

“Happily Ever After?”
(Book: “Very Married” by Katherine Willis Pershey)
Ephesians 5: 21 – 33
West Swamp Mennonite Church # 31
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While at Mama’s house the other week, I was looking for some legal papers we needed when I ran across my parents wedding day photos. They were in a white wedding album hidden away in a dark green box up in Mama’s closet. I sat on the bed to look at them; large 8 x 10” black and white photos over sixty years old yet still so fresh and vibrant.

Mom and Dad were standing in a doorway holding hands looking so tenderly at one another. They were kissing each other after the vows, feeding each other wedding cake, and celebrating with friends, drinks in hand, after the ceremony. It looked like the picture of an ideal marriage, so full of joy and promise and hope and delight.

And suddenly my mind was sweeping across the decades with the story of their lives and the shape that marriage covenant would take: the excitement of Dad’s new cabinet- making business and a few years later his dreams dashed by mental illness, the joy of four babies in five years before Dad is institutionalized, the love and support of extended family, the strain of toil with Mom as a single parent and the death of her middle child. I recalled the pride of mother’s many years as a teacher’s aide, Dad’s final

passing, the peace of Mom's retirement years, her many friends, the joy of a grandchild and now mother's most recent stroke.

And I was struck with the risk of it all – to bind ourselves for life, until death do us part, with another human being. It is enough to make us wonder that any couple can make it through the years, still honoring each other and still considering themselves “very married” as our book title today suggests.

History tells us marriage, in the sense of a cozy couple in love choosing to spend their lives together, is really only a couple hundred years old. In ancient times tribes traded women for food and protection or used marriage as a way to connect with another tribe. Later, parents chose and made arrangements for who their children would marry for all kinds of social, political and economic reasons. Marriages were brokered for protection, in the case of pregnancy, or in-law connections. Nobody trusted letting young people, full of hormones and poor judgment, to make their own decisions about who to marry especially if it was just for love.

And for centuries the early church considered celibacy the preferred state for believers. The Church was so busy looking for Jesus they did not get excited about marriage on earth, especially since he had said there were not going to be any marriages in heaven anyway. (Matt. 22: 30)

Even after people started to marry within the church, church leaders often hovered over couples, tracked down participants in disputes, or hounded them for details about their sex lives. Then the Church complicated it all even further by making it full of rituals and rules, parental contracts and dowries. Rather than rejoicing in the covenant of marriage and supporting couples, the Church has often spent more time on all its problems, especially when it comes to sex both in and outside marriage.

But our author, Pastor Katherine Willis Pershey is all for the covenant of life-long marriage. She would agree with all of us married folks that it is not an easy undertaking to choose to spend our lives with one other human being. Some would say it is not even possible. There are just too many things that can sidetrack us. Because of this, Pershey says marriage is one big risk. It is full of sacrifice and compromise. It is about managing temptation and desire. And it is everything about being honest and kind and courteous and living in ways that do not leave our loved one brokenhearted.

Pershey looks around at her thirty-something peers and says marriage is full of conflicts. Conflicts most generally between honoring the promises of the covenant we have made together on our wedding day and fighting against the individualism that tempts us to strike out on our own,

caring only about what we want and need. She hears the stories of so many of her friends who cannot make it last and feels their pain. She tells her own stories of temptation and narrow escape; of messy fighting and her husband's struggle with depression. She understands in a very real way how important it is to have supportive friends, family and therapists, even strangers who can help open our eyes.

Pershey makes clear that, while contracts are legal documents that are conditional and time-limited, the covenant of marriage is sacred and unconditional with no statute of limitation. A faithful God pursued his bride, Israel, for several millennia despite her wayward tendencies because God had established a covenant with his people, Israel. A covenant - not a contract. A long and faithful marriage bound by covenant promises is what Eugene Peterson calls "a long obedience in the same direction."

Our scripture today takes this Old Testament covenantal understanding of God's relationship with his people and moves the analogy on to the relationship of Christ to his bride, the Church. The writer of Ephesians, Paul or one of his followers then takes this analogy into the everyday household matters of marriage and family. A quick reading of the text may make some of us cringe as it seems too hierarchical for our

modern-day taste. And ancient texts do not bend very well to our more egalitarian understandings of marriage today.

But a deeper look can make it good news for a first century Christian marriage and perhaps even speak into our own marriages. The good news hinges on our understanding of what Spirit-filled mutual submission looks like and just how the husband is “head” of the wife.

Pershey points us to New Testament writer Claire Powell’s definition of submission as a voluntary giving-in to each other. Powell says mutual submission here is about each of us compromising our own needs or wishes in order to make the relationship work. It is about lovingly giving in to each other for the sake of our oneness and out of respect for the difference Christ and his Spirit makes in our lives.

Husbands, as head of their wives, are to demonstrate the same kind of sacrificial love that Christ demonstrated to his body, the Church. In this sense, the husband is to lovingly give himself away for the sake of his wife. The work of Christian marriage then is all about giving-in and giving up out of love for your spouse. Pershey puts it in plainer language I think when she says two hallmarks of a healthy marriage are where kindness and courtesy are alive and well; when we are polite, kind and considerate, putting our spouses needs most often before our own.

Pershey goes on to quote an unsettling but very true line from a poem by Eavan Boland, “nothing is ever entirely right in the lives of those who love each other.” Yes, there is always something to work on in a marriage – in any deep and loving relationship really. We all know happily ever after is only partly true.

But I choose to make the same vow Pershey made after a tough time in her marriage: I have made my choice. It is the same choice I made thirty-eight years ago, the same choice I made last week after our tough conversation, and the same choice I make this morning as I hold our wedding photo. In fact, it is the same choice I expect to make all the days of my life: I choose faithfulness. I choose to love you, Ken, first and most. I choose to be true to you as long as we both shall live.

O Lord, help us go the distance in growing our love and in keeping the covenants we cherish with those we love.

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