

LONGEVITY IN MARRIAGE

A Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on the Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, August 14, 2016

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Finding a Firm Foundation for Marriage

The passage from the concluding story of the Sermon on the Mount about the man who built his house upon sand versus the one who built his house upon stone (Matthew 7:24-27) is my favorite text for weddings. This is because I like the way in which Jesus was raised in a home-building family. Traditionally, he was a carpenter, but there's also a legend that he was brought up in a stone-mason setting.

Regardless of that legend, Jesus would have known about foundations, and in his parable about the two houses he actually was talking about the foundation of our spiritual life, which also can be built upon something solid or something worthless.

Also marriages. When I look at young couples, sometimes still in their teens but often nowadays in their 30's, I ask myself, "What are their marriages built upon? Will they last?" There are a lot of forces out there that can beat upon an unsound foundation and bring the house down.

Today is the 40th Wedding Anniversary for Tracy and me. We also chose the hottest day of the year 40 years ago, at 4:30 in the afternoon. I have only one memory of the actual ceremony, which is that the minister, who was suffering from heat much more than I am right now, wore big, thick, black plastic glasses, and they started sliding down his nose. But he waited until they had slid right down to the very tip of his nose before push-

ing them back up. And I worried about his glasses the whole time, not thinking about the vows or anything else.

Counseling Reveals Personality Types

During those 40 years, we have been in marital counseling twice, once around the ten-year mark and once again around the twenty-year mark. One of the reasons actually had to do with personality types. We've taken many tests over the years. The Myers-Briggs, for example, is based upon Jungian archetypes, from which you can learn your personality type.

I'm of a particular type; Tracy is of a different type, of course, and we have opposite personalities. There are four different ranges, and we are exactly opposite on all four. The worst thing for a marriage is to be identical because you die of boredom. The second-worst thing is to be opposites like we are, which has led to some of the troubles we have had. What works best is to have some commonalities and some differences. So therefore we've had to work on our marriage over the years.

Now contrast our 40 years with those of my sister, a kind, good, loving woman — who might have been called in older times a righteous person. Linda is the kind of person who takes the Golden Rule very seriously. Always doing to others what she would have them do unto her. She also married right at the end of college, but she divorced at seven

years later. The guy she had married proved to be immature and also had a drug problem.

Strikeout Vows Forsaken for a Final Try

Linda then married sort of on the rebound a guy who had swept her off her feet but ended up being a Loser, with a capital L. They were married for 19 years. He contributed positively to the net income of the family in only one year out of the 19. However, he was fertile. They had two kids, who are now grown. They divorced finally at the behest of the two boys.

She vowed never to marry again, was single for nearly 15 years, and then she met a kind, smart, gentle man, and she married for the third time within two months of her retirement. I married them two years ago.

Now what would you conclude about longevity in marriage by contrasting the marriages of these two siblings? I suggest to you that you can conclude almost nothing. It is a combination of work, and sometimes hard work, but also a bit of luck. A lot of people disagree with me on this, but I tend to think that there's some luck involved, somehow or other.

A good friend of mine had parents who were married for 72 years. How did this happen? It was out West, on a ranch where they came from, and what happened is that, while they were dating, they decided to take a hayride, an unsupervised hayride. So off they went with the horse and the wagon and the hay. One thing led to another. Afterward, they fell asleep, which is common after that kind of exercise. The horse got bored, went back to the barn, wagon and all, and they woke up in their birthday suits with mom and dad standing there and the dad saying, "The minister is on the way." And they ended up being married for 72 years.

Longevity Predictors Prove Worthless

Talking about longevity, not just in marriages but generally in relationships, there aren't any good predictors available as to what will lead toward a good marriage or a good relationship and what won't.

Here are some potential predictors of relationship results. All of them are sort of worthless:

- If your parents have been divorced, you are 40% more likely to get divorced also.
- If your parents have been divorced and they remarry, you're 90% more likely to get a divorce.
- If at least one of the couple is a smoker, you are 75% more likely to get a divorce, almost double the average rate.
- If you live in a red state, you are 27% more likely to divorce than if you live in a blue state.
- If you have a daughter, you are 5% more likely to divorce than if you have a son.
- If you have higher intelligence, you are less likely to divorce.
- If you are older in age at the time of the wedding, you are less likely to divorce.
- Money has a fascinating correlation. If you have too much or too little, you're more likely to divorce. The very rich and the very poor have a higher divorce rate. What is ideal is to have enough plus a little bit more. A little bit

of mad money, a little bit of fancy-vacation money is ideal for a marriage.

- Those who have premarital counseling are less likely to divorce. But that's a worthless statistic because it's a self-selecting group. Only people who are interested in working on and investing in their marriages will do premarital counseling anyway.
- Cohabitation prior to marriage, which is very common now, leads to a slightly higher divorce rate. But there is an intriguing reason. Lots of studies have been done on this, and it turns out the reason is that, if you date prior to marriage rather than moving in and living together, you tend to talk more, and you know each other better than if you've moved in and lived together.

It's Painfully Clear Which Marriages Fail

Now a conclusion. I would say it is very difficult, if not impossible, to say which marriages will last. However, in my experience, it has been painfully clear which ones won't last.

1. Twice in my time as a minister, over 30 years now, I have married couples whom I knew in my heart of hearts that theirs was not a good match. However, they were children of pillars of the church, and they didn't want to offend anyone. One marriage lasted one year. The other marriage lasted two years.

Which begs the question, "How did I know that this wasn't going to be a good match?" Well, it's true for all of us. We can usually tell when it's not going to be a good match, and we can tell when others might be a good match.

2. I had one woman from New Jersey who called for an appointment. She wanted to be married in my church. However, it was nearly a year away, so we scheduled our first face-to-face meeting six months after the phone call.

I took down the information and created a file on this couple. Six months passed, they showed up, and the name of the guy didn't match the name in my file. And yes, they had broken up. She got engaged to another guy but kept the appointment. Part of me was upset; another part was impressed.

Pining for an Old Girlfriend not Good

3. I had a couple, a younger, more immature couple, who came to me for premarital counseling. The first session is a get-to-know-you meeting in which I ask open questions: Tell me about your family of origin. Tell me about the most recent argument you've had. Tell me about how you met. All these kinds of things. It's a friendly session, but I'm also looking for red flags.

In the middle of the initial appointment with this couple, the guy sort of kicks back and looks

up at the ceiling and begins pining away for his old girlfriend. I'm thinking maybe this guy isn't ready to get married yet. So at that point, I declined to marry them. They got upset with me, but I received a thank-you note from them nearly a year later. It really made my day.

4. I had one couple in which where the guy was angry about something, I'm not sure exactly what. But we're having an open-ended conversation: Tell me stories about who you are and your relationship. The guy just gives me one-word answers to these open questions. The woman was very forthcoming, though, so I ended up having this conversation mostly with her, with him throwing in one or two words now and then.

“Yeah, How Much Do You Charge?”

After an hour of this, it's sort of irritating, you know, but finally it's time to conclude the appointment, and I asked this couple, “Do you have any questions of me?”

The guy sits up on the edge of his chair after having his arms folded in anger the whole time and giving me all these nonverbals. Sitting straight up, he says, “Yeah, I have *the* question. How much do you charge?”

Well, he ended up dying six months after the wedding. He was a very angry man, and it took a toll on his health, I'm sure.

Forty years. If I have one bit of advice that I would give, it's not just on marriages. It's on relationships. This advice has to do with any person who has a long-term relationship with another person. Within a family. Within a business. Pastor and congregant. Teacher and student. Best friends. Any kind of long-term relationship.

Part I: Conflict Is Inevitable, so Fight Fair

Part I of my advice has to do with conflict:

- Conflict is inevitable. It will happen. It is guaranteed.
- However, our judgement in our culture is that conflict is bad. We prejudge it to be so because we've had an argument. But it isn't necessarily bad.
- There are two parts to this one piece of advice about conflict. When you judge it to be inherently bad to have an argument, your reptilian brain kicks in, and you have this initial two-part response — fight or flight, the primal urges of settling conflict.
- Flight usually takes the form of the silent treatment. Sleeping in different rooms. Not talking to each other. You have removed yourself, and it will ultimately lead to divorce.
- You really must fight. Fight is necessary. The trick is to fight fair, and there are ways to do it.

One of the finest articles I've ever read about long-term relationships, marriages in particular, came in the editorial pages of The New York Times on May 28, 2016, authored by Alain de Botton under the title “Why You

Will Marry the Wrong Person.” You can understand why I immediately wanted to read it. The article has to do with the fact that exactly the right person doesn’t exist. There is no such person out there. So here is the penultimate paragraph, which sums it up, for me at least:

“The person who is best suited to us is not the person who shares our every taste (he or she doesn’t exist), but the person who can *negotiate differences in taste intelligently* — the person who is good at disagreement. Rather than some notional idea of perfect complementarity, it is the capacity to *tolerate differences with generosity* that is the true marker of the “not overly wrong” person. *Compatibility is an achievement of love; it must not be its precondition.* [My italics.]

Part II: Opportunity for Spiritual Growth

Part II of this bit of advice comes out of something spiritual.

- There is a spiritual principle that really is practiced only by the mature. You don’t see a spiritually immature person doing this.
- Is the conflict, the disagreement, the difference in taste, the argument — is it really a genuine problem? Or might it be yet one more opportunity for our own spiritual learning and growth?
- Let me give you an example: I mentioned at the very beginning that Tracy and I went into marital therapy twice, at the ten-year mark and at the twenty-year mark.

During the early years of our marriage, we argued about money, mostly. There were a few other things, but money was the chronic dispute, and it took us a while to figure out what was going on. We had enough money. It wasn’t whether we had enough money or not. It was what we did with the money we had.

Tracing Trouble Back to Our Fathers

To make a long story short, we got some good therapists who helped us trace it back to our fathers. It turned out that one very important detail had its effect a whole generation later on Tracy and me. It is that my dad was ten years older than her dad, meaning that my dad was nineteen during the depression, and her dad was nine. My dad was in his formative, about-to-enter-adulthood time, and her dad was still in grade school.

Thus, my dad was more affected by the depression than was her dad. There were, of course, other factors, but to generalize, my dad, as he married and raised a family, ended up being a borderline miser. Save, save, and save some more. Tracy’s dad, on the other hand, was one of the more generous people I have ever known, but without a savings account and without investments.

To give you a feeling for the situation, in my family of origin, dad took us out to dinner only once every couple of years, whereas that was a common occurrence in Tracy’s family. Once, when we were dating, her dad took us all out to dinner at a fancy restaurant. (This is still an emotional experience for me.)

As we were ordering, with the waiter standing by, when my turn to speak up came, Tracy’s dad interrupted me. I was about to

order something inexpensive, when he said, “Art will have the Surf ’n’ Turf.” It is the only time in my life that I’ve had the most expensive item on the menu.

The Effect of Generosity and Stinginess

It hasn’t happened since. It’ll probably never happen again. But it happened once, and that gesture of generosity I remember in his honor to this day.

However, it had an effect on our marriage. Such generosity and such stinginess were brought together in the lives of their children. Finally out from under the oppressive wet-blanket mantle of my family, I am at last ready to spend! Now Tracy wants to save!

It took us nearly 20 years to reach an equilibrium that we finally settled on. We still argue about stuff now and then, but that was the big chronic one.

What we didn’t realize in our immaturity and naïveté was that each of us was a gift to the

other. It wasn’t a problem. It wasn’t an argument. It was a gift that we didn’t recognize. We didn’t see it at the time.

This is the the case for so many disagreements across long-term relationships, across the land. Oftentimes they are beautiful gifts in disguise.

The one bit of advice I would give is to know that conflict is inevitable. It will happen, and it’s okay. Actually, it’s more than okay. It might be a nice gift for your relationship.

My Conclusion Is Buried in the Bible

My conclusion? Buried deep in the middle of I Corinthians 13, that love chapter that you hear so often for weddings, is a three-word sentence that is one of the most magnificent lines in the Bible. It applies to the whole of our lives in multiple facets:

“Love is kind.”

Amen.