

Hot Summer Nights

Sunday, July 8, 2007

Divide the congregation Men/Women

It has been said by Freudian Psychologists that a young woman looks for a partner who embodies traits that are like her father's. Maybe that's why mothers cry at weddings. On the other hand I knew a young man who could never seem to date any girls who pleased his Mom, know matter what edifying qualities they possessed she could always find fault in them. There simply was not any one good enough for her son. Then one day he brought home a girl that was just like his mother, needless to say his mother loved her and found her delightful in every way. There was just one problem...his father didn't like her at all.

To make marriage work requires commitment. I believe that where there is commitment over many years, a husband and wife can grow a marriage into something that makes romance seem frivolous by comparison.

There are many ways in which Love and Romance differ, but perhaps the most significant ways is in how lovers face each other. In **romance**, they look at each other, enjoying what they see! But **love** at its best takes place when people do not simply look at each other but **into** each other, looking into a person's eyes with the energy and anticipation that the Holy Spirit provides. When we are empowered by God's spirit, one person can reach down into the depths of another person's being and touch their innermost recesses of that person's soul. When that happens, one then experiences love at the pinnacle of the divine intention. The problem is that this probably doesn't describe most of our relationships!

The bottom line for all relationships is without commitment there is no love. Without commitment sex can become exploitive and

diminish the dignity of the other person. But within the context of love and within the context of marriage sex takes on a whole new dimension. Our commitment is to be in heart, body and soul, not pieces parts of each or even just one of these, it is to embody the emptying of all three into someone else.

I primarily do two kinds of counseling, premarital counseling where the couples sit so close that you couldn't pass air between them, where they sit there and rub the skin off each others hands for an hour and a half. Then there is marital counseling where the couples sit on each extreme end of my couch and avoid physical contact. The good news is it keeps the cushions on my couch balanced.

The last several years all of my counseling involves couples about my age, what we would call mid-life between 35-55. It represents a time when the many stresses that pull at couples apart reach their pinnacle; children, aging parents, vocational stresses, financial stresses of teenage drivers, college. I am figuring out that launching a teenager from your home is almost as costly as launching the shuttle. There are intimacy issues, women experiencing the change and men facing the departure of their youth (didn't you like how delicately I handled that). The bottom line is if you're married and you don't stay focused on what is primary the secondary stuff will divide and conquer you!

I have several counselor friends in town who concurred that the volume of dysfunctional middle-age marriages is rapidly on the rise and constitutes the bulk of the work they are doing. The divorce rate in the US is at 51% but it is a myth to think that the other 49% are blissfully thrilled. I have found that what most couples need is a relationship nanny, someone to point out what we miss when comfort and complacency collide. For a long time we thought about doing a two part series about what men needed to know about women and then the following week what women needed to know about their men. We intended for men to discover that there wives are precious children of God, worthy of

admiration and respect, worthy to be honored and appreciated, to know they are equal partners for life. Then we thought about what women needed to know about their men, but this would be a short sermon, cause what do you say after...they just want more sex! So today we are going to try and put it all into harmony in one message.

The Passage

This morning we are going to look at what has become the hallmark of relationship scriptures, which can be found in Ephesians 5. The problem is that churches and preachers only read the second half of the Ephesians 5 text, and thus causes it to be misapplied and abused, but what happens in the beginning sets the stage for what follows. So let's look at ch. 5 of Ephesians (**Teach along the way**) 1-21

Notice the emphasis on togetherness and the way our personal choices about how we live influences others. Ephesians 5 is about living in community, and then Paul gets specific about wives. (**Read 22-24**)

For years these two verses defined the marriage relationship and imparticularly the word **submit**. Now this word usually causes one of two extreme responses in women; one is that it will be a cold day in a very warm place before you will catch me submitting or the opposite extreme of complete abandonment of any voice, a subservient response to the male presence.

The word "submit" here in its original context means to give allegiance too, tends to the needs of, be responsive to someone else. So what this is saying is that out of a reverence and respect for Christ we dedicate our lives to another. That a wife's allegiance is first to her husband in the same way we have allegiance to the Lord, it is the placing of her spouses needs ahead of her own, it is to honor him. It is what we do around here all the time when we say it's not about us. How is this possible, because of the expectation that comes next (**Read 25-30**).

Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the church; He gave himself up for her. It centers around His sacrifice, His surrender, His willingness to give himself wholly to her and ultimately his death. Jesus said in one of his teachings that there is no greater love than this than to lay down your life another. I tell young girls, don't settle for anything less than this benchmark for your husband and if someone fails to reach this standard for God's sake don't give your body to him.

Any authority that comes from being the head is rooted in being the least and a willingness to lay down His life for his wife, and the wife is commanded to pledge her allegiance to her husband, but they are both commanded to submit to each other because everyone is commanded to submit to everyone else and all of this happens out of reverence for Christ.

No matter how you slice this up it comes down to whose in charge. What would happen if a husband died to his need to be in control or the wife died to her need to be in control? What if a wife knew crystal clear that her husband was placing her needs ahead of his own? What if she knew without a shadow of a doubt that his love for her was so great that he would give his life for her in a blink of an eye... and not at the next commercial break. What if he knew that no one else came before him, not the kids, not her mother, not her best friend, what if he knew he was her top priority? Invariably when I teach this there are some doubts because in conflict it's all about control, it's all about who is really in charge. This is how I frame it; think about the closest friendship you have ever had...How often do you ask who is in charge? Are not our marriages to be greater than our friendships?

As a Christian, whose in charge is a stupid question? You see a Christian never asks who is going to be Master; the Christian always asks whose going to be the servant. If you're a Christian you don't ask who is going to be number one you ask who is going to be last. The model here is Christ and he gave up all his power

and took the lowest place. And if a man loves his wife he should be ready to give up his power and become her servant. And the woman who is to pledge her allegiance to surrender her whole self to her husband in doing so becomes like Christ. And when both Husband and Wife follow Christ in a Christian marriage, both sacrifice and service are revealed.

Issues of Control and Power should not ever be on the Radar, because over time you have built up reserves of trust and love and things like power and control become irrelevant. The healthier and whole a marriage is the less you ask these kind of questions, you see when people are living in mutual submission you lose track of whose in charge.

Men, I want to be honest you are given a big task here, and it is reflected in the number of words in the passage; the command for women is 47 words long, while the commands for the man are 143 words long. The onus here is on the man to model the kind of love that will go all the way to death if it has to, not the kind of love that says “I told you I loved you when we got married if it changes I’ll let you know.

Transactional vs. Transformational

When it comes to love I think we confuse what I call Transformational love verses Transactional love. In Transformational love, it is the anticipation of someone else’s development and growth because of my outpouring of unconditional love into their life. Transactional Love is that which is done with the anticipation of something in return, it is a conditional love.

The number one place this plays itself out is in how we use our bodies. Our culture teaches our young women that the only way to relate to men and get what they want is through a series of transactions, if you don’t believe me just take a look at the fashions for young ladies. So relationships become painfully transactional;

“I have what you want and you have what I want, so lets make a deal”.

Some women learn at an early age how to negotiate, they need to be loved, to be validated, to be worth something and they discover that by giving a little of themselves away, they get what they need in return. It’s a cycle and pattern that can stay with them their entire lives.

Sex becomes a search, a search for something that is missing. It becomes a quest for an unconditional embrace, and so they go from relationship to relationship looking for what they already have. But sex is not a search for something that is missing. It’s intended to be an expression of something that has been found. It is designed to be the overflow, the culmination of something that a man and woman have found in each other.

What both men and women need to figure out is that your worth does not come from your body, your mind, your work, what you produce, what you put out, how much money you make.... You have a limitless worth that comes from your creator.

One Flesh

Let’s look at the last of this passage (**read 30-33**)

To understand this we have to look back at Genesis and when God creates Eve, Adam says this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh. Bone is a way of talking about strength and Flesh is a way of talking about weakness. Eve is the corresponding strength for Adam. They go together and they are better off together than apart. And scripture says they are to leave their former and separate worlds and become one flesh. Now this does not mean that we forget our families, what it means though is the priority has shifted; their first loyalty is now to each other.

Now the one flesh seems to be about having sex. Which of course it is, but there is so much more going on here because even having sex in this story is about something bigger. The uniting of man and woman becomes a symbol of what it means to be ONE. Having sex points to something bigger than just a man and a

woman it points beyond to somebody else...it points to God. It reflects the unity God desires in the middle of a world that isn't ONE, a world that is broken and shattered, fractured with pieces lying everywhere.

Marriage is designed to counter all of this and it was not intended to add to the brokenness of the world but to the "oneness" of the world. When it is at its best marriage gives a picture of what God is like. So when we are one flesh it is actually a celebration of many other things, things that ought to be celebrated: God, Life, Creativity and all its Potential. It is a shared partnership in caring for the little worlds God has trusted each of us with. It is strength for weakness and weakness for strength.

Finally, after all this leaving and cleaving and bones and flesh stuff, the passage in Genesis ends by saying that the man and his wife were both naked and they felt no shame. I love that part, they felt ...

- No shame or embarrassment
- No apologizing for who they are
- No covering or pretending
- No masks or secrets
- Total acceptance of each other

When I say these things... isn't it what we all want, we want people to see us exactly as we are and still love us. It's people's greatest fear in coming to church. It is terrifying to let people see us for who we really are. To see the dark places of our hearts, to see our bad habits, all the things we have done in our past, the many things we regret. We don't want any one to see our biases, our shortcomings, the things we are not good at. Being naked is terrifying!

The question is "If you see me as I really am, will you still love me like you do now?"

What we crave is unconditional, absolute acceptance from our parents, our spouses and from God. This is why marriage is always about bigger things. Its two people in their unconditionally loving embrace of each other, showing each other in flesh and blood what God is like. These two are naked, and they feel no shame. To pursue being naked, you have to believe that this person is worth getting to know for the rest of your lives. Being naked is peeling back the layers; conversation after conversation, experience after experience, year after year. It is the belief that each of our souls has infinite depth and we'll never get to the bottom of it. Our understanding of what it means to be naked reflects what we believe about the human soul; is it infinite or can we get to the end of a person or maybe we just tire of getting to the bottom of it?

Love

Love is handing your heart to someone and taking the risk that they won't hand it back because they don't want it. It is why it is such a crushing ache on the inside, when we give ourselves away and it wasn't wanted.

Love is a giving away of power, when we love we give the power to someone else. They can always do what they choose with our love. Once you let love go it is out of your hands. Others can reject it, they can accept it, they can step towards us in gratitude and appreciation or they can take it and turn their back to us.

Love is a giving away, when we love we put ourselves out there, we expose ourselves, we allow ourselves to be vulnerable. Love is giving up control, its also the surrendering of the desire to control the other person. The two Love and Controlling Power are mutually exclusive. If we are serious about loving someone, we have to surrender all the desires within us to manipulate the relationship.

It has always been interesting to me that when Jesus wants to assure his followers that they're going to be OK, that their future is secure, that they shouldn't let their hearts be troubled, he uses the wedding metaphor. There is a real mystery to marriage that in this world of 6 billion people you two ended up together.

There is a mystery why Jesus loves his church, because quite frankly on most days we are not worthy. But he loves anyway, because it's not about power and it's not about control, it's about sacrifice and service and it is a sacred and Holy thing. And it is mysterious!

If you are single or if you're a young person here this morning, I want to encourage you to not settle for anything less than an Ephesians 5 relationship. For our married couples; Ladies you are of incredible worth, of immeasurable value and are worthy of someone who will take a bullet for you. Men you are worthy to be a priority in someone else life. But neither of these things will happen without the other... the question always is...are you doing your part?

May we submit to one another not because our spouses are worthy, but out of reverence for Christ, who surrendered himself for us? May all our nights be Hot, because that was the divine intent!

Amen