

But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female.'
'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined
to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer
two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man
put asunder. Mk. 10:6-9

For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down
and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Lk. 14:28

A Prologue

(These remarks were offered by way of introduction on the day the sermon was
delivered.)

I got a letter last week from my Aunt Jane. She is not a real aunt in
the sense of being a blood relation. On the other hand, she is not the
imaginary Aunt Jane who owns stock in A.T & T. She is a real person who
went to school with my mother and who always brought me a box of Schraft's
lollypops. Though she was born in this country, and has spent most of her
life in Brooklyn, Aunt Jane is the most Irish person I have ever known. She
is, in fact, a member in good standing of the Ancient Order of Hibernians.
But beyond that she is a pure Gaelic type of the sort you might find on the
Aran Islands. Blue black hair, skin as white as the bark of a paper birch
and eyes of royal blue. She possesses a very hard, caustic wit sheathed in
good humor and charm. She loves all men, especially those of Irish descent
with the nerve to try a little repartee with her. But such men soon learn
that in her eyes they are as frail as they are clever and not to be taken
very seriously. Needless to say Aunt Jane is as devout a Catholic as ever
recited a Hail Mary. But even in that connection I think she has few illu-
sions. She is the sort of person you delight to come across at a wake: gay,
charming, well supplied with apt anecdotes about the departed, appropriately
sympathetic to the bereaved and yet not at all ruffled by the grim fact of
death. Only in one respect would Aunt Jane seem out of place. She would be
cold sober.

All of Aunt Jane's old friends know her as Jane Reilly. Even I grew up
thinking of her as Jane Reilly. But the fact is her legal name is Jane Green.
For the fact is that Aunt Jane was married. She was married very briefly to
a man named Green who died shortly afterwards. It seems that few people, my
mother included, had much of a chance to get acquainted with Mr. Green. I
have never known Aunt Jane to speak of her husband. But as far back as I can
remember his picture has been there in her apartment, a sober looking man who
hardly seems the type. For the last half century or so Aunt Jane has been
invited to innumerable dinner parties where various unattached gentlemen have
turned up, many of them sound Catholics and pure Hibernians who are not ad-
verse to being cut up by a wit so fine you hardly feel it, or at being laughed
at by eyes the color of a Killarney lake at dusk. But Jane Reilly, who in
the minds of her friends was Jane Green only in passing, has remained resolute-
ly Jane Green all these years. All of which means that when you see the sober
young man with the heavy rimmed glasses on her dressing table, he takes on an
aura of romance. You realize that it is not only because he died so long ago
that you never think of Aunt Jane as a widow. Somehow Aunt Jane always has
been married.

But Aunt Jane comes from another era, another culture.

Sermon

One day when I was living in California I received a telephone call from a lawyer with the Legal Aid Society. He said he had a couple with him who wanted to be married under Civil Code 79. He seemed to think that I should know what that meant. All I could think of was the hidden ball play, called K-79, which enabled some scrappy little men from Columbia to defeat mighty Stanford in the Rose Bowl game of 1934.

But that was not what the man from the Legal Aid Society had in mind. Civil Code 79 was a provision in the California statutes under which a common law marriage could become legal without becoming a matter of public notice. According to this arrangement a couple could be married by a clergyman without obtaining a marriage license. All the clergyman had to do was to perform the ceremony and write "Civil Code 79" after the parties' names in the church record.

I told the lawyer that I would see the couple. In a short time they arrived. The man was eighty-five years old, the woman a mere chick of sixty-seven. They had been living together for more than forty years and had raised a family. It suddenly dawned on them that after they died their children might be surprised to discover that they were not married. Civil Code 79 seemed to provide the answer. So we did the wedding, and presumably, to this day only myself, the church secretary and the janitor are any the wiser.

The bride and groom took a genuine delight in the whole procedure. But naturally it did occur to me to wonder whether such a cloak and dagger ceremony was really necessary. I have wondered some since. People today frequently declare that there isn't much point to marriage under any circumstances. After all, they ask, what is marriage but a piece of paper?

Now as we all know, pieces of paper can carry a weight of significance far exceeding their frail heft as mere paper. The Constitution of the United States is a piece of paper. So is a thousand dollar bill. To try to trivialize marriage by speaking of it as a piece of paper will hardly do.

Yet it also would be misleading to try to trivialize this complaint about marriage simply by observing that more goes into a marriage certificate than what is produced by the Potlatch Corporation. People who speak in the way I have indicated about pieces of paper are troubled by what the paper seems to signify. Indeed, if you probe their complaint, you are likely to find that their real concern is not that the piece of paper means too little. Rather they fear that it means too much.

To be specific, I think such people, are worried about three things:

First, the piece of paper suggests that marriage is something public.
Second, it raises the suspicion that marriage is something contractual.
Third, it stirs the fear that marriage calls for a rather high level of commitment.

You may feel that this is reading entirely too much into pieces of paper that say very little in print. You may want to assuage such fears by suggesting that people who seek relationships that are purely private, in which nothing is required of either party, and which call for a commitment that is very tentative and transient, have nothing to worry about when it comes to marriage. But I do not believe that to say such things would be to deal

honestly with people's legitimate fears. I want to say candidly that such pieces of paper — marriage certificates — do imply precisely what a lot of people are afraid they imply.

Let us take first the suggestion that marriage is something public. In the minds of an increasing number of people this is a strange and misguided notion. After all, are we not concerned here with a purely private relationship between two people? What concern should it be to anyone else? And even if one admits that it is of concern to a few close relatives and friends, what is the need for a public ceremony and for various sorts of public regulations?

To such questions as these I think we must give a twofold answer. First, there is no such thing as a purely private relationship. To think otherwise is to go directly contrary to the modern understanding of human nature. A basic modern insight is that the human self is constituted largely by its relationship with other selves. But if that is true, it follows that every relationship between selves is also constituted in considerable measure by wider relationships. To state the matter differently: all relationships occur in a social context. They are shaped by what happens in the wider society and they in turn influence what happens there.

That principle applies with special force in the case of marriage and in any relationship that supposedly substitutes for marriage. For one thing children have a way of emerging out of such relationships. Whenever a child does emerge, another party to the marriage relationship appears. One abiding reason for marriage today as in the past is to provide for the nurture and protection of children. Certainly that is not the only reason for marriage. In an age of increased longevity, extended youth and small families, marriage cannot be centered in children alone. Nevertheless, the nurture and protection of children remains a very important reason for marriage.

Yet even aside from the matter of children, a sustained relationship between two people of the opposite sex is always one of powerful social impact. Because that is so, human society always has regulated such relationships. That is to say, marriage in some form always exists in any society that can be called a society. The notion that marriage is unnatural has no basis in human nature as the record of history reveals that nature. No doubt there is some merit in doing what comes naturally. But what comes naturally to our species is that in every time and place, with the possible exception of our own, people have regarded that "private" relationship as one of paramount social concern.

So the first part of the answer is that the private relationship is really public whether we wish it to be or not. The second part is that the recognition of the public nature of such a relationship can reinforce its private aspects.

Let me draw a rather strange analogy. Some years ago I preached a sermon entitled, "Why I Gave Up Smoking." That sermon was fairly well received. Even the tobacco wholesaler in the congregation did not complain too much. But whatever good that sermon may have done the congregation, it did more good to me. For the fact was that I had quit smoking only a month before and was still passing through withdrawal symptoms. By putting myself on public record that way I made it much harder for myself to light up again.

Now two people may feel that they have a mutual understanding that is quite capable of standing by itself. Their commitment to one another is

total. Why then drag in church and state? Yet it is a practical truth that "going public" on such a commitment has a way of reinforcing it. Not only does this action undergird the bride and groom, but it commands respect from other people as well.

No doubt people may make in a private way the same pledges that go into a formal marriage covenant. And no doubt many people will honor such private pledges just as well. But every bit of reinforcement helps. In a time when so many marriages founder, this kind of relationship needs all the help it can get. I would think, therefore, that there is more practical reason for going public with marriage today than ever before.

The second basic fear about the marriage certificate is that it involves something contractual. Once again let me confess that the suspicion is correct. One does hesitate to admit this because one realizes that there are in our society many people with very delicate sensibilities, people who cannot bear the thought that there should be in any human relationship, least of all between the sexes, any semblance of a formal agreement. There are among us many young, tender shoots who would be bruised, perhaps irreparably, by the very thought of such an arrangement. But as I said at the outset, we must be brave and honest enough to face head on all those crawling monsters that lie beneath pieces of paper.

And here, let us be frank to admit, there is a basic difference in outlook between the modern revival of the religion of Baal, that is to say, of the hedonistic fertility cults, and the religion of the Lord. Those of us infected by the spirit of the Bible have tried to keep an open mind in recent years. We have acknowledged that we tended in the past to stray too far in the direction of prudery and legalism. We saw in the spontaneity of the flower children a refreshing corrective. We also saw, however, what happened to many of these free spirits whose liberty led them to succumb to the most oppressive tyrannies: chemical, religious, political, sexual. The time has come now when we must acknowledge that Yahweh, the Lord, does look at human nature somewhat differently from this popular revival of the religion of Baal. Yahweh, you see, has had a good deal of experience with people going back a long way. Beginning with Adam and Eve, then continuing with Cain and Abel, and so down through the centuries, Yahweh has come to certain conclusions about the human race. Yahweh believes that while human beings never behave very well at any time, they will behave a trifle better than otherwise if you can get them to stand up in a public place and come to some fairly explicit, mutual agreement.

Sometimes I find it hard to agree with Paul Ramsey, one of the leading Protestant writers on ethics. However, I think his words about the marriage vows in his book Basic Christian Ethics reflect true, Christian tough-mindedness. "In taking the vow," he says, "a person acknowledges that he has not become an entirely trustworthy person, one on whom his mate can truly rely, simply on account of the momentary purity of his passion or his present, single-minded sentiment. He becomes trustworthy and reliable only to the degree he is able to promise. Since 'I love you' may simply mean in all sorts of subtle ways, 'I love me and want you,' ... a person had better subject his love to severe testing, see if he can promise permanence in love for another person precisely under those conditions referred to in the expressions, 'for worse', 'for poorer', and 'in sickness,' under which he will have to give rather than derive benefit from the marriage relationship. Then only will it be clear whether he loves the other person for his or her own sake, or whether in all his powerful and passionate love he actually remains only a lover of himself."

There is something contractual, or to use a word closer to the Biblical-Christian understanding, something covenantal. There are terms jointly agreed to. Please note that I do not comment today on what those terms should be. It is very evident that in some details they are changing. For example, it used to be true in English law that, except under special conditions, a man had control of his wife's property. Charles Dickens attacked that custom in David Copperfield more than a century ago and in the years that have followed these terms of the marriage agreement have altered. Today the economic aspects of marriage undergo further changes. Other aspects change as well. But so long as marriage in some form continues there will be terms. There will be mutual promises, mutual expectations. Whether legal or purely customary, whether spelled out or largely tacit, there will be something contractual.

The third fear to which I alluded in the beginning was that marriage entails a rather high level of commitment. Here the traditional Christian understanding grows very confusing to some of us. First that Christian understanding tells us that people are not very trustworthy and that consequently they need to be hedged around by some sort of public pledge to which church and society hold them accountable. Then this same tradition asks these same untrustworthy people to commit themselves to a relationship that takes in everything down to the sharing of a morning paper. Suddenly marriage looks impossibly idealistic.

Perhaps that is confusing. On the other hand, beside what Christians call "holy matrimony" those supposedly romantic alternatives look rather crass. For it becomes clear that the principle distinction between marriage and those other arrangements is precisely the level of commitment. People desire the intimacy that marriage offers without the responsibility that marriage demands. And in that situation the tough-minded Christian will assume, unless he can be shown otherwise, that somebody is being used.

So then, all those fears and suspicions about that piece of paper are well justified. There is something public, something binding, something rather sweeping about it all. We are right to be apprehensive about it. Some people may think that in a tricky, reverse way I am recommending that everybody get married. But that is not the case at all. Too many people get married. In the play Our Town, the stage manager remarks, "Most everybody in the world climbs into their graves married." Maybe that was a mistake. Maybe that was why a generation or two later, Our Town turned into Peyton Place.

There can be too much pressure to get married for the sake of getting married when people are not willing to accept the terms or make the commitment. Certainly with the marriage record being what it is today, we don't want to encourage a stampede to the county clerk's office. Better to do it right or not at all. Better to recognize what that piece of paper signifies.

POSTSCRIPT, April, 1978

Some brief thoughts about what seems to be happening.

1. We're not ready. My sermon closed with the caution that I was not suggesting that everybody engaged in an "affair" should run out and get married. Obviously many people are not ready. However, the fact is that when people live together they are making very far-reaching demands of one another, physical, emotional and usually economic as well. I wonder how people can be ready

to do that and to risk so much potential pain to another whom they claim to love if they are not ready to make that sort of unconditional commitment that marriage involves. Beyond that it is rather hard for an old romantic like me to hear so many young women say, in effect, "I'm not ready for marriage, but I'm fully prepared to be somebody's mistress."

2. "We take marriage seriously." There is no doubt that many people hesitate to marry because they have become profoundly disillusioned about marriage. Some think that it is in the best interests of marriage to make it the exception, rather than the rule, in relations with the opposite sex. Let marriage come only when one has had one's fling with several people and has tested out the possibilities with a particular person in advance. Perhaps it is too early to assess the effects of this policy on marriage. My suspicion, however, is that the old social instincts are correct. Marriage and the family cannot survive in a society where more casual alternatives are continually present as socially acceptable options.

3. "We're not promiscuous." The going moral code, which is to say the one taught in the singles bars, has high respect for fidelity, whether in marriage or between people who have some sort of "understanding." It sees nothing wrong, however, in pre-marital sexual relationships between persons who think highly of one another.

But I observe a kind of erosion taking place. First it became acceptable for people to "live together" so long as they were faithful to one another. Now it has become acceptable for people to carry on fairly regular sexual relations who live apart, often in their parents' homes. Here we move down another step on the scale of commitment and enter into an arrangement rather less honest than the one where people actually cohabit.

The next step is to make it acceptable for an individual to enter into such relationships on a very transient basis, or perhaps with more than one person at a time. When that step is taken we come very close to what most people mean by "promiscuity."

In other words, a process of erosion is taking place. Once we crossed that line which confines sex to marriage (and the Church has never recognized any other position than that) that process of erosion seems inevitable and unstoppable.

4. "We're only eliminating the double-standard." The so-called double-standard is a logical impossibility. It had to be a triple-standard: one for men, a second for one sort of woman and a third for another sort of woman. What is so insidious about the talk about the double-standard today is the assumption that all men always subscribed to it. The fact is, as even the "Kinsey Report" revealed, until very recently a very large proportion of middle-class Christian men did adhere quite rigorously to that single standard which the Church always has applied both to men and to women.