

# **Giving in Marriage**

I John 3:23-24

by the Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones

First Central Congregational UCC

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Michael and I were married on June 6, 2009 in Oklahoma City in a city park a few blocks from our home. We held the ceremony beside a creek under a canopy of trees. Two hundred of our family, friends, and church members attended. Some came all the way from San Francisco, New York City, Minneapolis, and South Texas, and many points in between. Michael and I arrived for the ceremony sitting atop a classic, bright red, Thunderbird convertible. My former colleague, the Rev. Harry Wooten, a Baptist, performed the ceremony. A string quartet provided the music, and our friend Sara Salas, an opera singer, sang an incredibly moving and beautiful aria.

The reception was at our home. Lights were strung over the back and side yards. Japanese lanterns were hung. Tables were decorated with white linens and bouquets of seasonal and native wildflowers and grasses. The blue thistle and the sunflower were the dominant images.

Inside our pool table was covered with the buffet that reflected the ethnic traditions of our families. For my Oklahoma side of the family we had barbecue. For Michael's German side we had brats and sauerkraut. And for the Filipino side we had roast pig. Filipino tradition is that all big events include a roast pig. We had two. One was cut up and served in the buffet. The other was a whole pig, head and feet and everything, lying in the center of the table with a big sunflower in its mouth. Needless to say, our vegetarian friends were horrified when they walked into the buffet.

Also Filipino tradition is to prepare enough food so that people can take some away. When the reception was only halfway through my mother-in-law, still in her beautiful, pale yellow, mother-of-the-groom dress, started butchering the pig and filling up Ziploc bags that she insisted every guest take with them. The smart ones did, because that roast pig was delicious. My mother-in-law expertly butchered that pig. Watching her wield a knife, I realized that I never wanted to make her angry.

When it came time to cut the cake, I politely fed Michael his piece, but he purposely got frosting on my nose.

The next morning, we had a big breakfast with all of Michael's extended family before they headed for home. His uncle Ken remarked on the irony that we were now married in the eyes of God and the church, but our marriage was not recognized by the state, which objected to our marriage on religious, not legal grounds. A local newspaper asked for a picture from the wedding to run on their front page. We declined.

In November 2012, as we were preparing to become foster parents, we were told by the foster care agency that they need us to have a legal marriage certificate. They were very clear-- they didn't legally recognize that certificate, to do so would violate the Nebraska constitution,

but they needed it anyway. So, Michael and I had a legal ceremony in Council Bluffs. We actually held the ceremony on the pedestrian bridge, standing near that line that marks the state boundaries, signifying the absurdity of having rights on one side of an arbitrary boundary that we did not have on the other side. It is funny. Move one inch and you aren't legally married. That ceremony included three friends who were there to act as witnesses. The officiant was our good friend Niki Jordan, who is a Buddhist. So, we have the joy of having been married by a Baptist and a Buddhist.

It just so happened that right before we began that simple ceremony, the wind picked up, and Niki could barely hold on to her papers. We all laughed and tried sheltering one another. I didn't expect to be emotional at this silly little ceremony, but as we said our vows a second time, we both cried.

We've been married for five years now, and marriage has surprised me. One thing that has been surprising is how much work it takes. Our sermon series this summer is entitled "The Work of Love" and is borrowed from a line in a Wendell Berry poem that we read the first Sunday in this series. The poem was written by Berry to his wife on the occasion of their 35<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. He writes that they have kept to the way of love, even though they had little understanding of what that meant when they took their vows. Along the way have come many surprises requiring faithful commitment and good work. That work yielded beauty, growth, and delight. After 35 years they have arrived at a place, a place he describes as:

familiar  
as the oldest dream, where we know  
we are, even as we do,  
the work of love.

As I said, this work has surprised me. Marriage, while a gift, is also more of a challenging adventure than I anticipated. I have more rough edges than I realized I did. That's humbling. More sacrifice is called for than I expected. Forgiveness is essential.

I have come to view marriage as a spiritual discipline. As with all the spiritual disciplines, the effort yields rewards. I am opened up to God and other people in new ways. I am, hopefully, growing and becoming a better person—more humble, more generous, more patient, more loving (though there are days when it does feel like I'm headed in the other direction. Just ask Michael).

The United Church of Christ has a neat little booklet for couples who are preparing for marriage. In it there are several handy tips, but also a few essays by some of our denomination's best writers reflecting on the meaning of marriage. I really like one of the essays by UCC pastor Anthony Robinson. That essay is about the vows we take in marriage. Here is what he wrote:

This promise asks and requires of us courage, character and commitment. Not only that, it gives these to us as well. [Note: I really like that. The very act of being married develops these virtues within us. Robinson continues:] In living this vow and these promises, our character shall be deepened and our courage shall grow. In all sorts of

ways, marriage is a spiritual practice as demanding and rewarding as any.

We make these wild and bold promises in the presence of a holy God, in the presence of the power that called the worlds into being and set the moon and planets in their courses. Those who commit themselves to these bold promises shall know the help of this God, of a power not their own, of a love that upholds them and a grace that sustains them amid life's joys and sorrows.

In preparation for this sermon, I read a lot on marriage—theological essays, articles on the current state of marriage in America, and one good new book that is a guide to Christian marriage. In this book, by Thomas Breidenthal, Dean of Religious Life at Princeton University, the emphasis is upon married romantic love as one aspect of how we love our neighbor, as commanded by God in holy scripture. I had never thought of it this way before. Breidenthal believes that many of us are called to intensely, intimately, and wholly love another person. We cannot love everyone, every neighbor fully and completely, but we can do it with our spouse.

Entering into marriage, he writes, is a religious act requiring sacrificial self-giving:

When two people offer themselves to each other for life, they are witnessing to their belief that full human life is about service and other-centeredness. They are making a faith statement that the fundamental rules that govern human life demand that we share everything we are and everything we have with others, and that genuine personal happiness lies in [making that commitment].

Truly committing ourselves to another person means that we believe they have value beyond how they satisfy our own needs and desires. It means that we are willing to make sacrifices of our own interests for theirs, even as they make the same commitment to us. True love then schools us in service to others. Our horizons ought to expand beyond the marriage, as we begin to put that service into practice in our relationships with other people. Marriage shouldn't be a refuge, but a place that draws us out of ourselves and into the wider world.

And, so, in my wedding ceremonies I always remind the couple and the assembled witnesses that the marriage we are making in that moment is also a sign. "A sign of what God desires for humanity. A sign of the meaning of the creation. A sign of the character of God." And in the blessing that closes the ceremony, I pray that God will "give them such fulfillment of their mutual affection that they may reach out in love and concern for others."

There are days when all these beautiful spiritual things are not at the front of my mind. There are days when I am hurt, angry, distracted, or just plain being a jerk. Sometimes I wonder if being single would be easier. Sometimes I am attracted to other people.

And in those moments of temptation and doubt, what always helps is remembering. Remembering how my mother-in-law wielded that knife. No, that's just a joke.

What I remember is standing together in that park in Oklahoma City before two hundred other people who can still bear witness for me if I need them to.

I remember how we held our hands and took vows in which we gave ourselves completely to one another. I remember Michael's smile and the tear drops glistening in his eyes. And in remembering I realize that another human being gave himself to me. Entrusted himself to me. So it's my responsibility, my spiritual calling to receive that gift by caring for him.

And I remember that I also gave myself to him. Now I realize that every single day I must give myself to him. Every day I must receive his gift to me. That is my spiritual calling. Giving in marriage. It's wild, it's bold, it's risky, it's adventurous, it's romantic.

May God give us the courage and the character to become your work of love.