

"God: The Marriage"

a Sermon Delivered by Rev. Tamara Lebak, Associate Minister
at All Souls Unitarian Church, Sunday, December 19, 2010

Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in this sanctuary of hope, supported by the memories of all those who have come before us, to remember and to strengthen our commitments to one another, our commitment to this free religious faith, and to explore and expand upon our commitment to that which is larger than all of us and all that we have created: our commitment to God. God is love, and love requires commitment.

This is the third Sunday in a series. The first Sunday was "God: The Journey," where Marlin talked about our relationship to God, and how that relationship is a journey – it is a never-ending journey. And then last week, Marlin talked about "God: The Funeral," how it is that we respond when it feels as though God has died, or God has turned on us. Today I am addressing "God: The Marriage," in which we are going to explore what our roles and responsibilities are in our long-term relationships with something higher than us. And then next week Bishop Pearson will be here talking about GOD: The Birth," and how we are born again, and again, and again with God.

So today we look at "God: The Marriage." What is our role in our relationship to the Holy?

Maybe we are, in fact, already always connected to the Holy. That there is a persistent love in the Universe available to us at all times. This morning, though, let's consider what we can do to make that relationship stronger, by considering that we are bound to life, to love, to God, like a marriage. What if love requires us to participate to commit? Some people say marriage is not a word it's a sentence: a life sentence. That is true, to a certain degree. There is a battle raging in this country over who can define marriage, and who owns it: the state or the church? And who has the right to marry?

Marriage may have lost much of its meaning today, and so has the ceremony itself. Woven into the fabric of our culture is this fairytale: you can get married underwater, jumping out of an airplane, or on Skype. You can go to Vegas and get married in a drive-through. But that doesn't cut it for me. The ceremonies that have felt most relevant, most meaningful, reflected the realities and the aspirations of the couple, that is more intentional about the commitment and the vision of the kind of partnership they would like to have, and the kind of partner they would like to be. A ceremony attended by friends and family who will continue to serve as witnesses to the commitments made; friends and family who

support their decision, and can serve as support in difficult times, and who can hold the couple accountable. Because marriage is *hard work*.

There is a story about a woman who was newly married, and when she moved into her new home with her husband, she put a shoe box on a shelf in her closet and asked her husband *never* to touch it. For fifty years this man left the box alone, until his wife was old and dying. One day, when he was in their home putting their affairs in order, he found the box and thought it might hold something important. Opening it, he found two doilies – you know, those little lace things that you put your cup on – and \$82,500 in cash. He took the box to his wife and asked about the contents. She said, “My mother gave me that box the day we married. She told me to make a doily to help ease my frustrations every time I got mad at you.” The man was very touched that in fifty years she’d only been mad at him twice, since there were only two doilies in the box. Then, puzzled, he said, “What’s the \$82,500 for?” “Oh,” she said, “that’s the money I made selling the rest of the doilies.”

I will be teaching some classes this year on tools to help your relationship. We will not be making doilies, but we will look at specific tools that can help a couple’s relationship. At the end of January I am teaching a two-and-a-half hour couples workshop on Sunday morning, 9-11:30 am, called *A Couple’s Relationship Tune Up*, where each member of a couple takes an online assessment, answering questions about all areas of their relationship, and the Workshop will target specific issues relevant to all couples, and I will meet with individual couples for an individual feedback session by request. In March I will teach another couples class on *Fighting Fairly*. No matter how long you have been together, there is always more to learn about how to handle conflict well. If you want to take these classes you’ll need to sign up in advance with your spouse or partner so that you can take the assessment. You can get more information at the Newcomers table, or email me directly.

Marriage requires us to commit ourselves – that seems obvious enough – but it doesn’t mean committing to stay the same. Long-term relationships benefit from the kind of commitment that Marlin presented God the Journey: continually reminding ourselves that the work is never done. Because we continue to grow and change, as does the person with whom we are in a relationship, and there is always a way to improve how we relate to those whom we hold most dear. Often we do not treat the most important people in our lives as well as we would a stranger in our own home. Have you ever considered this? Those closest to us – their presence is often so taken for granted that we don’t bother extending even the most basic considerations, because after we have been together we have these expectations of their behavior.

For example: how many of you, when you are sitting in front of the television and decide to get up and get something to drink, think to say, “I am going to go get something to drink. Honey, would you like something?” Not very many, I would assume. No, because you are thinking it’s his house too; if he wants something to drink, he knows where the glasses are he can get up off his tush and get it himself. Or take kinds of consideration, like explaining your plans for the evening to your other half? I know it’s dinner time, but I am going to surf the internet mindlessly for about two hours to relax, and then maybe we could order a pizza.

But if that were a complete stranger in your house, a guest in your home, you would have a completely different set of expectations for the other person and yourself. They would pick up after themselves. Now this is a high standard, and I know I don’t always meet it, but it can be a good gauge to help you err on the side of communication. It’s when we have expectations of our partner’s behavior or over direction that we get in trouble – thinking they should just know what I want and need. That’s like saying, “You went to the kitchen. Why didn’t you bring *me* something to drink!?” Relationships are complicated!

So, for the ceremony of marriage to be meaningful it is important to reflect some of these complexities in the ceremony itself, before the marriage even happens. Our weddings here at All Souls are about love, about commitment, *and* about the couple addressing the struggles and assuming that there will in fact be difficult times. In our standard ceremony, there are optional components that we incorporate: sometimes a unity candle, sharing wine, or jumping the broom, or stomping on a glass. It depends on the couple and their needs. One of the rituals that I prefer in the ceremonies I perform is called a hand fasting. In this ritual I take six cords, and for each cord I ask a question. They have already said their vows and exchanged rings, so all of the expected elements of that fairytale love are already there, but this ritual takes the ceremony to another level. When I incorporate this ritual I can feel the room shift; everyone becomes more grounded and more present, almost immediately.

The couple holds hands looking deeply into each other’s eyes, and I take a cord and turn to one of them and ask, “Will you anger her?” And he (or she) replies, “I may.” Sometimes they just go ahead and say “Yes, indeed I will. I know I will.” Those are the real practical people; usually they have been around awhile or have been married before. “Is that your intent?” I ask. “No,” they say. And I then ask the other person the same question. After they have made that first promise I take the cord and lay it across their hands.

I then ask a second question: “Will you hurt him?” and they respond, “I may.” “Is that your intent?” “No.” And I drape the second cord across their hands. This goes on until six questions have been asked; questions that they have to pay attention to how they will answer, not that have a simple “I do,” until six cords lay over their hands.

I then gather the cords and tie them in a knot as they remove their hands, and hold it up saying “The knots of this binding are not formed by these cords alone, but by the promises that they have made to one another this day.” I tell them that they hold in their own hands, each and every moment, the making or breaking of this union, and ask that these cords remind them that they are better together.

That ritual grounds the wedding in something more substantial, more real. That hand fasting ritual reminds me of how we are bound together in our commitment to those most dear in our lives, and it reminds me of the ties that bind us as a religious people.

You see, marriage is like religion: when we bind ourselves, it is the choice to hand over one small part of ourselves, to give away some of our freedom, so that we might become something more – something stronger. Because the secret of love and marriage is similar to that of religion itself; it is the emergence a larger self; it is the finding more of one’s life in the giving over of some small part of it. Such is the privilege of those who bond in union together – they each become fully his/herself, and yet also become another; a third thing. In marriage we are giving give away our right to simply walk away.

I once asked this very practical friend of mine from Texas who was married for sixty years, “What’s the secret? How did you stay married for so long?” He said, “Well, we stayed married for sixty years because we never broke up.” That doesn’t seem very helpful, and yet something about it is true. He stayed committed through all the difficult times. He was in it for the long haul, and so was she. They assumed one another’s good intentions. I often quote in my wedding ceremonies the author of *The Little Prince*, who said: “Love does not consist in gazing at each other, but in looking outward, together in the same direction, uniting in the same high effort.” That couple was constantly reminding one another that they were on the same team, with the same ultimate goal. They knew that they had someone who assumed their good intentions, but who also served as a witness to the other’s life, holding them accountable with their presence.

So, marriage is like religion. Church is also like marriage. When we gather together, when we covenant together, when we *choose* to place our names among the names of those who have agreed to bring their whole selves to church, we are gaining a community – a chosen family – and yet we are also giving away a small part of ourselves to become a part of something larger. When we join this church, we are in essence giving up our right to simply walk away. When we choose to be a member of a religious community, in full awareness, with free conscience, we are *choosing* to stay at the table when times are difficult, when we disagree. We are choosing to be in relationship, and to work with and even support people who are different than us – people who we are not *required* to be in relationship with – so that we can better ourselves and become a part of something greater. Staying committed to this church means that we work to assume good intentions, assuming that we are on the same team working toward the same goal. Church is a place where we practice being in relationship when we don't have to. We practice because we want to, because we are called to, because we know we are better people for having done so.

So Church, like marriage, is about the emergence of a larger self; a better self. It is the finding more of one's life in the giving over of a small part of it; giving up some freedom in order to become freer. So that you can have a whole church full of people on your team! Assuming your best intentions, uniting in the same high effort, holding you accountable. So Church is like a marriage...what if your relationship to God was also like a marriage? A long-term commitment? What if you made the commitment to stay at the table with God even when times are difficult, in doubt and uncertainty, when you are angry?

Do you fight fairly with God and in your relationship? Are you holding a grudge for something that happened long ago? There is no better predictor of how long a relationship will last than *how* a couple fights: not what they fight about, but how they fight. In relationships that go the long haul, individuals do not fight to *win*, because they are on the same team! Fighting fairly means owning our part, listening deeply, and assuming the other person's good intentions. What if you looked at your relationship with God, with life, with the church, in this way? What if you assumed God's good intentions, and assumed that God was assuming yours? How would that change you and your response? What if your level of commitment in your relationship with God was that you could not walk away, you would not walk away, not because you are forced to, but because you have chosen to commit in this way.

What if we chose to be bound in this way to GOD, to the church? You know that the words *religion* and *religious* come from *religare*: to be bound to. What if you were bound to God, like the hand fasting in my wedding ceremony. I'd like to invite you to participate in a bit of a vow renewal to your understanding of God; to your commitment to say yes to life, your commitment to faith in good intentions, and staying awake and invested in this life.

If you would place your palms facing up on your lap and just imagine with me: what would make your commitment to God more real for you? What would you need to acknowledge in order to make your commitment more real? Maybe the questions, like the hand fasting, that get real about the couple's commitment would help:

Will you anger God (or other members of this church)? You may; or maybe you are ready to say "Yes, I will likely." Is that your intent? No?

Will God anger you (Will others in this church anger you)? Is that God's intent? Not in my book, it's not. The God I understand would in fact say no.

Will you be hurt in this life? Likely, I may. Is that its intent? No. When you are hurt, will you assume that is God's intent? Life's intent? To hurt you?

Will you celebrate one another's successes? Yes.

Will you hold one another accountable?

And maybe the last question is in fact the hardest. I ask this of couples as well; in the wedding I ask, "Will you believe in her?" And by this I mean believe in her as her identity unfolds, as she grows and changes throughout her life, promising to assume those good intentions as the other changes? I can imagine a God who believes in us in this way, and I can be bound to a God like that, when there is room for God's identity to change and reveal itself over time, when there is room for my identity, thoughts, and feelings to change over time.

Or maybe it's easier to think, will you believe in this church as a reflection of that something larger? As it grows and changes as its identity continues to unfold? Yes! This church, in a sense, has promised to believe in you: believing that you were born with gifts that need to be offered to this world, that you are a valuable part of this larger whole, and so the last binding is made. You hold in your hands in each and every moment the making and breaking of this union. This is what I mean by "God: The Marriage": a commitment that we make to stay in relationship. To stay in relationship with God, with the church, with our highest aspirations. To assume good intentions. To keep doing the

work – the intellectual work, the emotional work, the spiritual work – binding ourselves as we are bound to those people in our lives most important to us.

And so I am choosing to bind myself to this church, and I am choosing to bind myself in relationship to God for the long haul. We are bound to each other, and I am bound to each and every one of you.

In sickness and in health, I am bound.
In good times and in bad, I am bound.
In joy and in sorrow, I am bound.
When I doubt and when I know the way, I am bound.
When I use my mind and when I use my heart, I am bound.
When I have a job and when I don't have a job, I am bound.
When the check clears and when it bounces,
When I am angry, when I am sad,
When the sermon is good and when the sermon is not so good...

I am bound.

When God is speaking and when God is silent, I am bound.
When I feel the Presence of an Almighty Holiness, and when I feel utterly alone,
I am bound.

We are bound to each other, and I am bound to each and every one of you.

Amen