

“Because I Said I Would (2010)”

1 Corinthians 7:10-16 ¹

Well, we’ve now entered June, one of our two “most official” months for weddings. In keeping with this expectation, yesterday was Matt & Anna’s sixth anniversary; today is the forty-first anniversary of my first date with Jill; and next Thursday marks the sixty-third anniversary of my parents’ wedding. All of this, combined with the news of the struggles of Al & Tipper Gore’s forty-year marriage this week, has inspired me to focus our thought this morning on marriage.

Our text from 1 Corinthians is about marriage as Paul encountered it in the first century. In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11, Paul was writing to two believers in a marriage when he said, “*But for those who are married, I have a command that comes not from me, but from the Lord. A wife must not leave her husband. But if she does leave him, let her remain single or else be reconciled to him. And the husband must not leave his wife.*” Almost from cover to cover, the Bible affirms God’s intention that marriage be a life-long commitment, and that divorce is something that God hates.²

In verses 12-16 of our text, Paul’s focus shifted to how to handle the situation when two unbelievers are married to each other and one of them then becomes a follower of Jesus. In that situation, Paul’s hope was that the unbelieving spouse who became a believer might eventually lead his or her spouse to Christ as well.

Finally, the Bible is quite clear—in the strongest possible language—that Christians are never to knowingly marry non-Christians (Deuteronomy 7:3-4; 2 Corinthians 6:14-16). Each of these principles is extremely important; but I want to invite your thought in a slightly different direction this morning as we consider marriage as it exists in our own time.

Developmental psychologists have studied childhood and adolescence extensively, and we have a pretty good understanding about how humans grow and develop during our first twenty years. Much less attention has been paid overall to human developmental patterns over the much larger span of our adult years from age twenty to eighty or ninety and beyond. And it has only been in the last thirty years or so that psychologists have given much thought to the developmental patterns of marriage.

There are four peaks of divorce in American culture today. The first of these windows of danger takes place in the first two years, when persons who never should have attempted to join their lives at all “run their ships aground” nearly as soon as they put them in the water.

The second window of divorce is so common that it has its own name—“the seven-year itch.” Actually, the window is something like seven to ten years.

The third window of frequent divorce is about seventeen to twenty years. When I was doing marriage counseling all the time I used to call it “the eighteen-year syndrome.” And the fourth peak of divorce comes when the last child leaves home—marriages that stayed together “for the sake of the children,” but that were dead on the inside.

Now here’s what’s really interesting about all this. If you’ll open the insert in your order of worship to the side that says, “Four Marriages within a Marriage,” the four peaks of divorce I’ve just described correspond to the vertical lines in that table. The peaks of divorce correspond to “chapter changes” within marriages that last a lifetime, and the divorces that take place in those windows represent failures to understand and to navigate the transitions between those chapters. The table

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on June 6, 2010.

² Genesis 2:24; Malachi 2:14-16; Matthew 5:31-32, 19:9; Mark 10:10-12; Luke 16:18.

on the other side of the handout, “The Life-Cycle of a Marriage,” presents the same information keyed to the transitions that come with parenting.

Now the information in these tables describes normal marriages, not marriages that experience unusual stresses. These stresses and these transitions are quite dependably present in virtually every marriage established since about 1960. They may well have been present in earlier marriages, but nobody was studying marriage in this way back then.

Let’s say a couple comes for marriage counsel at about year twelve. This means that they’re probably stuck either in the transition between Marriage One and Marriage Two or are somewhere in Marriage Two. They come in saying, with the old hit song, “You don’t bring me flowers, you don’t sing me love songs anymore.”³

Now while I applaud those couples who are wise enough to seek counsel and encouragement for the health of their marriages, we seem to frequently approach the symptoms of our marriages as we do the symptoms of our bodies—we wait until it’s almost too late to ask for help. So, when a couple comes in during year twelve, experiencing a lot of pain in their relationship, I typically tell them, “You can divorce each other if you want to, but you need to know that if you divorce and remarry someone else, you’re going to be back twelve years later with the same problem.

“Your problem isn’t each other. Your problem is that you don’t know the next steps of the dance, and you’re going to hit this wall again and again until you buckle down and learn how to move past it. Your marriage vows very intentionally promised faithfulness ‘for better or for worse,’ and this is the ‘for worse’ part—but it doesn’t have to stay like it is now.”

Very briefly, then, here’s how the four chapters of marriage work. In the first chapter of marriage, our developmental task is to establish the foundation of a relationship, to build bridges between two lives (and two families). In this chapter, love may not actually be “blind,” but we choose to be inattentive to differences, since we’re focusing on commonalities and on building bridges.

I tell pre-marital couples that there are at least three levels of marital covenant. The first level is the public covenant of the marriage vows themselves. It is with deep wisdom and centuries of experience that those vows have us promise “to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, according to God’s holy ordinance, until death parts us.” There are reasons for those words.

The second level of marriage covenant is a laundry list of things that the pre-marital couple has already decided that they’re going to change about the other person once they’re married. This list hasn’t been discussed, but the couple could write their lists down if I asked them to. They haven’t talked about their lists because they’re focusing on building bridges, but the lists represent cracks in the buttresses of those bridges even as the concrete begins to set.

The third level of marriage covenant is the most problematic. This covenant has to do with the things each person expects to have happen in the relationship, but that they don’t know they expect and won’t know they expect . . . until they don’t happen. These are those dimensions of life—usually from our families of origin—that we take so much for granted as normal parts of life that it never occurs to us that others might do things differently. The transition from Marriage One into Marriage Two begins as issues from these last two levels of covenant begin to accumulate, making ignoring them in the service of bridge building more and more difficult.

³ Alan and Marilyn Bergman, “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers,” Columbia Records, 1978, popularized as a duet by Barbara Streisand and Neil Diamond.

Marriage Two then becomes a battlefield whose motto is, “If you’d just do this like I want to do this, we’d have a wonderful marriage!” Typically, by the time we have a “teenage marriage” (years 13-19), we also have children, who, wonderful as they are, add enormous stresses to a relationship. Surviving a “teenage marriage” is just as difficult as surviving teenage children; and if our teenage marriage coincides with actually having teenage children, things are all the more difficult.

The second decade of most marriages—we’re talking about “normal” marriages—is a very painful journey, as we use various forms of manipulative behavior to try to strong-arm each other into submission to “the way I want our marriage to be.” We typically move through these years in increasing frustration and desperation, which not infrequently results in abandoning ship and abandoning all the good that God could have brought about through the fiery furnace of character building that enduring marriage represents.

But for those who hang on and who keep their promises to each other, however difficult—and especially for those who are wise and courageous enough to seek coaching along the way—somewhere toward the end of the second decade we begin the welcome transition into Marriage Three. That began to happen in year eighteen for Jill and me. All through that year (Nathan was sixteen and Anna was 13), Jill and I looked at each other and said out loud, “I’m SO GLAD we didn’t quit!” We said it over and over and over to each other!

In Marriage Three, those things that were charming in Marriage One and infuriating in Marriage Two begin, ever so slightly, to be cute again. Having tried and failed in our efforts to manipulate each other into becoming someone other than who God made us to be, we begin at last to rediscover—or perhaps to discover for the first time—the wonder and the beauty of the person whom God has given us as a life partner and soul mate.

As that process continues, our children grow up and launch their lives into the larger world, leaving us alone again in an empty nest. But now, with a sense of satisfaction at a job well done, we can set our own pace again in Marriage Four until loss of powers forces a slower cadence.

Marriage Four has a lot in common with the patina that develops on silver flatware over the years. New sterling is certainly beautiful and shiny, but old sterling, having experienced a good bit of wear and tear, is far more beautiful. People are a lot like that. We start life beautiful and shiny, but wear and tear over the years produces a different kind of beauty, a beauty far deeper and more real. My favorite description of this transformation is that given by the Old Skin Horse in response to a question from the Velveteen Rabbit:

“Real isn’t how you’re made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real, you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up, or bit by bit?”

“It doesn’t happen all at once. You become. It takes a long time—that’s why it doesn’t often happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”⁴

⁴ Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, 1922.

The title of this message comes, as some of you will remember, from one of the most painful—and most crucial—moments of my own marriage. Jill and I were navigating the transition from Marriage One into Marriage Two, and really were in year seven, I think. That means Nathan was five and Anna was about a year old when this happened.

In those days, I was a young pastor and Jill was a stay-at-home Mom. I don't remember all that was going on, but it was certainly painful, because on one fateful afternoon Jill took me out in the back yard, away from the children, who must have been asleep, to look me in the eye and tell me, "The only reason I'm staying married to you—the ONLY reason I'm staying married to you—is that I said I would." That's called hitting the mule between the eyes with a two-by-four, and it got my attention.

I wish I could say that things were all rosy and wonderful from that point on, but they weren't. Our Marriage Two was a painful time for all four of us, but we hung on, got into counseling, and tried to live by a maxim from Ernie White, one of my colleagues at the seminary, who pointed out that "**Love is the overwhelming desire and the persistent effort of two people to create for each other the conditions in which each may become the person God intended each to be.**" That's been on our refrigerator literally for decades, and it's there right now—faded, like the Old Skin Horse, and like we ourselves have become with time.

Marriage is not all wonderful; but it IS all worth it! As a wise woman said to Jill as we struggled our way through Marriage Two, "When you promised 'for better or for worse,' did you mean it, or did you not?" That kind of commitment is the only anchor that will hold your marriage together during the storms of life. And the only way you and I can produce such commitment is by the power of God's Holy Spirit at work within, transforming us little by little into persons who can celebrate each other with a love that becomes more and more like that with which God has loved both of us since before the creation of the world.

Yes, there is pain in marriage, for sure and certain. The good news is that most of the pain is birth pain, if we have eyes to see it. The unseen factor in the enterprise of Christian marriage is the work of the Spirit of God, the Midwife of Eternity, who lends us divine strength to hold fast to our commitment.

When all is said and done, and when we ask ourselves what is most truly good in the world, what seems most worthwhile, what most surely turns our struggles into joy, and what brings closest a sense of harmony with the purposes of God, then surely Christian marriage must be a central part of our answer. Marriage is not the only way in which God graces the relationships in our lives—there are many, many others—but for many of us Christian marriage is the vehicle for God's most precious gifts of grace.

As Robert Browning penned long ago, "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be—the last of life, for which the first was made." "*Haven't you read,*" [Jesus] *replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'?* So they are no longer two, but one" (Matthew 19:4-6a).

Let me say it again: **marriage is not all wonderful, but it IS all worth it.** And only those who are obedient to God's call to enduring faithfulness in their marriages will discover that it is precisely in the context of committed Christian marriage that they are most able to live out their faith in Christ . . . "**because we said we would.**"

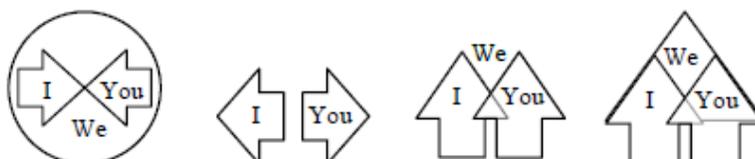
The Life Cycle of a Marriage

ERA OF MARRIAGE	<i>Marriage One</i>		<i>Marriage Two</i>		<i>Marriage Three</i>		<i>Marriage Four</i>
STAGE	Stage 1 (c. Years 0-4)	Stage 2 (c. Years 5-8)	Stage 3 (c. Years 9-12)	Stage 4 (c. Years 13-16)	Stage 5 (c. Years 17-20)	Stage 6 (c. Years 21-24)	Stage 7 (c. Years 25+)
MARITAL FOCUS	Initial Commitment	Provisional Commitment	Crisis of Commitment	Joint Productivity	Summing Up Life Direction	Embracing Life's Work	Celebrating Integrity
FAMILY FOCUS	Young Married Couple	Child-bearing Stage	Preschool Stage	School-age Stage	Teenage Stage	Launching Years	Middle-age Onward
GOALS	<i>Pursuing the Dream</i>		<i>Experiencing Disillusionment</i> (the Dream evaporates)		<i>Discovery of a New Dream</i>		<i>Depth</i>
SOURCES OF CONFLICT	Conflict of Loyalties (Parents vs. Mate)	Conflict over Uncertainties about Choice of Partner	Conflict over Parenting Values and Styles	Conflict over Priorities, Parenting, and Careers	Conflict over Parenting and Enduring Life Values	Conflicts over Directions and Rates of Personal Growth	Conflicts arising from Despair and Stagnation
PATTERNS OF CONFLICT	Accommodate Differences (I'll pretend we are just alike.)		Eliminate Differences (If only you were like me!)		Appreciate Differences (Well, maybe you're okay.)		Celebrate Differences (Wow!)

NOTE: This model generally presumes that couples marry in their early twenties and begin bearing children within several years thereafter. Differing patterns of marriage and family development will require appropriate modifications to the chart.

Modified from David Augsburger,
Sustaining Love: Healing and Growth in the Passages of Marriage
(Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1988), pp. 24-25, 32-33.

Four Marriages within a Marriage



	Marriage One	Marriage Two	Marriage Three	Marriage Four
GOALS	Dream	Disillusionment	Discovery	Depth
COMMUNICATION	Expectation	Manipulation	Invitation	Dialogue
FEELINGS	Excuse	Explode	Express	Experience
DIFFERENCES	Accommodate	Eliminate	Appreciate	Celebrate
CONFLICT	Avoid	Attack	Adjust	Accept
INTIMACY	Dependent	Independent	Interdependent	Intimate
ROLES	Complementary	Symmetrical	Parallel	Intertwined
MEANING	Hopes	Hopelessness	Hopeful	Hope

From David Augsburger,
Sustaining Love: Healing & Growth in the Passages of Marriage
 (Ventura, California: Regal Books, 1988), pp. 24-25).

“Because I Said I Would (2002)”⁵

Genesis 2:18-25; Matthew 19:1-6

“Haven’t you read,” [Jesus] replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’? So they are no longer two, but one . . .” (Matthew 19:4-6a).

In the opinion of many persons today, marriage simply does not work. In the eyes of many women, marriage is a not-so-subtle form of slavery. To many children of divorce, marriage is often no more than a pretense at permanence and acceptability. For many young adults, marriage is an outdated social oddity, whose pitfalls can be avoided by the choice of an alternative life-style.

To maintain, then, that marriage is God’s merciful provision for our need for relationship is, for many people, to perpetuate a sick joke that long ago ceased to be funny. Like many of the Bible’s affirmations, this one from Genesis confronts us amid the realities and agonies of our daily life and appears offensive, unreal, and untrue. Of course, that is the way the biblical word frequently appears to us at first.

Though our marriages often have pain indeed, their disintegration does not have to be accepted as inevitable, for in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is the possibility for the healing for all our private hells. Christian marriage is not trouble free or easy. But by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, it is a real possibility.

Much of our difficulty lies in the fact that we often experience our marriages as being in tension with our efforts at “success.” Without our noticing it, whole days of thoughts, emotions, and experiences go by that never get told or shared. We arrive home too late and too tired. We have meetings to attend. Television or homework takes the evening. We and our family members remain private individuals apart, strangers in the same house.

Over it all, we try to paint an image of prosperity, sophistication, and importance, while underneath we know that if the rush stopped and we were not distracted—by television sports, church work, league sports, or music lessons—we would find ourselves encapsulated by loneliness, beset behind and before by no one. “The porch light’s on, but nobody’s home.”

We hunger to share life with each other, to get rid of images and roles and job expectations and to be valued for ourselves. We want to converse with someone who will listen—really listen—to our hurts without trying to fix them, and who will genuinely rejoice in our triumphs without trying to diminish them. We yearn to pour out the finest gifts of our hearts and to find them received and treasured, to give of ourselves in concern and labors of love and to have the gift needed and wanted.

We are perhaps at once both the busiest and the loneliest people in the world. We live with beepers, cell phones, PDAs, and laptops. We rely on global positioning satellites to tell us “where we are.” But under it all we have a vast and empty inner ache to know and to be known.

The good news is that we were not made to be alone. God intends for us to be in relationship—with God, and with others. Marriage is not the only relationship through which God gracefully fills our emptiness; but it is a primary one.

Further, God intends the gift of marriage to be even more special: God intends for us to know and to be known in Christian Marriage. As Wayne Oates has wisely pointed out, Christian

⁵ A sermon by Rev. David C. Stancil, Ph.D., delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on September 1, 2002.

Marriage is a three-dimensional relationship. Indeed, no relationship can be truly whole unless it is fully grounded in God.

From the very start, the choice of a mate confronts us with the question as to whether our prior commitment to Christ can be lived out in this relationship. We ask ourselves, “Are my reasons for wanting to marry adequate expressions of the unique purposes God has for my life?” “Will this marriage enable me to love and to trust and to serve God, or will it handicap or prevent such obedience?” Without a shared commitment to Jesus as Lord, above and prior to our love for each other, our commitment to each other loses its most important and powerful support.

Now the basic characteristic of Christian Marriage is not the feeling of being in love. It is not the desire for passionate sexual union. It is not even a shared vision of the purpose of life. All of these are vital and vibrant dimensions of marriage, but the most basic characteristic of Christian Marriage is commitment. Christian Marriage is Committed Marriage.

The one central, indispensable quality of a lasting marriage is COMMITMENT. It’s cute to hear a four year-old make an affirmation of marriage about a young friend in Sunday School; but if they really DID get married at four, it wouldn’t be cute any more. Such an outcome would be tragic, because marriage is not for children. Marriage is a heavy-duty undertaking that requires considerable maturity to pull off.

Maturity does not necessarily come with age, but the two are usually related. A mature person is able to make independent decisions and to take responsibility for them, accepting those consequences that may come. A mature person is able to respect the thoughts and feelings of others, to accept constructive feedback with grace, to engage in genuinely mutual relationships. Mature persons are able to plan for the future, to delay gratification where this is needed, and to live within their income. Mature persons are able to laugh and to cry, taking their own experiences and feelings seriously . . . but not too seriously.

Marriage requires this sort of mature commitment, because in the covenant of marriage we are making a commitment that is intended to last for all of our lives. We are agreeing not to abandon each other because of illness or accident. We are agreeing not to abandon each other for competitors who offer passion or thrills. We are promising to continue to cherish each other and to grow together even when the blossom of youth is past.

Professor Elizabeth Achtemeier’s wonderful book, *The Committed Marriage*,⁶ served as the inspiration for this sermon. In that book, Dr. Achtemeier suggested six dimensions of Committed Marriage. These dimensions are:

1. *Total* Commitment
2. *Accepting* Commitment
3. *Exclusive* Commitment
4. *Continuing* Commitment
5. *Growing* Commitment
6. *Anticipating* Commitment

Look with me at these for just a bit

Total Commitment: First of all, Christian Marriage must be founded on a total and unreserved commitment of one’s whole self to the relationship. The one thing that can make our goals and dreams attainable is total and non-calculating commitment to each other. We are not talking about a feeling here. We are talking about a promise.

⁶ Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1976.

Keeping promises is much harder than making them. When Jill and I were eight years or so into our marriage, there were several years in which I was more of a jerk than usual (I have been a much more difficult person to be married to than Jill has).

Now Jill has never been one to bluff—she means what she says. I will never forget the afternoon when she pulled me aside, confronted me with some of my problematic behaviors, and concluded by saying, “The ONLY reason I’m staying married to you is that I promised that I would.” It grieves me even now to have caused such pain; but such total commitment is the ONLY anchor for marriage that can hold fast in the storms of life. As an older woman said to Jill, “When you promised ‘for better or for worse,’ did you mean it, or did you not?”

“I will love you with a TOTAL commitment . . . because I said I would.”

Accepting Commitment: Christian Marriage must also involve an accepting commitment. Our challenge is to accept each other for who we are now, as well as for all that we may—and will—become.

To use a somewhat hazardous metaphor, the younger we are when we enter marriage, especially younger than twenty-one, the more true it is that we are joining our lives with a “tadpole” rather than with a “frog.” This tadpole might turn into a frog, but into what sort of frog? And it might become Godzilla. It could become all sorts of things. Now “tadpoleship” is a very fine place to be along life’s journey, but marrying a tadpole is risky business when it comes to accepting each other for all that we will become.

For all that, though, since none of us is perfect, no marital choice is perfect, either—no matter how old we are when we marry. Our challenge comes in learning to live with, to respect, to love, and to delight in the person we did marry, not that fantasy person some book or movie says we should have chosen.

Even in the best of times, love is seldom deserved. A good portion of the time, we are not very lovable. The good news is that our attempts at offering love to each other are grounded in God’s powerful, transforming love that accepts us where we are, as well as calls us to become more than we are. I like the way my friend and teacher, Ernie White, put it: “Love is the overwhelming desire and the persistent effort of two people to create for each other the conditions in which each may become the person God intended each to be.”

“I will love you with an ACCEPTING commitment . . . because I said I would.”

Exclusive Commitment: The third commitment of Christian Marriage involves making and keeping an exclusive commitment: “keeping myself only for you, so long as we both shall live.” Sexual faithfulness—or the lack of it—is one of the standard topics for efforts at humor on late-night talk shows these days. And whether or not we talk about it in church, we all know that it would not be very hard to have an affair if we wanted one.

Let’s get really honest here. For all the efforts at humor, the world is beginning to see sexual faithfulness as important—if only to physically survive in a world of AIDS. On a recent trip I was interested to see the following quote on a machine in a gas station bathroom: “Condoms help in the prevention of sexually transmitted diseases. The only certain protection, however, is abstinence before marriage and faithfulness in marriage.” What a novel idea . . . on a condom machine!

There’s a more serious issue here than AIDS, though. If we fail to establish exclusive commitment to our future mate in our pre-marital relationships, or if we violate this faithfulness after marriage, we do violence to the spirits of every person concerned. Paul wrote, “Do you not

know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, *“The two will become one flesh”* (1 Cor. 6:16). There is mystery here that goes beyond biology.

If we choose not to keep our marital commitment exclusive, we fragment our spirits in ways that—though they may be genuinely forgiven—can never be undone. How much more beautiful it is to tell our mate, in words as well as in deeds, every day of our lives, that “You are my most intimate and cherished companion of body and of spirit, and I will be faithful to you always and forever, no matter how ‘attractive,’ or ‘understanding,’ or ‘compatible’ some other person may seem to be.” It is a wonderful treasure for me to know deep down in my soul that I can trust Jill implicitly, explicitly, and absolutely to be faithful to our shared commitment.

I gladly offer the same to her . . . because I said I would.

Continuing Commitment: The fourth dimension of committed marriage is a continuing commitment. The marriage vow speaks with purpose when it says that our commitment is “for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.” It seems to me that when couples “modernize” their vows to exclude these covenants, they are missing the central point of the whole event.

The young groom hit the mark when he asked his bride, “Will you still love me when I’m old and bald and fat?” That is the promise, though when we make it we do not begin to understand it. It is only in the living of the promise that we begin to understand.

In the last decade or so we have begun to see more clearly the stages of development in the life-cycle of Committed Marriage. There are at least three peaks in the marital life-cycle when divorce happens most often. These are times when we may say to each other, “You don’t sing me love songs. You don’t bring me flowers any more.” We feel in our hearts that something is dying, and our culture tells us that the normal response to this situation is to start over with someone else. These peaks of divorce are periods around 7-10 years of marriage, 17-20 years, and whenever the last child leaves home.

Now it is true that something is dying in these times, but it is more true that the pain we feel is birth pain. Our relational pain signals that we have taken our current understanding of marriage as far as it can go, and that the time has come to learn the steps of the next movement. Starting over again and again cannot work, because this is a retreat to the previous movements of marriage rather than an advance to learning the next “steps of the dance.” The insert in your worship order summarizes these transitions. To study it may bring new hope.

Yes, there is pain in marriage, for sure and for certain. The good news is that most of the pain is birth pain, if we allow God’s Spirit to work transformation in our hearts. The unseen factor in this whole enterprise is that the Spirit of God is the Midwife of Eternity who lends us divine strength to hold fast to our commitment. As we near the twenty-nine year marker, Jill and I often look at each other and say with our eyes, “I’m so glad we didn’t quit.”

“I will love you with a CONTINUING commitment . . . because I said I would.”

Growing Commitment: The fifth dimension is a growing commitment. Many—maybe even most—marriages don’t grow. They wither. Edith Bunker highlighted this point without knowing it when she said, “Well, my marriage works, and my father used to always say, ‘When something works, don’t fix it.’”

Together with Edith, one of the things we sometimes have a hard time understanding is that a marriage relationship is a living reality. Anything that is alive is always either growing or dying. There are no other choices. Relationships never “stay the same.” To go back to the third

commitment, a marriage that is stagnant and withering is a fertile pool for unfaithfulness. All kinds of nasty stuff grows in stagnant pools.

So, in all of life's seasons, and in all of life's moods, we decide every day for or against our marriages, not only by what we think and feel, but also by what we do. It is here, in the rough and tumble of everyday life that we make or break our commitment. Every day we have the glad opportunity to get to know the new person that our mate is becoming. If we allow ourselves to set other priorities, we may "gain the whole world but lose our own souls" at home, because we don't take the time to marvel at the inner life of the miracle who is our mate.

And so it is that opening doors for each other, helping with carried bundles, holding tools, washing dishes, asking pardon for interruptions, inquiring how the other is feeling, and saying "I love you" are absolute necessities for a growing marriage. Taking the time to share thoughts and feelings, hopes and fears and dreams is not optional. Every marriage can grow—and it **MUST**—or it will die.

"I will love you with a GROWING commitment . . . because I said I would."

Anticipating Commitment: Finally, Christian marriage involves an anticipating commitment—a commitment to the adventures and to the becoming that lie ahead. Since God guides us in our marriages, working out a gracious plan for our life together, we can anticipate unexpected outcomes, new paths and new ways down which God will lead us in our shared life.

When all is said and done, and when we ask ourselves what is truly good in the world, what seems most worthwhile, what most surely turns our struggles into joy, and what brings closest the feeling of harmony with the purposes of God, then surely Christian Marriage must be a central part of our answer. Marriage is not the only way in which God graces our relational lives—there are many, many others—but for many of us Christian Marriage is the vehicle for God's most precious gifts of grace.

As Robert Browning penned long ago, "Grow old along with me. The best is yet to be—the last of life, for which the first was made." "Haven't you read," [Jesus] replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one . . ." (Matthew 19:4-6a).

Marriage is not all wonderful, but it is all worth it. Only the two persons in a marriage covenant can take responsibility for their mutual commitment. Only they can decide whether their commitment will be TOTAL, ACCEPTING, EXCLUSIVE, CONTINUING, GROWING, and ANTICIPATING. And only those who have followed God's clear call to live out their obedience in their marriages can discover the truth that it is precisely in their Committed Marriage that they are most able to live out their faith in Christ . . .

"because we said we would."