

“REFLECTIONS ON FOUR DECADES OF MARRIAGE.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

July 5, 2020, 10:30 AM

Scripture Texts: Proverbs 31:10-12, 27-31; Ephesians 5:31-33

Prayer

Introduction.

40 years ago today, at 2:00 in the afternoon I stood at the altar of Eastminster Presbyterian Church in Wichita, Kansas waiting for my beautiful bride to come down the aisle. It was a glorious day, surrounded by family and friends.

I do wish someone had told me then that someday I would regret wearing an all-white tuxedo. That's about the only thing I would change about that day.

It was 114 outside, one of 40 days over 100 that summer. I was actually glad when my groomsmen threw me in the pool at the reception.

The next day we flew to Portland and drove to the Oregon coast for our honeymoon. The first thing we did was drive to a J.C. Penney in Newport and buy coats.

This happy occasion happened about 8 years after she first noticed me and about 6 years after I noticed her. At that age girls are always faster at figuring things out than guys.

We are trying to figure out that part about growing old together gracefully. Right now we are fighting it.

40 is kind of a scary number. It is one of those numbers of Biblical proportions, like Israel's 40 years in the wilderness. In the Bible 40 is a number of testing, preparation and completion. We figure since we have completed this wilderness wandering now we are ready for the Promised Land of marital bliss. We've been told the first 40 years are the hardest.

Since I am preaching on my 40th anniversary I thought I would take it as an occasion to offer some Biblical reflections on marriage and the secrets of long marriages.

But what about those here who aren't married? The teaching in Scripture about marriage and family has many applications. It is not just limited to those who are married. Our understanding of these parts of God's Word will help us in all your relationships. So on many levels it is valuable for all of us to be a part of biblical conversations about the home.

Being married and having kids are two of the hardest things you can do. Especially when you factor in how long it lasts.

Marriage is one of the most sanctifying things anyone can do. Having kids is another. Those two things expose your heart, your sin, your selfishness like few other things.

This doesn't mean you can't be sanctified if you aren't married or don't have kids. God is very creative and can accomplish that in a thousand ways. A roommate, health issues, a job, a boss, parents, siblings, the driver in front of you, the list goes on and on.

Whatever it is in your life that God is using to sanctify you, that thing is being used by God to make you more like Jesus. We can resist and rebel, or we can submit and cooperate.

Marriage is a spiritual battle ground. Instantly after the first marriage Satan was there to destroy it. He is the enemy of all marriage because marriage is a reflection of Jesus and His Church.

I have a suspicion knowing human nature that some of you look at Phama and me and you think since I am a pastor and she is a pastor's wife, that just makes everything wonderful and nice.

What you may not know is that we are very different, different in just about everything. She said last week she thinks we are about as opposite as two people can be. Opposites attract until you get married and then opposites attack, as we start trying to change each other.

Ours is not a perfect marriage, not even close. No marriage between two sinners ever is. I jested about the first 40 years are the hardest. It would be closer to the truth to say our first decade was the hardest and each decade since then has gotten better as we have learned some things.

How did we manage to get to 40 years? Let me offer six reflections on the keys to a reasonably happy marriage.

First, start with a good foundation.

If you are going to build a house, don't start with two architects, two sets of blueprints, two builders. Don't start with the world's plans and God's plans. A house divided cannot stand. Start with God's plans.

Hebrews 11:10 talks about a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.
Psalms 127:1 Unless the Lord builds the house, they labor in vain who build it.

Marriage was God's idea. He invented it, designed it, said how it should be and wrote the manual for it. It's the Bible. The Bible begins and ends with marriage. From the garden to the marriage feast of the Lamb. Everything you need is in here if you will read it and apply it. It is true and reliable and trustworthy.

Phama and I started with a good foundation and that foundation was Jesus Christ and His Word. When the walls got shaky, the foundation held. Sometimes we had to tear down and remodel, but the foundation stayed the same. We wouldn't be here without Jesus.

The foundation of marriage actually reveals the purpose of marriage. It's foundation is in Christ because, as Paul says, the mystery of marriage is that it is an earthly picture or reflection of the nature of Christ's relationship with His bride the church. The purpose of marriage is to reflect and glorify Christ. The purpose of marriage is to move us closer to seeing the reality of Jesus.

Make that the purpose of your marriage, make that the mark of your home, to glorify Christ in all you say and do. The leader in setting that direction is the husband, supported in it by his wife.

We glorify God in our marriages when we live like Jesus, self-sacrificing, dying to self for the sake of love.

“In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths” (Proverbs 3:6).

If you start with Jesus and stay with Jesus and you will end with Jesus.

Second, don't let the sun go down on your anger.

Ephesians 4:26-27 Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, 27 and give no opportunity to the devil.

Conflict is inevitable. There will be anger. Two sinners can't live together without conflict, without disagreements, without bumps. Conflict is not only inevitable, conflict is normal. Actually what I should say is there will be conflict in a healthy marriage. Unhealthy marriages stuff things, cover up, withhold, shut down. It is also true there is unhealthy conflict.

The issue is not whether you will quarrel but whether it will be a lover's quarrel. One couple calls their fights, “an intense moment of fellowship.”

The biggest sources of conflict are money, kids, sex, in-laws, chores, communication, screen time. I am sure that during this Covid crisis you have had ample opportunity for all those conflicts and a few more.

Learn how to fight fair.

Learn how to fight fair, learn the rules and keep them.

Don't use words like “always” and “never,” don't say “you made me mad.”

Don't bring up past things into the present issue. Leave your mother-in-law out of it.

Saying I'm sorry will go a lot further than saying I'm right.

Be willing to be wrong and be willing to change.

Not letting the sun go down on your anger means sometimes you have to stay up and fight.

Not letting the sun go down on your anger means keeping short accounts, if nothing lingers, nothing can accumulate. Don't let bitterness get a foothold, give the Devil no opportunity.

No days of silent treatment. No sleeping on the couch. No leaving the house in anger. Call timeouts, back up, cool down. Stop and pray.

Scripture has much wisdom for us.

Proverbs 15:1 A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Proverbs 15:4 The soothing tongue is a tree of life, but a perverse tongue crushes the spirit.

Proverbs 18:13 He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame.

James 1:19 You must all be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry.

Romans 12:18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

What is your goal in a conflict? Is it to win? Or is it to arrive at the best solution, the best way forward? Think about what happens if you fight to win. It means you end up being married to a loser. Don't fight to win, fight to understand and resolve, to move forward.

Learn not to fight each other but to fight the real enemy of your marriage who is trying to destroy your marriage. Our battle is not with flesh and blood but with cosmic powers, with principalities and powers, with spiritual forces of evil (Ephesians 6:12).

By the way, not letting the sun go down doesn't mean that you have to have everything resolved with a pretty bow around it. Not at all. You can agree that you have more work that needs to be done, you can ask forgiveness, and resolve to come back to it tomorrow.

Third, forgive each other.

Ephesians 4:32 Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.

Colossians 3:13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.

Matthew 6:12, 14-15 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

14 For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, 15 but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

This is huge, this is massively important. I have seen way too much of the damage done by ignoring this and by lack of forgiveness.

Sin is inevitable, sin is normal, sin means you are human. You have sinned, you will sin.

Every marriage is fundamentally flawed because every husband and wife is fundamentally flawed. You have to be honest about how much of the problem you are. For our first ten years or so I didn't think there was a problem. You are on your way to a solution when you see you are part of the problem.

We are all sinners, but if we are Christians that means we have been given a gift to deal with sin, the gift of the repentance and the blood of Jesus that cleanses us from all sin.

Outdo each other in being the Christian first, or doing the Christ-like thing first.

For true forgiveness to work you have to know something, one very important thing. You have to have a clear awareness of how much you need it, of how great your own sins are, and how much you have been forgiven. The biggest problem in every marriage is in here.

No one, not even our spouse has ever wronged us as much as we have wronged God, and He has forgiven us. Let us forgive as He has forgiven, that we may be forgiven.

You have to see how big the log in your own eye is, which makes it easier to forgive the speck in the other person's eye.

In order to do this you have learn to confess your sin to each other.

James 5:16 Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.

If you see a good marriage, what you see is two good confessors and forgivers. Do you know what happens when you forgive? You surrender your right to punish the other person.

If you have never said "I have sinned in this or that, please forgive me" then your soul is in danger and so is your marriage. Not asking for and giving forgiveness will kill your marriage, your oneness, your unity. No significant human relation can survive or last without forgiveness.

One of my biggest problems with most marriage counseling is how often it avoids the most fundamental problem of sin in our own lives and in our relationships and marriages.

Every spouse needs to make it almost a daily habit to say, "I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me."

Fourth, pray for and with each other every day.

Romans 12:12 Be constant in prayer.

Colossians 4:2 Continue steadfastly in prayer.

In the 13th year of our marriage I went to a Promise Keepers event where a speaker challenged us to pray with our wives, so we began making nightly prayer together a habit. I am going to attribute this one thing to why we are doing as well as we for as long as we have. Simple, humble prayer, pleading with God for help.

They don't have to be flowery or theological. Some nights the best you might be able to muster is "Lord, help." "Lord, have mercy." "Lord, give us wisdom, give us strength."

Pray together, pray out loud, pray for each other. Ask each other what do you want prayer for. Our praying together every night put an end to the sun ever going down on our anger. You can't pray when you are mad.

Jesus prays for His Bride every day. And He says to us.

Matthew 18:19-20 "If two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for; it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. 20 For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them."

Cultivate a prayer life together so that when the storms come you will have the best tool for facing it.

In your vows you acknowledged the possibility of "for worse" kinds of moments, poorer, sickness, troubles. So don't be surprised or shocked when they come. God is the master over such moments. In the storms, in the floods, in the fires, draw closer to God and each other.

Don't let difficulties isolate you, don't let them drive a wedge or cause you to withdraw.

Fifth, never use the d-word (divorce).

That word never crossed our lips, we never spoke it, never entertained the thought. Period. Throw it away, eliminate it from your vocabulary. I like how Billy Graham's wife Ruth said it once. When asked if she ever considered divorce she said, "Divorce, no, murder, yes."

Now as soon as I say that, my pastor's heart and mind goes out to those who have experienced that painful reality. Please don't hear my words as condemnation or judgment. We all have sin and failure in our lives, and the good news of the Gospel is Jesus' blood covers all our sins. His grace abounds to all sinners.

To you who are married, drive that word and that thought away. Fight for your marriage covenant and fight against Satan. Get help.

Sixth, give a hug, a kiss and an "I love you" every day.

Colossians 3:14 Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The small things are important, they add up. It keeps love alive; it says we still like each other. My main regret is not doing all these things earlier and more often.

Implications and application.

After 40 years I can say we are where we are only by the pure grace of God.

Among men I am most blessed. God has given me more than I could ask or deserve. Phama is a good helpmate, a good partner, a good pastor's wife. Listening, understanding, encouraging, rebuking. She has endured the demands of pastoral ministry, many nights home alone. It is said pastors have a mistress, called the church. She has sacrificed so much. She truly is a precious jewel, my glory and joy.

Our love has grown. We love each other more now than ever. The good news is I would do it all over again in a heartbeat.

God bless those of you in your fifth and sixth decade. Thank you for your example of faithfulness. You can testify it is all grace. May God's grace abound to us all.

Colossians 3:14 Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Prayer: Holy Father, we ask that you would cause and enable all our marriages to increasingly be a reflection of the love relationship that exist between Christ and His Church. Lord, we know that doesn't just happen overnight and we know that we are far from your best for us, and we know that we can't get back to where we should be without your divine intervention and help. Lord begin today to spread a revival of marriage vows the way Christ loves His Church. We ask you for this in the name of Jesus, for the sake of Him and His glory in the Church. Amen.