

*Presence: The Power of Authentic Relationships*

A Love That Endures

Genesis 2:18-25; *The True Love* by David Whyte

An anthropologist who was studying a Hopi tribe of Native Americans noticed how often *rain* appeared in the art and music of the Hopi people. He asked the leader of the tribe why so many of the people's songs dealt with rain. "It's because water is so scarce in the land where we live," the Hopi leader replied. And then the Native American turned and asked the anthropologist, "Is that why so many of your songs are about love?"

This is the second in a series of sermons on *The Power of Authentic Relationships*. I want you to hear something intentional in my decision to put this series first as we begin a long course of Sunday morning conversations. Authentic, honest, loving relationships are the foundation for everything else we do with our lives. They are what we rely on for stability; they are also what lead us to change, to our own transformation. The central relationships in our lives—relationships with our spouses or partners, our parents and children, our friends, our colleagues—are not only fixed pieces in our daily routines; they are also the backpack we carry around with us all the time, whether we want to carry them or not. Wherever we go and whatever else we're doing, the temperature of those primary relationships—worry or fear or conflict or the sense of well-being they bring us—influences our reactions to everything else. It has the power to weigh us down and sink our spirits, or to raise us up to embrace life.

The ways we love the most important people in our lives are an important topic to talk about in church, because those relationships are the laboratory where we experiment and practice with what it means to be loved by God and to love God back. What it looks like, in our day-to-day, real lives, to put love at the center of our intentions *and our actions*.

More and more, as I pay attention to the words and life of Jesus, I am convinced that loving God and loving others are not just the two most important commandments; in some essential way, they're the *same* commandment. When Jesus said, "Love one another," I think he meant this with particularity. He was talking about loving people who have actual faces and bad habits. He knew, I think, how easy it is to declare that we love

*humanity*, and how hard it is to forgive the person who kept us awake all night with their snoring.

Over and over again in the Bible, the relationship between God and God's people is spoken of in the image of a bride and bridegroom, or a husband and wife. Our own relationships of covenant and promise help us understand and reflect on the kind of faithful love God has for us, and what covenant with God means. Making and keeping vows means loving people we sometimes feel stuck with, caring for people to whom we are bound by a promise that lasts much longer than the feeling that led to that promise. And the challenges of those relationships remind us of the love of God, who is, quite frankly, stuck with us.

Today I want to talk particularly about life-long relationships, the kind of relationships that are embodied in marriage and lifetime commitments, regardless of the partners' gender. The story from Genesis that we read a few moments ago is part of the biblical story of the creation of the earth. I can imagine ancient people sitting around a fire, late at night, and a child asking, "Why do the adults always seem to pair up? Why do they always look for one person to go home with?" The story of Adam and Eve was told in response. It is the story of two people who are closely and invisibly connected with one another, so much in need of one another's partnership that it is as if they shared a rib, or some other part of their bodies. I notice that the story says nothing about sexuality. Their relationship, and the point of this story, is not about sex. I hear in this story that what is meaningful, what God honors and encourages, is a connectedness of whole persons, a commitment that can happen regardless of the sexual identity or gender of the people who make it.

Often, the feeling that leads us toward making that kind of life-long commitment is the romantic exhilaration that comes from feeling that we are fully seen by someone else. When we fall in love, we reveal ourselves. We allow someone else to see the parts of ourselves that are hidden from most of the world. Being known in that way is what we call intimacy, a word that is best explained, I think, by breaking apart its syllables. Intimacy: *into-me-see*.

Intimacy is what gives marriage and life-partner relationships an immense power in our lives: there is someone, right next to us, who is able to see in us something different than the well-crafted image we present to the world.

Sometimes this is the only person who sees us without makeup—both literally and figuratively. Each partner becomes the mirror through which the other sees himself. Each holds in her hands the other's self-image and need for approval. That makes this relationship the tool that can transform us. It also makes this kind of relationship perilous—because each partner has great power to heal or deeply wound the other.

Often, when I perform weddings, I say something like this to the couple getting married: “For each of you, the calling you must listen to, and follow, is not only to reach your own destiny, but to help your loved one to find hers, or his. The calling of marriage is to tend your partner's spirit, to stand by the other as a tangible reminder of the presence of love and constancy in life. And the reward of marriage is that you too will have the companionship of the one whom you most love and respect, and whose love and respect you need to make you whole.”

As I say that to freshly-in-love and romance-filled young couples, it seems like an obvious thing to promise. And yet, it is that obligation to tend one another's need for affirmation and unconditional acceptance that we are most likely to misplace along the long road of a lifetime relationship. The truth is that of all the places we go and people we encounter every day, for many people, home feels like the place where they are most criticized, instead of most treasured.

John Welwood, who is one of my favorite writers on marriage, says, “This is one of the most striking phenomena I observe in working with couples: how they often have much more energy for making each other wrong than for setting things right between them.” Almost all of any couple's grievances against one another, he says, are different forms of the same complaint: *You don't love me as I am*. Welwood calls this the most fundamental sorrow that there is. Sometimes I think this is the one thing that could most completely change the quality of our marriages: for each of us to remind ourselves, over and over again, until our behavior changes, that you are the one whose understanding, support and love your partner needs more than anyone else's in the whole world. That home is where we come to find the unconditional acceptance that is in short supply almost everywhere else we go.

At some level, we know this. That's what makes us stress compatibility so heavily when we're looking for the right person to marry. But the truth is that none of us stays the same person we were on our wedding day. Every

marriage is about two flawed people, who don't have a clue about what lies ahead or who they will become. Stanley Hauerwas, a United Methodist clergy person who teaches ethics at Duke University, says that when he marries couples, he gives them a sealed envelope and tells them not to open it until things really get difficult in their marriage. When they do finally open the envelope, usually years later, every couple reads the same message. It says, "*Everyone marries the wrong person.*" When I first heard that story, I thought it seemed hopelessly cynical. But actually, I think it's a pretty good message for couples who feel their marriage is in trouble. It reminds them that most of the time, the issue is not about whom you married. The solution is not to go out searching again for the right person. It's about remembering that no matter what your reasons were for getting married, the reasons for staying married are something else.

The author Mary Pipher tells a story about visiting an older couple in the Midwest and interviewing them about the key to their 60-year marriage. "How have you done it?" she asked them. "Mary," the husband said to her, "I have one thing I do. I get up every morning, and I look in the mirror and I say to myself, 'You're no prize either!'"

Marriage calls us to abandon our longing for the perfect, both in our partner and in ourselves. No one remains as sublimely lovable as he was on the day you fell in love with him, or as beautiful as she was on your wedding day. The passions and the illusions of love ebb and, if we are lucky, they flow again. And every day in between, we are required to remember that we are married. Married while we love imperfectly and are imperfectly lovable.

John Gottman, another psychologist whose work on marriage I admire, found in decades of studying married couples that 69% of the conflicts they argue about never go away. That means if you're inclined as a couple to argue about a particular issue, or a difference between you, you're likely to deal with that same conflict forever. One of you will *always* avoid emptying the dishwasher. The other will *never* learn to use the car's turn indicator correctly. That doesn't mean things are hopeless; it just means that solving things by eliminating the differences between you is not the answer. What makes a marriage work, Gottman says, is to find a way to come back together every time you notice and are irritated by those persistent differences. To forgive each other for not being someone else, and to have a path that leads back to connection after every one of those predictable arguments.

Even a relationship made of sterling can get tarnished. Over time, a lot of things happen that damage us, wound us and wear us down, and all of those things can dampen even the most bright-hot love. After that, staying together is, in some ways, “in spite of it all”. I heard someone say once, “Love at first sight is easy to understand. It’s when two people have been looking at each other for forty years that it becomes a miracle.”

And that seems to me very much like faith. The writer of Hebrews says faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” In other words, faithfulness is holding on to God even when our prayers go unanswered and we cannot feel that warm and inspiring presence. Faithfulness to our partners means loving them even when we have lost sight of why it is we loved them in the first place. Sometimes, what makes a relationship endure is simply remembering that something precious and fragile has been put in your hands. You have been given another life to hold as dearly and carefully and lovingly as you hold your own. Hold it with care.

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John Welwood, *Perfect Love, Imperfect Relationships*, 2007

John Gottman, *The Relationship Cure*, 2001, p. 207