



**Reflections on Marriage  
shared by Pastor Phil Waite  
Congregational Meeting – Nov. 13, 2016**

*I promised I would commit my comments at the November congregational meeting to writing. Here they are, perhaps a little more developed. In the approach taken here, I am indebted to Gerald Schlabach for his article “What is marriage now?” in The Christian Century (Oct. 14, 2014).*

I believe deeply in marriage as a Christian vocation. In what *New York Times* David Brooks calls a “culture of contingency” so prevalent in our throw-away culture, marriage is counter cultural. Relationships are contingent on the value or pleasure they give an individual at a particular point in time. Once that value or pleasure is no longer “worth” the effort, the person or relationship can be discarded. This is not to pass judgment on those whose marriages end in divorce, only to speak in an affirmative way about the importance of marriage to the gospel message. In Christian faith, people are not commodities to be used and discarded when they have outlived their usefulness to us.

One of the first questions Christians ask when faced with a question of substance is: What does the Bible say? As on any topic, the Bible speaks with a multiplicity of voices on marriage and sexuality. Christians have come to divergent conclusions on a variety of aspects of marriage and sexuality based on careful biblical study. Many Christians are convinced the Bible allows for, even calls for, men to have multiple wives. Others are convinced that all Christians should abstain from sexual activity. So it is that the theological approaches we take to understanding scripture become crucial in determining our conclusions.

Through centuries of theological reflection, Christians and Jews developed an understanding of marriage which we now call traditional, although the traditional understanding of marriage and family changed dramatically with widespread acceptance of contraception by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Saint Augustine was an early influential Christian thinker on these matters. Augustine believed that marriage provided for three “goods” or positive contributions to the social fabric—fruitfulness, permanence, and faithfulness.

Fruitfulness is often understood as having children, as in “be fruitful and multiply.” But we can all recognize ways that marriage is fruitful apart from having children. Couples that have children are also fruitful in other ways. Couples that cannot or choose not to have children can also be fruitful. The generativity growing out of their marriage is greater than what it would have been had they stayed single. For example, I know a couple which exercises the gift of hospitality together in ways each partner could not as individuals. Such fruitfulness or generativity contributes to the life of the church. By being fruitful, marriage reflects the creativity of God.

Marriage also contributes to the social fabric by providing permanence and stability when so much of life in this world is fleeting and unstable. Life lived in isolation is more fragile. Marriage provides a permanent social structure. Humans are mortal and impermanent. God is permanent (immutable in theological language). As a gift from God, marriage allows us, in a small way, to participate in God's permanence.

Finally, Augustine argued that faithfulness is a good provided for through marriage. We humans can be fickle and flighty, ready to bail at the first sign of trouble. We have a tendency to view commitments as contingent even aside from a society like ours which trains us to see each other as commodities, goods and services to keep around as long as they are useful. Christian marriage teaches us faithfulness in contrast to our culture. At the first sign of trouble it tells us to go deeper in love and understanding. Marriage becomes a kind of training ground for Christian maturity.

Which brings us to same-sex marriage. I have come to believe through studying the scriptures and reflecting on my own experience and on the Christian tradition of blessing marriages that the church ought to extend this gift of marriage to same-sex couples. I believe these relationships are stronger and healthier, and that the church and society are stronger and healthier.

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