



MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT SUNDAY

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

Sunday, February 10, 2013

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Lection – 1 Corinthians 7:4 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 4) For the wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Marriage reflects one expression of God's creative relationship with God's children. When two people accept God's call to love, honor, comfort, and respect one another, they enter into a mutual agreement grounded in appreciation of the spouse's unique identity in Christ. It is the unique identities and gifts of each individual which ignite God-ordained attraction between the couple and affirms the call to be married.

Godly attraction suggests that each spouse mutually complements the desires, needs, and gifts of the other spouse. The ultimate desire for a Christian is to reach his or her soul's salvation while experiencing an abundant life as God's rightful heir. This shared goal supports the marital commitment for both spouses to honor and serve each other—actions that mutually enhance their Christian journey.

During the slave era in the United States, African Americans were denied the opportunity to formally marry. African slaves preserved the sanctity of marriage by conducting their own ceremonies and traditions (such as jumping the broom) despite punishing restrictions. The remote plantations that physically separated spouses encouraged dependence on spiritual intimacy for sustaining God's collective intent for them as a couple. The call to marry in the midst of such divisive conditions demonstrated the power of merging individual faith, ability, and sacrificial love for the common good of God's commonwealth.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: 1 Corinthians 7:4

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Over 42 years of marriage, my maternal grandparents endured together several wars and shared eight children and eleven grandchildren. My grandmother led their home like the CEO of a major, successful corporation. She ensured that everyone's interest was aligned with the common goal of being loving, respectful, and productive individuals. Her authority was a byproduct of her sacrifice to keep the family unified and focused on God in the midst of life's ups and downs.

My grandfather ensured that we honored Grandma with his same intensity. Their mutual respect and support of each other's gifts taught us the value of genuine partnership. They balanced each other such that the scale of love and influence never tilted in either parental direction. Grandma's strength and leadership prevailed even after my grandfather's death, and their legacy motivates me to build my marriage with the same fortitude.

Successful marriages embrace that "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil" (Ecclesiastes 4:9 NRSV). Each spouse moves beyond hierarchy to embracing that *beside* every good spouse is a great spouse. Current economic situations continue to subject both spouses to work inside and outside the home, requiring even greater appreciation of mutual sacrifice for mutual gain.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

In 1 Corinthians, Paul counsels the Corinthian church by reminding them of their call to live holy lives and remain in communion with the Holy Spirit. The Corinthians have strayed from Paul's teachings and have found themselves heavily influenced by cultural norms. Paul encourages the Corinthians to recommit their lives to Christ and change behaviors that are causing strife within their community.

Paul emphasizes that all people and things belong to God. By submitting to God, God will protect followers of Christ and give them strength to overcome life's temptations. Paul warns the Corinthians that it is better to appear foolish and gain godly wisdom than to act foolish and fall from grace.

Paul addresses the Corinthians collectively as the body of Christ with instruction applicable to each individual. He removes the focus on hierarchy by explaining that all followers of Christ are servants and royal heirs of God. God is a God of equality. Apostles, including Paul, should not be considered as the only group favored by God. God favors those who are trustworthy of being good stewards of God's mysteries. Authority and the power of influence are given to those who faithfully serve God.

Discussions regarding individual spiritual gifts also clarify equal access and importance to God. God distributes gifts among all of God's children with the expectation that each gift will be used collectively to build God's commonwealth. Paul affirms that all gifts are important for nurturing the spiritual health of the Corinthian community. The Corinthians' dissatisfaction with their assigned gifts prevented them from giving thanks and sharing their gifts with others in love.

Paul's framing of the church's witness and responsibilities are instructive for marriages as well. Marriage reflects the formation of a micro community within the larger community. God calls each individual within any community to serve God and each other with wisdom and self-control.

In 1 Corinthians 7:1-7, Paul addresses the relationship between husbands and wives within the Corinthian community. Paul emphasizes physical intimacy because the Corinthians are struggling with how Christians can and should handle their sexual desires in a holy manner. Paul acknowledges that celibacy keeps him focused on God, yet celibacy is not intended for everyone. God creatively assigns marital status as one gift in the body of Christ.

In verse 4, Paul declares that each spouse has authority over the other spouse's body. Paul addresses the wife and husband on equal terms, suggesting that both spouses must be diligent and in agreement on addressing intimate matters. Paul also places emphasis on each spouse's relationship with God and the importance of sharing how the Holy Spirit guides their individual decisions for the common good of their household. He encourages couples to commitment to prayer and meditation when tackling intimate concerns so that they are not tempted and lose self-control. Couples are encouraged to preserve their individual identities in Christ as they negotiate how best to serve and love one another.

Marriage is enriched when each person in the marriage places God first and seeks to inspire, encourage, and uplift one's spouse—this is the height of intimacy and the height of authority in marriage.

Celebration

Having a partner to share the abundant Christian life is a reason to celebrate. Marriage invites couples to experience God on many intimate levels. God graciously ordained couples to partner for life and equipped each of them with complementary gifts as anchors in their Christian journey. Married couples succeed when they fully commit to serving each other and demonstrate a reciprocal desire to faithfully live God's calls on their lives both individually and collectively. Each spouse gains authority to be co-leaders in their marriage through sacrificial love and an unwavering appreciation for the spiritual gifts brought to the marriage.

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details of this passage include:

Sights: Use of body that suggests not being alone (e.g., holding hands, eye contact to affirm approval and intimate connection); envisioning a spouse who has a tattoo of the other spouse's name on his or her body as declaration of the partnership;

Textures: Physical intimacy engages physical touch of the temple God has given each spouse.

III. Other Material That Preachers and Others Can Use

- A spiritual gifts inventory is a great tool for discovering a spouse's unique gifts and discerning how gifts support the marriage. Lifeway offers a Spiritual Gifts Survey at http://www.lifeway.com/lwc/files/lwcF_MYCS_030526_Spiritual_Gifts_Survey.pdf accessed 7 November, 2012.
- President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama demonstrate the value of complementing one another for the glory of God. Barack and Michelle Obama on Their 20 Years of Marriage: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zzct-Ei18Mc>.