

Perfect Love. . . and Also Marriage
Malachi 2:10-17

Men, do you remember when you fell in love with your wife? When you knew she was the one? When you couldn't wait to hold a door open for her, couldn't wait to hold her, listened to her every word as if it were a wondrous symphony? Remember when you bought her a little gift, a flower or a candy bar or just anything, because you were thinking of her?

Remember those days? When you wonder why the marriage is as exciting and fulfilling as it once was?

Remember her? The woman you fell in love with? The one you sometimes now only listen to if it is a particularly boring commercial, the one you sometimes forget to kiss goodbye, the one who has long since learned to open her own doors?

And women, do you remember when you fell in love with him? When he had no money, but that didn't matter? When you couldn't wait to see him again? When with every ring of the phone, you

hoped it was he at the other end?

Remember him? The one you fuss at because that promotion didn't come through? The one whose paycheck is too small? The one who bothers you during the day by calling right when you are busy with something else? The one you sometimes forget to kiss goodbye?

I'm not sure anyone has ever figured marriage out. We sing the hymn, "O Perfect Love, " but we know that refers to God and certainly not to the marriage. In fact, the imperfection of marriage is fodder for countless jokes. Eve to Adam: "Are you sure you are not seeing someone else?"

Now, the Bible does not say perhaps as much as we would like about marriage. The Bible is not so much a handbook of living as it is a record of humanity struggling to understand God and His will.

Oh, we have little snippets here and there, such as "wives be subject to your husbands." As if that makes the husband the king and the wife the mat upon which to walk. But it is a misunderstanding to

apply this to modern marriage. Back then, women had no rights at all, so then, if we read the full injunction, we find wives to be subject to husbands as husbands are to Christ.. . Christ, the one who elevated women to equality with men, who commanded a life that is patient and kind and filled with respect.

Or, take the wedding Jesus attended at Cana. Someone once said, "The folks who got married at that wedding certainly stayed together, because Jesus was there at the wedding." But I am not so sure. Jesus was present at the wedding, but was he present during the marriage? After all, most marriages that end in divorce at least begin with a pretty good wedding. It's the presence of Christ in the every day, not just at the beginning or once in a while that makes a difference.

But if we are going to look at the Scriptures to begin to talk about marriage, Malachi is not such a bad place to start. Malachi uses the metaphor of marriage to talk about faithfulness to God, to talk about keeping promises to God, keeping the covenant. And yet, as he talks about the relationship of God and his people using this

marriage metaphor, he also finds himself talking about marriage itself.

Malachi preached during a time when the people of Israel were feeling lost spiritually. Their great nation had been destroyed, they had been carted off into exile, and only recently had returned, but not as a great nation any more, but simply as a backwater province of the vast Persian Empire.

Malachi says, You cover the Lord's altar with you tears. But God doesn't respond to your offerings (as if God could ever be bribed anyway, but that's for another sermon), and you wonder why? It's because you have served other Gods. You have let other gods be worshiped in the sanctuary. If you break covenant with God, your life will not be as good as it would otherwise be. God is weary, Malchi says, with people who say that even those who do evil are really still good, who think that whatever they do, God doesn't mind and is still pleased with them. No, actions have consequences.

And then Malachi illustrates the brokenness of the covenant with

God by talking about marriage covenants that have been broken.

And this is what he says about marriage: It is a covenant with which God is concerned. To break faith with one's wife is like breaking faith with God himself.

And here is what he says: remember the wife of your youth. He uses that phrase many times. In other words, recall the love and tenderness and commitment that you and she shared all those years ago. No, she is no longer young, perhaps no longer as beautiful as she once was, and at this point we wish that Malachi had lived at a time when women had rights, too in a marriage, so he could have encouraged wives to remember the husbands of their youth, not the pot-bellied-forgot-to-shave partners they have now.

In other words, don't go looking for a better offer. And don't break faith with your spouse simply because it's not as exciting as it once was.

Don't break faith. Yes, that can include severe trauma in a marriage

such as breaking the marriage vows. But we also break faith when we forget to be considerate, when we stop respecting the other one, when we forget that the other person is a person precious and beloved by God, too. The seeds of destruction in most marriages are nothing dramatic, just a gradual withering away of tenderness, caring, respecting. Until nothing is left.

Back to the Scripture.

Then this is said, "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel. But divorce isn't really the problem. It's the culture and the decisions and the lack of commitment that lead to divorce. God hates divorce because it is a final sign that promises have not been kept.

I have heard it said it is too easy to get divorced in our culture. I'm not sure I agree. Most divorces are painful, devastating, expensive, both materially and emotionally. No, what is too easy in our culture is the ease with which husbands and wives just stop trying. Divorce is not the disease; it's the symptom of relationships which fail to honor the sacred gift of being husband and wife.

Someone recently was talking about a husband who had been married for many years, and who said, "I love her as much today as I did the day I married her." The one telling this then commented, "How disappointing. You would expect he would love her even more."

God hates divorce, but he hates even more, we could argue, the adultery and the violence that make divorce necessary.

So, how can I sum this all up? God has created marriage not as something to be endured, but as a joyous gift for a man and woman to share with each other. He intends for the joy of marriage to grow with each passing year. It is not lightly to be tossed aside because of difficult times.

And, yes, there are times, when the best decision to be made is to divorce. Certainly in the case of unrepented violence or relentless emotional abuse. Jesus himself allows divorce in the case of adultery, but we must understand "adultery" in the fullness of its

meaning. It does mean what we all take it to mean, but there is a deeper meaning: which is the breaking of covenant. Malachi says God hates divorce, and also hates those who cover themselves with violence. And violence is adultery, it is breaking the covenant.

If we are abusive and belittling, if we fail to honor the other spouse as a capable person, with dreams and abilities and opinions of his own or her own, then we also break the covenant.

Now, even as we Methodists are against divorce, we also believe that sometimes it is a tragic necessity, and we also support folks getting married again, because we believe in the power of God to give new life, new hope, new beginnings. I have been married once, my sister three times. [Her first husband was named, "Jim", her second husband was named "Jim," and her third husband is named. "Bill". . . We call him "Jim," by mistake sometimes, but he unlike her first two husbands, is a wonderful, caring man. And God loves her as much as he loves me, and God is present in this third marriage, heading into its tenth year, and finally to see my sister happy and fulfilled and to know Bill is a part of it, gladdens my

heart.

But in those cases when marriages are just sort of stale and dying on the vine, instead of looking for reasons to divorce, let's be about finding ways to rekindle the love that brought you together in the first place. Perfect love? No, that's not found in any marriage. But it doesn't have to be perfect to be good.

Let's not let our marriages simply fade into dullness because of neglect. Let's take the time again to listen, to cherish, to love. Let us remember the sacred dimension of those vows we once shared with each other. May we today promise to recommit ourselves to God; recommit ourselves to our marriage, to our vows, to the one we married.

Husbands and wives, God led you to each other. There are few greater gifts than this that God ever can give. Are you honoring that gift, cherishing that gift, living in thankful response to that gift?

Today may we trust again in the perfect love of Christ, in which we

can dare to try, dare to believe our imperfections can be forgiven, dare to trust that in him all things, even our marriages, can be made new.

And maybe it can all start with something as simple as this: Let's remember the day we fell in love. And treat each other every day, the way we treated each other then, not just when we notice February 14 is around the corner. Amen.