in therapy for five years, revealed that she had been promiscuous as a teenager. Her therapist had helped her understand that many girls who were victims of childhood sexual abuse 'acted out' with promiscuous behavior during puberty, but the knowledge of this did little to assuage the guilt and self-hatred Vera carried as a result: "I'm bad. I'm a sinner. I can't be forgiven." Stan felt completely over his head and out of his league. He knew the trauma his wife was re-experiencing was profound and tragic, yet he had no idea how to be her husband and partner in this moment.

As the proverbial flood-gates opened and Vera 'got honest,' almost as a way of proving she was unforgivable, Vera revealed that she had also been unfaithful once in their marriage. Vera was clear that her 'affair' was strictly sexual and ended long ago, that she had no feelings of love for this other man and no desire for continuing contact with him. As she spoke, Vera was also practically drowning in self-hatred. She truly loved her husband, who while terribly hurt, also truly

loved her. Both expressed a desire to find their way through this difficult moment, but neither could see the way to go.

Discussions about sex and the sexual life of a marrying couple are an essential part of any pre-marital counseling program. Avoiding them or skirting the difficult discussions likely to emerge when the proper questions are asked, however, is unfair and potentially damaging to the couple's marital life long-term. The church fails those couples it does not fully engage in pre-marital counseling.

The statistics around rape and sexual abuse make asking these questions and having these discussions a priority for all couples about to marry. Statistically there are more women in America who have been sexually assaulted (17%) than there are alcoholics of both genders (7%).¹³⁹ According to the Rape and Incest National Network (RAINN), one in six women will be the victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime and 15% of all sexual assault and rape victims are under the age of 12.¹⁴⁰

Even outside of traumatic circumstances, women and men approach sex differently and couples about to marry need to articulate their expectations and assumptions prior to entering into a legally binding relationship, especially if the

¹³⁹ *Statistics on Alcohol*. http://www.alcoholics-info.com/Statistics_on_Alcoholics.html, March 18, 2010.

¹⁴⁰ *Rape and Incest National Network*. <http://www.rainn.org/get-information/statistics/sexual-assault-victims>, March 18, 2010.

couple is not living together and has not been sexually active prior to their marriage.

Society labels girls with sexual experience as promiscuous while boys continue to enjoy the label of 'lucky.' There remains a tacit belief that males should be 'experienced' sexually and will make better husbands if they've had time to 'sow their oats' prior to 'settling down.'

In cases where women have been sexually abused prior to their marital relationship, some amount of sexual practice, as I call it, is often necessary for normal sexual relations to be able to happen. Girls and young women who have had their personal boundaries violated and who associate sexual touch with violence, need the opportunity to take back power that was stolen from them by their abusers. They need to make new associations with sexual touch that empower and please them and over which they have total control, in order to extinguish their experiences of violation and helplessness, experiences that can have profound impact on the sexual aspect of their married lives. While society still holds to the convention that women should be 'pure and undefiled' that is, virgins, the ethics of this convention derive from the ancient economic exchange of property and simply do not apply to current culture and certainly not to women healing from sexual abuse.

The same is true for boys and young men who experience sexual abuse. The statistics around this are staggeringly important. Boys who are sexually abused

tend to have a greater risk of depression, sexual identity confusion, compulsive sexuality, and relationship problems.¹⁴¹ As with women labeled promiscuous by society for their sexual practicing, men who are sexually active, even compulsive, may not be 'lucky' as much as reclaiming their masculinity or power over their own bodies.

The potential impact on marriage is clear and males who are victimized sexually need as much attention to their healing as do females, especially if/when they are considering entering into a marital relationship. Society has been slower to respond to the needs of male victims of sexual abuse. The church should not be.

For any couple entering into marriage, or for couples like Vera and Stan who find themselves coping with early traumatic experiences injecting themselves years later into their marriage, it is important to be able to separate the ethics of an ancient patriarchal society from the current opportunities being presented for healing and reconciliation from the sin of sexual abuse. Members of the clergy must inform themselves so that the truth we know and proclaim can set these people free from the sins that bind them.

¹⁴¹ *Sexual abuse of male children.*
<http://www.sasian.org/projects/boysngirls.htm>, March 18, 2010.

CHAPTER TWO CONCLUSION

It behooves church leaders to know the truth that underlies the experience of people seeking (or not seeking) marriage. In 1900, 9.3% of the population in the United States was married and the divorce rate was at .7%. In 1950, just over 11% of the population was married and the divorce rate was at 2.6%. In 1970, 10% of the population was married and about a third of those marriages (3.5%) ended in divorce. In 2000, 8.5% of the population was married and nearly half of those marriages (4.2%) ended in divorce. Between the years 2000 and 2008, the statistic remains constant with about half of all marriages ending in divorce.¹⁴² While these statistics don't differentiate between the legal dissolution of first and subsequent marriages, the trend is clear and the arguments of people like Jo and John can't be ignored or dismissed as irrelevant.

Additionally, according to figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2000, about a third of men and women ages 24 to 34 years old were in unmarried partnerships, while less than 20 percent in the same age range were married. For persons 35 years and older, however, nearly three quarters were married. Whites represented the largest percentage of the groups that were married, higher than blacks, Hispanics (of any race), and Asian/Pacific Islanders. Persons with a high school education tended to marry and live in unmarried partnerships at about the same rate (35%). The higher the education level, the more likely the persons

¹⁴² *U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, National Center for Health Statistics*. Source: www.cdc.gov/nchs/, March 18, 2010.

lived in married relationships. The presence of children showed little significant impact on marital status with approximately 40% of men and women with children being in unmarried relationships and 45% in married relationships.¹⁴³

While marriage is still the preferred mode of living for middle-aged heterosexuals, it is no longer the only or ultimate choice for respectable people, nor is it the only acceptable context for the rearing of children. It will be interesting to see whether the younger age group, beginning with the Gen-X'ers, currently living outside of marriage more often than in, change this behavior as they age or whether they are establishing a new and very different priority in social ordering which would represent a major shift from our religious and cultural history and traditions.

As part of this project I conducted an online survey on marriage.¹⁴⁴ While it was never intended as a study to be scientifically analyzed, the survey provided a means by which certain cultural and religious trends could be traced and compared to existing statistical studies and the narrative section allowed for opinions to be safely expressed.

¹⁴³ *U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, March 2000. Information Please® Database, © 2007 Pearson Education, Inc. All rights reserved. March 18, 2010.*

¹⁴⁴ See VMSDMin survey summary, Appendices F 1 through 12.

One hundred responders offered general demographic information including age, location by state, education status, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status (including questions about the respondent's ability and/or desire to marry), parental marital status, spiritual identity, and prayer practice.¹⁴⁵ Narrative comments were encouraged and collected at a designated online mailbox.

Responses came from a variety of states covering most regions of the country. Since this survey was posted on my Facebook and Twitter pages as well as sent to my email address book, most of the people responding to the survey were from my social-familial circles. That the majority of responders are highly educated Christians is no surprise. Still the survey provides some interesting data.

Of the 100 respondents to this survey:

- 72% were female, 28% were male.
- 83% identified themselves as straight, 12% as gay-lesbian, 1% (each) as asexual, hetero-flexible, or homo-flexible. 2% identified their sexual orientation as "other."
- 82% grew up in homes with parents who remained married.
- Of those whose parents divorced, 26% were between the ages of 0 and 5 when their parents divorced; 21% of respondents were between the ages of 16-20; 16% (each) were either between 11 and 15 or over 26 years old when their parents divorced.
- 89% of respondents identified themselves as Christian; 6% as atheist and 5% as agnostic.
- About 80% of respondents said they pray daily or weekly; 11% pray sometimes, and 3% pray only in an emergency; 6% said they never pray.

¹⁴⁵ The survey did not ask for names or other identifying information from the respondents.

- Of those who identified as Christian, 75% of respondents identified themselves as Episcopalian; 15% as Roman Catholic; 6% as Lutheran; 3% (each) as Baptist or non-denominational; and 1% as Methodist.
- 59% had a Master's Degree or higher; only 2% had attended but not graduated high school.
- 71% of respondents were married, 28% were single, and 1% didn't know.
- Of the respondents who were single, 39% reported being unable to legally marry their partner.
- Among those who could not legally marry their partner, 81% said they would marry if they could; 4% said they would not marry; and 15% said they didn't know.
- Among those who were single and could marry their partner if they chose to do so, 59% said they would not marry; 26% said they would marry; and 15% said they didn't know.

Those who identified as single in my survey tended to be younger than those who identified as married, which agrees with the data from the Census Bureau mentioned above. I wondered, upon reviewing the Census Bureau data, if this unmarried younger group would tend to marry as they aged or whether they were establishing a new approach to social ordering, one that did not include marriage. My survey seems to indicate that at least the intent of this age group is tending toward the latter option.

It is my position that we are indeed at the beginning of a major cultural and religious shift in thinking and behavior regarding marriage. I believe this shift will cause us to re-examine and redefine our understanding of the proper context for coupling and raising a family. I also believe this shift will cause us to rethink and rework the roles of the church and state in the institution of marriage.

It's possible I could be wrong. Whatever the outcome turns out to be in ten or twenty years, however, the church needs to begin to be responsive now to a large population of the next generation which is living in committed unions and having families outside the bonds of marriage and doesn't seem to intend to change that.

In order to do that, members of the clergy need to be willing to discern where the 'law' has become an impediment to the compassionate, reconciling work of Christ and "pluck heads of grain" on the Sabbath in order to feed their hungry disciples.¹⁴⁶ That is, they need to be willing to follow Christ's example of discerning when to put compassion before compliance to rules.

In the second structural story about Evelyn and Bob, their pastor was in agreement that the couple would have been better served by living together and not legally marrying, but he was motivated to keep his elders happy, and therefore keep his job, more than he was motivated to serve the pastoral needs of that elderly couple. The pastor was a prisoner to a church-driven, deontological approach to behavior so prevalent in small southern towns (but certainly not only there) causing him to miss the beauty and validity of the love that presented itself to him in this elderly couple, as well as the opportunity to teach his flock about transcendent love, love that is life-giving and reflects the covenant love of God for us.

¹⁴⁶ Mt 12:1.

CHAPTER THREE: A REVIEW OF WEDDING TRADITIONS & CUSTOMS

Often, much of church experience is accidental, that is, it is done mostly by habit, with little thought or reflection. Marriage ceremonies fall into this trap all too easily with so many cultural and religious customs and traditions confronting the couple. Many of these customs and traditions are meaningful, long-anticipated, and therefore, never really thoughtfully approached. That is why the pre-marital counseling tool I developed provides detailed education on many of these customs and connects them to our identity as Christians.¹⁴⁷ Customs chosen and embraced by the couple then, are done so with informed intention.

I have found that most people don't know the origins, or at least the history and legend, of the traditions used in and around the modern ceremony of marriage. While based on superstitions or long-gone cultural mores, many of these traditions linger and remain beloved parts of the wedding experience. For example, "the custom of proposing on one knee hearkens back to the days of knighthood and chivalry when it was customary for a knight to dip his knee in a show of servitude to his mistress and his master."¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ See Pre-Marital Counseling Tool, Appendix A and the associated handout entitled, "Marriage: Traditions, Superstitions, and Beliefs, Appendix D."

¹⁴⁸ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, <http://www.hudsonvalleyweddings.com/guide/customs.htm>, March 18, 2010.

Most brides still seek to wear “something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue.” This tradition was initially a superstitious attempt to ward off evil spirits, but these four things also contained the symbolism of connection to what was, the bride’s family of origin and her life as a maiden (something old), the transition to adulthood and married life (something new), the transfer of good luck from a successful married couple to the new bride (something borrowed), and the purity of her commitment and fidelity to her marriage (something blue).

It wasn’t until Queen Victoria wore a white gown at her wedding that the virginal purity of the bride was expressed in her dress. Previous to that brides simply wore their best dresses. Superstitious brides wore dresses similar to their bridesmaids in order to confuse evil spirits and diffuse their power to harm the bride on her wedding day. The bouquet carried by the bride was also filled with fragrant herbs and flowers meant to ward off evil spirits as well as to cover the smell of body odor since daily bathing wasn’t a cultural norm until more recent history. In ancient Greek and Roman cultures, the bouquet was a garland encircling the bride’s head. In Victorian England, the bouquet incorporated flowers, each variety of flower carrying its own meaning, e.g., roses signifying love or beauty (depending upon the color), baby’s breath signifying innocence and purity of heart, blue violets signifying fidelity, etc.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, and *Language of Flowers*, <http://victorianbazaar.com/meanings.html>, March 18, 2010.

The bridal shower began as a way to enable a poor bride, whose father couldn't come up with a dowry or bride-price. The bride was 'showered' with gifts from family and friends to spare her the humiliation of becoming an old-maid/spinster.¹⁵⁰

The tradition of a groom having a best man harkens back to the ancient Goths, a first century culture living near the Baltic Sea, and their practice of abducting brides from a neighboring village, the groom taking with him the strongest and best man for the job. Once the abduction was completed, the duty of the best man was to act as an armed guard to keep the bride's family from abducting her back. Eventually, the abduction of the bride developed into a symbolic and fun tradition with the bride surrounding herself with maids dressed like herself in order to confuse the groom and his men in the abduction attempt. "Also originating from this practice of abduction, which literally swept a bride off her feet, sprang the later symbolic act of carrying the bride across the threshold of her new home."¹⁵¹

The tradition of the bride standing to the left of the groom probably derives from a practical consideration: since men needed their right hands free to use their

¹⁵⁰ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

¹⁵¹ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

weapons in defense against attack, the groom would place his bride at his left side in order to be able to protect her. The positioning of the bride to the left and the groom to the right in the marriage ceremony continues to this day as a rubric in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer.¹⁵²

There are several guesses as to the origin of the honeymoon. One tradition, coming from ancient Babylonian culture, about 4,000 years ago, suggests that “the bride’s father would supply his new son-in-law with all the mead (honey beer/wine) that the young man could drink. Their calendar was lunar-based, and, as it turned out, this tradition, called the ‘honey month,’ was just about the time it took the groom to consume his gift. Ultimately, this period of time just after the wedding became known as the honeymoon.”¹⁵³

The tradition of keeping the bride and groom from seeing one another until the wedding hails from the time when weddings were an exchange of property; the bride being the property. Grooms were not allowed to see the bride’s face until the end of the ceremony when it was too late to back out of the deal. Modern tradition holds it to be “bad luck” for the groom to see the bride prior to her entrance in the wedding procession. Given the origin of this practice, that makes sense.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² BCP, 423.

¹⁵³ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

¹⁵⁴ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

The wedding veil, though originally used in an attempt to fool evil spirits, eventually took on the more practical purpose of concealing the brides' face until the property exchange had been completed.¹⁵⁵ The tradition of the bride's father 'giving her away' in the marriage ceremony, harkening back to the days of marriage being an exchange of property, has maintained itself with surprising vigor and can be found as an option even today in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer¹⁵⁶ with the Celebrant asking: "Who gives (presents) this woman to be married to this man?"¹⁵⁷ While some today choose to interpret the modern tradition as the father giving his blessing over the marriage, the action is still communicative of the father giving away his daughter.

The tradition of the wedding ring as part of the wedding ceremony is believed to have originated in ancient Egyptian and Roman cultures. The rings were generally made of hemp in Egypt and iron in Rome. Later, in Medieval Europe, the ring was typically worn on the index finger of the right hand which they believed was the finger closest to the heart.¹⁵⁸ Rings in that era were not gold bands as we have today, but fine jeweled rings, at least among the wealthy. Some modern European cultures continue to wear the wedding ring on the right hand,

¹⁵⁵ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

¹⁵⁶ BCP, 425.

¹⁵⁷ BCP, 437.

¹⁵⁸ *Wedding Lore and Traditions*, <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/weddinglore1.html>, March 18, 2010.

e.g., Spain, Germany, Austria. Many Eastern European and Asian cultures, which consider the left hand to be less favorable due to its role in personal hygiene much as ancient Jewish culture did, place the wedding ring, therefore, on the right hand.¹⁵⁹

It became the habit in much of Western Europe, and later in the United States, to place the wedding ring on the fourth finger of the left hand. This tradition traces back to ancient Egyptian culture which considered the ring to be a symbol of eternity. The Egyptians placed the wedding ring on the fourth finger of the left hand because it was believed that a vein from this finger ran directly to the heart, the seat of love in the body. This tradition was passed to the Ancient Greeks when Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, then later to ancient Roman culture, where this vein was named the *vena amoris* (the vein of love).¹⁶⁰

Puritans believed wedding rings to be a pagan practice and refused to participate in the tradition. Modern day Quakers are among the few Christians who likewise do not exchange wedding rings.¹⁶¹

Blessing the wedding ring as a symbol of the unity of the couple began around the 11th century when Bishops and priests began blessing more and more marriages

¹⁵⁹ *Enduring Wedding Traditions*. March 18, 2010.

¹⁶⁰ *The history of.net*: <http://thehistoryof.net/history-of-the-wedding-ring.html>, March 18, 2010.

¹⁶¹ *The history of.net*. March 18, 2010.

in general. Until modern times, however, only the woman was given a wedding ring. As indicated in the rubrics of the 1549 Book of Common Prayer (England):

and the manne shall geve unto the womanne a ring, and other tokens of spousage, as golde or silver, laying the Chrise upon the boke: And the Priest taking the ring shall deliver it unto the man: to put it upon the fowerth finger of the womans left hande And the man taught by the priest, shall say... With thys ring I thee wed: Thys golde and silver I thee geve: with my body I thee wurship: and withal my worldly Goodes I thee endowe. In the name of the father, and of the sonne, and of the holy goste. Amen. Then the man leavyng the ring upon the fowerth finger of the womans lef hande, the minister shal say, Let us pray.¹⁶²

The service then continued with a collect with no giving of a wedding ring to the groom by the bride. The 1979 Book of Common Prayer contains a similar rubric allowing for “some other suitable symbol of the vows” to be used “in place of the wedding ring” if desired.¹⁶³ In this version of the rite of marriage, however, both persons in the couple exchange rings.

There is much agreement among various cultures about the power and value of certain signs, rituals, and symbols relating to marriage and therefore, incorporated into the wedding ceremony. These signs, rituals, and symbols point to something each culture holds as deeply important about marriage and married

¹⁶² *The Book of Common Prayer, 1549, The Forme of Solemnizacion of Matrimonie*, http://justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1549/Marriage_1549.htm, March 18, 2010.

¹⁶³ BCP, 437.

life. They also carry cultural expectations and assumptions about married life from generation to generation.

The wedding ring, for example, has been understood since ancient Egyptian culture to be a symbol of the eternity of the pledge of fidelity by the couple. The idea that marriage is a life-long bond is nearly universal among the world's cultures. For some it is more than a life-long bond. It is eternal. The practice of exchanging wedding rings can be found in cultures around the world. Recently, couples from (East) Indian and other eastern cultures where an exchange of rings is not a traditional practice, are adding this symbol to their wedded life.¹⁶⁴

While the color of the bride's attire varies from culture to culture, each culture chooses a color that highlights a cultural priority or belief about marriage. For ancient Greeks, the bride typically wore red, which represented fire and was intended to scare away evil spirits. In Chinese culture, red is still the traditional color of the bride's clothing. For the Chinese, red symbolizes good luck.¹⁶⁵

In Japan the traditional color for a bride's gown is purple, which is for them, the color of love. For the Japanese, love is the most important aspect in the joining of two lives together in marriage.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ This could either be a reflection of the universality of the symbol of the wedding ring or evidence of the global influence of American /Western culture.

¹⁶⁵ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

¹⁶⁶ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

In England and the United States, the traditional color for a bride's gown is white. This custom began in the 16th century with Ann of Brittany, and the color reflected the liturgical meaning of joy.¹⁶⁷ White as a bridal color later became associated with the bride's purity, that is, her virginity, thanks to Queen Victoria in the 19th century. For these cultures, purity and joy are priorities in the making of a good marriage.

These symbols and practices acknowledge the cultural belief (or experience) of the fragile nature of marriage and the importance of the community's support of the marriage in the face of the forces at work against it. The traditional rituals meant to ward off evil spirits and call good luck or financial success upon the marrying couple indicate the solidarity of the couple's community with the couple, a concept found in Episcopal theology too. In our Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage, the couple and their witnesses stand before the whole congregation to make their vows.¹⁶⁸ The congregation is comprised of family, friends, and members of the couple's faith community.

To bring good luck to the newly married couple, Scandinavian tradition has the bride and groom cut their wedding cake together, with the bride and groom

¹⁶⁷ *World Wedding Traditions*, http://www.worldweddingtraditions.com/locations/scandinavian_traditions.html, March 18, 2010.

¹⁶⁸ BCP, 423.

holding the knife together, then distributing pieces of their cake to their guests.¹⁶⁹
This ritual is also found in most American weddings.

In England, in the Middle Ages, wedding guests began to throw old shoes at the departing bride and groom's carriage. If a shoe hit the carriage it was thought to bring them good luck in their married life. This tradition was brought to America where it evolved into the tying of cans behind the newlyweds' car.¹⁷⁰

The superstitious origins of many of our traditional practices rarely stop us from continuing to use them: Christmas trees, the Easter bunny and Easter eggs, etc. There is rarely any harm, and lots of precedent for re-casting these practices in a Christian perspective, then continue to enjoy them. In the end, we are a people in the world but not of it. For that reason, including certain traditional practices in a wedding might be done simply because the tradition is fun and anticipated.

In Middle Eastern countries, a Henna Party, a ritual of tattoo painting on the hands and feet of the bride with impermanent henna dye, is held over three days prior to the wedding. The tattoos are meant to ward off evil spirits.¹⁷¹ At a recent Hindi wedding in my experience, all of the bride's friends, most of whom were not Hindi, were invited to have their hands tattooed with henna. No one reported taking seriously the protective effects of the dye against evil spirits, but all

¹⁶⁹ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

¹⁷⁰ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

¹⁷¹ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

seemed to enjoy participating in a long-standing and beautiful tradition belonging to the bride's culture of origin.

Most cultures, including our own, have a means by which the bride and groom receive gifts that help them get started in their new life together. Married life is an economic institution supported generously among the world's cultures. In Venezuela, for example, the bride and groom's families exchange gold coins known as *arras* that symbolize prosperity and good luck.¹⁷² In traditional Puerto Rican weddings the groom gives a plate of coins to his new wife symbolizing prosperity and good luck for their married life.¹⁷³ Most American brides have at least one, and some have many, bridal showers. Showers for the grooms are the latest vogue. The struggle for economic stability for the newly married is a common experience, as is the world's wisdom that money is one of the greatest stressors on a marriage, hence the participation of the couple's community in support of the economic stability of the new marriage.

Cultures around the world also have symbols or practices that seek to promote the couple's relational success and fertility. In Croatia, for example, each of the wedding guests throws an apple into the church's well seeking fertility for the couple.¹⁷⁴ The tradition of throwing of rice at a newly married couple, now often replaced in the American milieu by birdseed or bubbles, began as means of

¹⁷² *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

¹⁷³ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

¹⁷⁴ *Enduring Wedding Traditions... Customs and their Origins*, March 18, 2010.

calling fertility upon the couple. Children born of a marriage are nearly universally held to be a blessing.¹⁷⁵

Even when the superstitious nature of the ritual or practice is acknowledged and dismissed, the tradition remains, e.g., bridesmaids being dressed alike, keeping the bride and groom from seeing one another prior to the bridal procession, cutting the bridal cake, or passing out good-luck gifts. That's the key here, though. Once the marrying couple is informed about traditional practice they are able to make an informed choice about whether or not to include that practice – and why they choose to do so. Additionally, when the couple must face family pressures to include a custom they don't desire, they are prepared to enter into an informed discussion about it, promoting peace during a potentially stressful time.

CHAPTER THREE CONCLUSION

The traditional practices often found in modern day weddings matter on a number of levels. When engaged in pre-marital counseling and wedding planning with a couple these discussions are a non-threatening and enjoyable way to reveal how mindlessly we often enter into sacramental moments in our lives, clinging to actions and superstitions with little or no thought as to why we do so.

¹⁷⁵ I say nearly because I tend to shy away from words that eliminate the possibility for exception even though in this case I can find no evidence of the exception.

In addition, once informed about the traditions they had always expected to be present in their wedding, the couple then has the ability to be intentional about including those traditions that are meaningful or enjoyable to them and excluding those that don't fit with their understanding of the sacramental life into which they are about to enter, mindful, of course, of the rubrics in the Prayer Book.

In addition, discussions about these traditions open up all kinds of opportunities for easy discussions about subjects that are otherwise difficult for the couple to approach, i.e., discussions about gender and its role in their marriage, finances, careers, children, expectations about parenting, attachment to or expectations about continuing relationship with families of origin, etc.

These discussions also arm the couple with information with which they can discuss their wedding plans with family members who may have very strong expectations about what will or won't be included in the couple's wedding. As most people know, the bride and groom are often swept along in a tide of family decisions made around them rather than with them. Some couples feel as if their only role is to show up and be married while someone else's fantasy wedding occurs around them. These pre-marital counseling discussions can provide the couple with a sense of ownership around their nuptials and a unified sense of commitment, supported by their clergy, around their decisions regarding the ceremony.

CHAPTER FOUR: PASTORAL APPLICATION OF A NEW PRE-MARITAL COUNSELING TOOL

This project offers a tool for pre-marital counseling¹⁷⁶ designed to promote deep and meaningful discussions about the nature and purpose of marriage as described for us in Scripture, tradition, and the Book of Common Prayer. I believe that the church can and should provide an alternative to the modern cultural practices of non-covenanted relationships, i.e., non-licensed, non-blessed, and serial monogamy, i.e., moving from one impermanent monogamous relationship to another. I also believe that the ministers of the church have a responsibility to work toward this goal and can begin by truly preparing couples for marriage. Having a mature understanding about the sacramental nature of the marital union, its relationship to the larger community of faith, and its witness to the world, are crucial elements toward improving the success of a couple's commitment to their union.

One purpose of pre-marital counseling is to provide each person involved the opportunity to make an informed choice about getting married and getting married in the church. The time spent in pre-marital counseling also provides opportunity for the couple to learn how the liturgy for the rite of marriage found in the Book of Common Prayer reflects and communicates an Episcopal, theological, and practical understanding of marriage.

¹⁷⁶ See Pre-Marital Counseling Tool, Appendix A.

The time in counseling also provides time for prayerful reflection. As the priest and the couple meet and pray together and discuss the very basics of faith and liturgy, all are discerning their ability and/or willingness to go forward to the next step.

Another purpose of pre-marital counseling is to provide a time and place wherein difficult subjects can be safely discussed: sex, money, gender roles, values, parenting, fighting, temptations, and facing trials, so that informed consent can truly be given. According to the canons of the Episcopal Church, it is incumbent upon the clergy to ensure that prior to the solemnization of their union, the couple understands that “both parties [must] freely and knowingly consent to ...marriage, ...and that both parties have been instructed as to the nature, meaning, and purpose of Holy Matrimony by the Member of the Clergy, or ...persons known by the Member.”¹⁷⁷ This can only be accomplished by employing the time and effort necessary – an amount of time that will vary according to the experience of the marrying couple.

One of the last things I discuss in pre-marital counseling is the wedding ceremony. The reason is there is much to understand and discuss prior to that in order to make informed decisions and to make them mindfully. My first priority in pre-marital counseling is to begin at the beginning. It has been my experience

¹⁷⁷ *Constitution and Canons, Together with the Rules of Order, The Episcopal Church, Adopted and Revised in General Convention, 2006*. Canon 18: Of the solemnization of Holy Matrimony. Source: http://www.churchpublishing.org/general_convention/pdf_const_2006/Title_I_OrgAdmin.pdf, March 18, 2010.

that couples often hear phrases like ‘the covenant of marriage,’ or marriage as a ‘vocation,’ but most really don’t know how to understand them. To that end, I have developed a Glossary as part of the premarital counseling tool¹⁷⁸ by which we discuss and define (often redefine) these fundamental concepts during our pre-marital counseling conversations. I don’t offer definitions of these terms but invite the couple into mutual exploration of the meanings following certain discussions in each session.

The pre-marital counseling tool is designed to be divided into six, fifty-minute sessions. Each session begins and ends with prayer. This can be one of the Celtic prayers found in the handouts included with the pre-marital counseling tool, or a Collect from the Book of Common Prayer, or an extemporaneous prayer recalling parts of the discussion, as the priest and couple desire. Participation in the prayer is open to all present. The environment at these sessions is intentionally relaxed and informal. Following the prayer is a short ‘check-in’ time and time to process insights or questions from the previous session.

Every effort is made to maintain a comfortable, protected, and holy environment - water to drink, tissues nearby, soft seating, worry stones to provide outlet for nervousness, Rosaries to hold, icons to look at when the need to look away arises. Even familiar members of one’s own parish will need time during the first session to enter into this new relationship since the discussions will be, at times, of a very personal and intimate nature.

¹⁷⁸ See handout entitled, *Pre-Marital Counseling Glossary*, Appendix B.

At the end of each session, the couple and priest mark the place on the tool where they will begin the next session and discuss the homework to be done prior to that meeting. As some discussions may require more time for some couples than for others, i.e., sexual abuse issues, the actual number of sessions may vary.

The pre-marital counseling tool I developed cues the priest on the topics for discussion and provides language for beginning these discussions. It is important for the priest to maintain an awareness of body language, to notice who answers first, how often, and to what kinds of questions, how often does one or both need to be excused to go to the restroom, and what was being discussed at those times. Observations can be noted directly on the tool.

During the first session, expectations for the course of counseling are discussed, dates for subsequent sessions are chosen, and the counseling tool is reviewed (briefly), along with the homework assignments, in general terms. There are also forms that need to be completed at the first session: information that will be used in the Register of Services, canonically required forms, i.e., Declaration of Intent (signed at the fifth session), information to be posted in the church's announcements, reservation of the time, space, and related services for the wedding, i.e., organist, wedding coordinator, etc. If either person is being remarried, a form for the Bishop's permission to remarry is also filled out at that time but not sent until the couple and the priest discern that they will move

forward with the marriage. All other details about the wedding liturgy are held until later in the counseling sessions.

The couple is also provided one of several wedding booklets¹⁷⁹ based on their stated intention at the beginning of our discussion. These booklets will serve as a template for their own wedding booklet: The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage with Holy Eucharist or without as found on pages 423-432 in the Book of Common Prayer (BCP); The Blessing of a Civil Marriage as found on pages 433-434 in the BCP; An Order for Marriage as found on pages 435-436 in the BCP. This project also provides resources for ceremonies involving non-traditional marriages/couplings such as those found within the structural stories in chapter three. Mindful of the canons and the priestly vow to respect and be guided by one's Bishop,¹⁸⁰ these resources are provided for informational and pastoral consideration.

Sometimes a couple comes to the first session with a list of the things they'd like to have happen during their wedding ceremony. These are accepted and placed in the couple's file with an explanation about where in the pre-marital counseling sessions discussion of the details of the liturgy falls and why.

After the 'business' of filling out forms, etc. is completed, the content of the first session begins. This is where we "begin at the beginning" discussing Christian

¹⁷⁹ See wedding booklet templates, Appendices E-1 through 5.

¹⁸⁰ BCP, 532.

marriage as a vocation, covenant, sacramental union, and participation in a Trinitarian community (the couple and God).

As mentioned earlier, many times people hear these words used to describe marriage, but have little practical understanding about what they mean, how they connect us to our Christian narrative in the Bible and in our tradition, and how these apply to their own relationship. The couple is given opportunity to process the content of the first session through their homework: completing the first section of the Glossary section of the tool in light of our conversation. They are also asked to look ahead to the next section, usually points eleven through fifteen, and prepare for the discussion at the next session.

During the second session, the homework from the first session is discussed with particular attention paid to new insights or questions raised. Barring any unusual issues requiring deeper discussion, the second session usually covers sections eleven through sixteen: families of origin, children, experiences with divorce, gender roles, and pets.

The questions in this section are very specific and arise from my experience in post-marital counseling. In the context of the pre-marital counseling session, these issues can be directly and safely addressed. The order of the questions allows the priest to hear the initial responses to familial issues, then to hear them

again in another context, providing opportunity to notice any inconsistencies that might benefit from further discussion.¹⁸¹

It may seem odd, but the discussion about pets has proved to be very enlightening in these discussions, opening up issues of common or discordant values, a topic which receives more specific and deeper attention in a subsequent session. The couple is given opportunity to process the content of this session by completing the second section of the Glossary as their homework. They are also asked to look at the content for the third session and prepare for that discussion.

The third session usually covers sections sixteen through nineteen: alcoholism and substance abuse, careers, recreation, and finances. The discussion around alcoholism includes any family history, which can be informative as to how the couple relates ones to another, as well as current behaviors regarding alcohol and/or drug use. I have found that if the discussion is relaxed and non-judgmental in nature, couples will be honest and revelations of true feelings about this often occur, for example, “I really don’t like it when you smoke dope” or “Maybe a six-pack a night is too much.”¹⁸²

The discussion about careers often ties to the previous discussion about children and gives opportunity to discuss how the couple might live into their high-calling

¹⁸¹ Section 11 asks about families of origin and family traditions while section 14 asks about in-laws (getting the other’s view on the parents), parents’ gender roles, etc.

¹⁸² Confidential personal discussion, April 2006.

in the event of career stress – one or both of them being suddenly unemployed. The tool then shifts to a lighter discussion around recreation, alleviating the seriousness and stress of the previous two topics while addressing an important part of married life – enjoying one another’s company.

The third session usually ends with a nuts-and-bolts discussion about finances and budgeting. Details discussed refer back to the gender roles discussion, i.e., who will manage the finances. Value issues around spending and saving are discussed with opportunity to process how each might feel about any financial trouble the other has been in before and how that impacts their expectations about their married life together.

Finally, there is discussion about financial ethics, i.e., charitable giving. Some couples find that their at-home discussion following this session help them clarify how they will participate in church pledging and which charities they will support as a couple. The couple is given opportunity to process the content of this session by completing the third section of the Glossary as their homework. They are also asked to look at the content for the fourth session and prepare for that discussion.

The fourth session usually covers sections twenty through twenty-one: sexuality and common values. This can be, depending on the individuals, an intense discussion. Shyness about discussing sexuality can be overcome by the assurance that the point of the discussion is to understand the role of sexuality in the sacramental nature of the union.

The comfort level of the priest, spoken or unspoken, will be evident to the couple. It is especially important for the priest to maintain awareness of eye contact and body language during this session. It is also important for the priest to notice cues on eye contact from the couple so as to be a source of comfort and unobtrusive during sensitive moments.

The discussion on common values usually comes as a bit of a relief in this session and offers an enjoyable discussion on the things that are important to the couple. It also provides the priest opportunity to observe how the couple relates to an outsider on these important issues. Noticing and holding up the respectful (or disrespectful) behaviors they employ can be enlightening. Often, couples don't notice that a behavior they are using comes from their own family experience and may or may not be appropriate in their union. This allows for discussion about how to build or maintain safeguards in their relationship for respect – especially when discussing issues about which they disagree.

The homework following the fourth session includes watching the movie, *Spanglish*,¹⁸³ completing the fourth section of the Glossary and looking ahead to the discussion for the next session – the final discussion prior to the planning of the liturgy.

¹⁸³ *Spanglish*, a film by James L. Brooks (Columbia Pictures Industries, 2005). The DVD is provided to the couple.

The movie, *Spanglish* is chosen because it is about honor, respect for self and other, and temptation in marriage. Viewers often find themselves hoping the husband (Adam Sandler) will leave his crazy wife (Téa Leoni) for the exotically beautiful and righteous immigrant he's falling in love with (Paz Vega), but he doesn't. The sanctity of the marriage ends up winning over the temptation confronted and all involved are transformed by the experience, including the viewer.

The discussion on fidelity in marriage arising from discussion about this movie gets us back to the core meaning and experience of the sacramental nature of marriage, our identity as Christians in the continuing story of God's covenantal relationship with us found in Scripture and gives us opportunity to review all we discussed from the beginning of our time in pre-marital counseling. Articulating their new understanding is often quite revelatory to the couple (and rewarding to the priest).

The fifth session usually covers sections twenty-two through twenty-five: fidelity, faith, self-care, and quarreling. This session begins with discussion about their homework (the movie), which leads naturally to the question in section twenty-two, "What will you do when you fall in love with someone other than your spouse?"¹⁸⁴ This reflects the Baptismal Covenant which asks, "will you persevere

¹⁸⁴ See Pre-marital Counseling Tool, Appendix A.

in resisting evil and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?”¹⁸⁵
It isn't a matter of if, but when, and it goes to our identity as Christians and the ethics that begins there, not with the morality of an act.

The fifth session also discusses faith and the importance of being part of a community of faith as well as issues of plurality and diversity of faith and belief so often faced by couples. The session then moves to the lighter but important topic of self-care, allowing for a moment of mental respite. This is as much a spiritual discussion as a physical one, reminding the couple of the truth of the Incarnation and our participation in the reconciling work of Christ as incarnated beings. It also allows for the very practical issue of drawing up a will for the new social-legal reality they are about to enter.

The discussion portion of the fifth session concludes with conversation about disagreements – how to work out differences with respect while “speaking the truth in love.”¹⁸⁶ Practical tips are offered on promoting self and other-awareness by discerning how each in the couple reacts during times of disagreement, i.e., some react by retreating into quietness, others by aggressively arguing their point, and how to work with their differing styles through the disagreement, maintaining respect for the other.

¹⁸⁵ BCP, 304.

¹⁸⁶ Eph 4:15.

Following this final discussion, the priest and couple confess what they have discerned about whether or not the couple is ready to make this commitment and move to the planning of their marriage liturgy. In my experience, it is rare for the couple to discern a desire to wait or call off the wedding. Many couples have commented that following this course in the pre-marital counseling has led them to a greater state of awareness, commitment, and readiness. When all have confessed that they are prepared to continue, the couple signs the canonically required Declaration of Consent form.

The couple is given opportunity to process the content of this session by completing the fifth and final section of the Glossary as their homework. They are also asked to read the handout entitled, “Marriage: Traditions, Superstitions, and Beliefs” in order to prepare for the final meeting, a discussion in which we plan the details of their wedding ceremony. They are asked to make notes in the wedding booklet template provided¹⁸⁷ to them at the first session regarding the details unique to their liturgy: their names (this sounds obvious, but the Prayer Book allows for their “Christian names” to be used subsequent to the opening exhortation which declares their full names)¹⁸⁸ choices for readings, hymns, lectors, acolytes, etc.

At the final pre-marital counseling session the couple and priest finalize the details of the liturgy. Often, some of this work can be done ahead electronically so

¹⁸⁷ Two samples of these booklet templates are found in Appendices E-1 and 2.

¹⁸⁸ BCP, 422.

that a draft of the wedding booklet can be reviewed at the final session. Since reservations for related services such as an organist, wedding coordinator, etc., were made six months previously at the beginning of the pre-marital counseling, finalizing the details is generally quick and easy. In their new awareness, the couple is usually ready with decisions about which traditions and customs they would like to include or exclude, i.e., the giving in marriage or presentation, publishing banns of marriage, whether or not Communion will be part of the service, etc. I should note here that I have had many occasions where a couple that initially wanted to exclude Communion from their wedding liturgy changed their minds and included it, but no couples have chosen the reverse course.

PROJECT CONCLUSION: WHY ALL OF THIS MATTERS

Non-traditional marriage is nothing new on the ecclesial scene. As the historical-biblical review showed, God has been using non-traditional marriages throughout the story of our salvation history to redirect the human race into the way we should go. It's probable that in each era the kind of non-traditional marriage that presents itself is initially unwelcomed and mistrusted. It is certainly not quickly integrated into the fiber of the social customs or it wouldn't be noticeable as an exception.

That isn't, of itself, a problem. Tradition is worth protecting from every change blown in by the wind. These kinds of changes deserve nothing less than deliberate and considered discernment, the kind Episcopalians practice so well, individually and in community. Some of the changes discussed in this project have been being considered for decades, i.e., the issue of homosexuality in the church. Others are newer on the discernment scene, i.e. the role of clergy as agents of the state in marriage. When we consider how long it took the Church to agree on how to understand the nature of Trinity, we can be patient while the church works out some of these other issues.

On the other hand, there is a limit that decency and compassion require. After thirty years of discussion and discernment on homosexuality, to wait any longer

leaves us in the place Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. described in his *Letter from the Birmingham Jail*: “Justice delayed is justice denied.”¹⁸⁹

Non-traditional marriage is one crux at which the salvific mercy of God and the judgment of humanity continually meet. That’s why this matters. It matters because in the smallness of our human vision, the current social and ecclesial institutions, like those that went before us, have determined that the non-traditional marriages presenting themselves to us are unique, bad, and destructive of the very fiber of Christianity and society. I refer back to the proclamation by President George W. Bush supporting a Constitutional amendment on marriage.¹⁹⁰

One resource that turns this notion upside-down and illustrates how that the ‘traditional’ approach to some things might not be the only approach is *The Red Tent*, a fictional re-telling of the Biblical story of the rape of Dinah.¹⁹¹ In the Scriptural account, Dinah is silent. In this novel, however, the entire story is told from a feminine perspective, from Dinah’s perspective in conversation with the women in her life. In this re-telling Dinah was in love with Shechem against her father’s wishes. Her father and brothers intentionally made Dinah and

¹⁸⁹ Wayne G. Boulton, Thomas D. Kennedy, and Allen Verhey, Editors, *From Christ to the World, Introductory Readings in Christian Ethics, Letter From Birmingham Jail*, by Martin Luther King, Jr., April 16, 1963, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI), 1994, 429.

¹⁹⁰ See this statement on pages 43-44 of this project.

¹⁹¹ Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (Picador USA, New York, 1997).

Schechem's love into a crime so that they could force their rebellious female back into obedience and compliance. The story, being from the feminine perspective, is revealed to the reader by the conversations held in 'the red tent,' the place to which menstruating females were exiled in their uncleanness, the place where women could rest in one another's company monthly for one week at the new moon, freed from the oppression of their household chores, family responsibilities, and subjugation to the males in their lives. Unapologetically a fictional account, and with no intent to re-write Scripture, Anita Diamant gives us the opportunity to consider how another perspective might reveal as much truth as the traditional one.

Bishop Neil Alexander of the Diocese of Atlanta also provides an example of reviewing traditional concepts with the power and imagination of 'new eyes' in his book, *This Far by Grace, A Bishop's Journey Through Questions About Homosexuality*. Bishop Alexander says,

Earlier in my ordained ministry, I was among those who believed that a person could be healed from homosexuality and restored to the heterosexual lifestyle that was intended for them. I no longer, in good conscience, can believe that. I have known too many homosexual persons for whom sexual orientation clearly was not a choice... God made them homosexual. God loves them just as they are... I think the apostle [Paul] is quite right to suggest that a person should not have sex in an unnatural way, which means that heterosexual persons should not have homosexual sex... In the same way, homosexual persons should not have unnatural sex

either. They should not act sexually as though they are heterosexuals. The person that Paul finds rightly disgusting is simply doing that which is unnatural. I agree.¹⁹²

A responder to my survey makes an honest statement that affirms Bishop Alexander's statement. The responder, a male in his 60's, from south Georgia, takes it further, however, recalling our Christian narrative as Hauerwas described it, and clarifies his position according to our common story saying

I can't and won't oppose same-sex blessings/marriages but am personally repulsed by men dancing with men, men kissing men, etc. It's creepy to me personally but we're all created by God as we are and I won't stand in God's way. And last time I checked I am still not authorized or sanctified to be an all-knowing judge, and the last time I tried to walk on water I went straight to the bottom! I still await guidance from the Lord, and maybe it's already there and I just haven't discerned it yet. Hatred and discrimination against gays and same-sex couples is abhorrent to me; I oppose it.¹⁹³

It matters because our church is struggling. As we work to find our way through the messiness of the current debates on authority (again), homosexuality and same-sex marriage, the role of the church and the state in marriage (this hasn't come up yet, but it should), and the pastoral care of the Baptized in all its diversity, it is my hope that we will keep an eye on the big picture, the Christian

¹⁹² J. Neil Alexander, *This Far by Grace, A Bishop's Journey Through Questions About Homosexuality* (Cowley Publications, Cambridge, Mass, 2003), 45.

¹⁹³ Narrative response from my online survey, Feb. 9, 2010. Used with permission.

narrative, the story of our salvation history given to us in Scripture, along with the civil history that has shaped and continues to shape our institution. As one young responder to my survey puts it, the bottom line is this: “I know that I don't have all the answers, but if Jesus wanted us to show love and compassion to all persons, then that's what I'm going to do. I would rather be a compassionate person and be wrong, than be filled with hate and prejudice.”¹⁹⁴ The way through is by the power of our imagination, guided by the Spirit and informed by our Christian narrative.

It matters because the story of God's relationship with God's people as given to us in Scripture makes plain that God often works to shift the course of human history in a new direction according to God's continuing purpose, often using non-traditional and sometimes even surprising servants. Moses, who killed a Hebrew, comes to mind. Abraham, who tried to pawn off his wife as his sister to save his own neck, comes to mind. David, who killed his best friend and employee in order to take the man's wife as his own, comes to mind. Hagar, recipient of God's covenantal promise like the one given to Abraham that she would be the bearer of nations, comes to mind.

It matters because the goal is always the same: to build of the kingdom of heaven on earth, to include portions of the people of God previously excluded from the banquet of God's reconciling love. As we hear in the promise of God, spoken

¹⁹⁴ Narrative response from my online survey, Feb. 3, 2010. Used with permission.

through the prophet Isaiah, God “will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.”¹⁹⁵

We have our signal. The time has come to reform our theology and praxis regarding marriage in light of the undeniable changes in culture, church, and politics. We are possessed of a Biblical imperative to do so, supported by an ecclesial historical precedent, and motivated by pastoral responsibility.

As mentioned earlier, Episcopalians discern individually as well as in community. If the Holy Spirit intends to move the church in any direction, there will be evidence of that movement in the wider Church. The evidence is there, right before our eyes, if we have eyes to see it. Churches around the country as well as in other parts of the world and from a variety of denominational identities, are currently discussing this issue, developing liturgies for same-sex marriages as well as liturgies for blessing the unions of both heterosexuals and homosexuals outside of the legal sphere. Liturgies of this kind have been being developed for decades and nothing, not even the ‘moratorium’ called for by our own world-wide communion, has been able to stop their development or their use. Try as they might, neither Church nor government leadership cannot grab the Holy Spirit by the tail and tame her. The *ruach/pneuma* of God blows where she wills.

¹⁹⁵ Isa 11:12.

It matters because the vulnerable and the excluded call to us in the voices of elderly widows and widowers on Social Security, homosexuals, those wounded by divorce or the institutional church, and those healing from the wounds of sexual abuse. These voices call us, who enjoy the privileges of marriage, to come down to where they are and raise them up; to share the fruits of our riches (found in the privilege of marriage), with those who hunger for them; to extend the peace we know from our place of luxury (within our approved and celebrated unions) to those who lack it.

It matters because this is a call the people of God must heed. As theologian Bruce Birch says in his book, *Let Justice Roll Down: The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life*, “those who enjoy the fruits of wealth and luxury without regard to the plight of the poor and needy are as guilty as those who actively exploit them.”¹⁹⁶

Jesus affirms this in his parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke’s gospel.¹⁹⁷ In that story, the rich man goes on about his life not thinking much about the poor man, Lazarus, who sits nearby, hungry, and covered in sores. He doesn’t even notice when Lazarus has starved to death right outside his gate. By failing to

¹⁹⁶ Bruce C. Birch, *Let Justice Roll Down, The Old Testament, Ethics, and Christian Life* (Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 1991), 263.

¹⁹⁷ Luke 16:19-31.

notice and to intervene, the rich man fails to show hospitality which is a duty of those who “call upon Abraham as ‘father.’”¹⁹⁸

When the rich man dies, he is surprised to find their roles reversed. Now he is suffering and on the other side of a great chasm Lazarus being comforted. It seems that the rich man had forgotten Amos’ warning: “Alas for those who are at ease...they will be the first into exile.”¹⁹⁹

And that is the trap of privilege. Being rich is not bad, or wrong, or even to be avoided. The problem is failing to grieve over the ruin of Joseph as Amos says,²⁰⁰ failing to care enough about those children of God who suffer poverty, degradation, and humiliation ... failing to care enough to do something about it.

Another part of the trap of privilege is our masterful ability to justify and rationalize our protection of it. American slave owners in the nineteenth century justified their ownership of persons stolen from Africa by agreeing to believe that Negroes had no souls, and therefore, were not human. This, of course, alleviated any guilt for their inhumane treatment of them.

They rationalized the continuation of their ownership of slaves by asserting that they were, overall, good people, beneficent masters. The Negroes were actually

¹⁹⁸ Footnote, *NISB*, 1886.

¹⁹⁹ Amos 6:1, 7.

²⁰⁰ Amos 6:6.

better off as their slaves than they would be on their own, so their continued forced imprisonment was really a compassionate act.

But the ultimate justification of their privilege came from their claim of Scriptural support. Christian slave owners made themselves immune from Jesus' command to love their neighbors as Christ loved them, by agreeing to single out a passage of Scripture and interpreting it as supportive of the institution of slavery. Scripture, they said, confirmed that slavery was part of the natural order established by God. They were, therefore, slave owners according to God's word - as they chose to understand it.

In our country, it took a Civil War to undo those justifications and it nearly destroyed us. Those who suffered and died for the abolition of slavery are saints and martyrs whose singleness of purpose freed us from a terrible sin – the trap of privilege. In our time, the claim of a natural order established by God as found in Scripture is directed at issues of sexuality, sexual orientation, and the persons who can rightly marry. Try as we might, however, we will find no immunity here from Jesus' command to love one another as Christ loved us.

We who are blessed with the privilege to marry and share in the life of God who is unity in community, are called to open our eyes to a 'true realization of the privilege that is ours,' to notice the plight of those around us who have no such privilege, and then to imitate God who, as the psalmist says, "gives justice to

those who are oppressed and food to those who hunger... [who]sets the prisoners free...opens the eyes of the blind [and] lifts up those who are bowed down.”²⁰¹

Jesus confronted the oppressive systems of his time calling them to account and offering them opportunity to repent. He modeled how to welcome the stranger and how to treat those whom society labeled as sinners. He demonstrated how the covenant people had been redefined by eating with Gentiles and sinners and calling women to be disciples. In response, they killed him. This is our narrative identity.

It seems that the sort of redefinition and inclusion Jesus modeled proved to be just as hard then as it is now. We understand ourselves as good people, and rightly so for the most part. We’re trying to do the right thing according to the will of God as we understand it from our Christian narrative - Scripture, tradition, and reason.

Most of us are already actively working to make things better in our world. So the question for us is: Are we willing to open our eyes to the injustice around us, to grieve it, so that we get up off of our proverbial couches, put down our bowls of wine, and share what we have with those who have not? Are we willing to give up our lives on behalf of another, showing the kind of love Jesus described as the

²⁰¹ Psalm 146:6-7.

greatest love?²⁰² Or will we, like the rich man in Jesus' parable, understand it all too late?

It matters because we have an opportunity to do what the people of God are meant to do as Church: to move forward pastorally and faithfully, expanding our biblical understanding, adapting our theology and praxis by developing liturgies and canons that reflect the new revelation we confront for the good of the people we serve in the name of God.

As theologian Christopher Morse says, "faith, in the first instance, is God's doing. It is God's relating to human beings in such a way as to relate human beings to each other in ministering to the common good. How, and when, and where God's...Spirit achieves this relatedness is not subject to human control. The Spirit's working for freedom is revealed only by the free working of the Spirit."²⁰³

Each generation of God's people is called to follow God's leading just as Abraham and Moses were. This kind of faithful following requires God's people to let go of what is familiar and comfortable and continue on, trusting God's leading.

This project aims to be a part of that faithful response. To that end, I offer tools for use by clergy or others providing pre-marital counseling to anyone. I

²⁰² John 15:13.

²⁰³ Christopher Morse, *Not Every Spirit, A Dogmatics of Christian Belief*, (Trinity Press International Pennsylvania, 2008), 196.

encourage anyone providing pre-marital counseling to meet with all persons entering into the covenant of marriage regardless of age, sexual orientation, and previous marital or sexual experience because these discussions serve the rich and poor alike, the vulnerable as well as the privileged seeking a sacramental life in the unity of marriage.

I have also attached a booklet for a covenant blessing developed by a colleague.²⁰⁴ Integrity, which describes itself on its website as a “faithful witness of God's inclusive love to the Episcopal Church and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community [who] are working for the full inclusion of all the baptized in all the sacraments²⁰⁵ also offers samples of same-sex blessing liturgies, policies, etc. from a variety of Episcopal dioceses. These samples can be found on their website:

<http://www.integrityusa.org/samesexblessings/index.htm>

In the power of our common imagination, in the context of our Christian narrative, we press on toward the heavenly goal of God in Christ,²⁰⁶ never quite as certain as we'd like to be, but moving forward in faith nonetheless. Mindful of the vulnerable populations at our gates, we dare to challenge the status quo and invite the transforming love of God to change our direction and move us into the

²⁰⁴ This marriage booklet represents a blend of work from St. Philip's, Durham, the Diocese of Washington, D.C., the BCP, and St. Mark's, Raleigh, with St. Mark's as the final redactor. Used with permission. See Appendix E-3.

²⁰⁵ Web page for Integrity. <http://www.integrityusa.org/>, March 28, 2010.

²⁰⁶ Phil 3:14.

way we should go according to God's purpose and will for us, in this age, and evermore.