



Marriage as Sacred Mystery: Some Theological Reflections on the Purposes of Marriage

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Marriage is a mystery. Humans who enter its “holy estate” at times find themselves in a literal “hell-on-earth” of terrible suffering, while at other times in a literal “heaven-on-earth” of joyful ecstasy. Pastors who walk with married parishioners through these depths of despair and heights of joy sometimes wonder why God chose this means to propagate the species. What were the Creator’s purposes in inflicting—or blessing—us with this state? These purposes, of course, are veiled in mystery. In what follows I will share my guesses as to what some of those purposes might be.

I. GROWTH OF THE SOUL

One purpose of marriage seems to me to be soul-growth. This comes about through two contradictory but persistent aspects of marital experience, suffering and pleasure.

Suffering seems a universal experience of people who marry. They move toward marriage with the familiar rush of romantic anticipation only to discover in the weeks or months after the wedding experiences of disillusionment and frustration. The partner who in courtship seemed so like oneself in attitudes and preferences is discovered to be clearly different from oneself in fundamental ways. Conflicts erupt as the partners either overtly or covertly express their resentment and attempt to change each other. Especially painful is the experience of having someone who seemed to highly value and approve of you now withdraw their approval and liking of you.

Marital suffering is not a modern phenomenon. Martin Luther, reflecting upon his experience of marriage in light of that of biblical patriarchs centuries before him, commented that when people marry they are in for trouble in “sufficient abundance.” He concluded that it seems to be the will of God that we “toil and sweat among the thorns and thistles of marriage.”¹

¹Martin Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” *Luther’s Works* (55 vols.; St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-76) 5.195-196.

The beneficial outcome of this suffering is the spiritual growth of the married partners. Suffering tempers and builds character in Christians, as Paul has instructed us (see Rom 5:3-4). Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig views marriage as one of several paths to salvation that God has provided for us as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling.² He notes that all salvation pathways have one common element—suffering. All lead through hell. Both married partners are

engaged in their own “pilgrim’s progress,” and marriage is one avenue of that long and painful pursuit. Lifelong confrontation with their mate forces spouses to face and know themselves and to learn about their own destructiveness as well as creativity, their fundamental weaknesses and strengths, and their relationship to the rest of life and to God.

Similarly, David Wurster has described marriage as a “crucible for growth.”³ He draws upon the Old Testament image of a crucible, a firepot in which metals are refined (see for example, Isa 48:10), to describe God’s activity in marriage. Each of us selects a mate who has the qualities necessary to bring us face to face with our own central life issues or fears. For example, a man with a fear of anger marries a woman with a volatile temper. As the years of marriage pass, the temperature in the crucible rises and the resulting suffering creates the possibility of each person facing their own central dilemmas, learning to accept themselves as they really are, and then working through their life problems to resolution and soul-growth.

These images bring to mind Gibran’s poignant and realistic portrayal of love:

For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so he is for your pruning.

Gibran concludes his reflection with that vivid image of love harvesting us like corn, threshing, sifting, grinding and kneading us until we are ready to be baked in the fire to become “sacred bread for God’s sacred feast.”⁴

While suffering is one persistent dimension of marital experience, the opposite experience of pleasure also graces marriage. If marriage brought us only toil among thorns and thistles, we would soon lose energy for walking the path. Married people experience seasons of joy, lightness and laughter that refresh and renew them.

Luther was much aware of this dimension of marriage also. Commenting again upon the patriarchs, Luther spoke of Isaac having “fun with his beloved Rebecca, not only for the sake of necessity and comfort, but also because of some conjugal silliness, which is becoming to this kind of life.” He concluded that a playful attitude, fun, and laughter are all part of God’s intention for “the sacred matter” of marriage.⁵

If marriage is a salvation pathway, pleasure and levity are necessary elements for walking it. The growth of the human spirit requires playfulness as

²Adolf Guggenbuhl-Craig, *Marriage: Dead or Alive* (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1977).

³David Wurster, “Marriage: Crucible For Growth,” *The Journal of Pastoral Care* 37 (1983) 253-263.

⁴Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1979) 11-12.

⁵M. Luther, “Lectures on Genesis,” LW 5.31-34.

well as painful confrontation. Couples who freely joke with each other and make light of each other’s differences, flaws, and even their conflicts seem more able to accept and negotiate their disagreements. We all grow and learn most rapidly when we recover the playful capacities of children. Children possess a natural desire to learn and grow and they take pleasure in new learning. Perhaps marital soul-growth is adult play.

The anthropologist Ashley Montagu has written in depth about the importance of these qualities for human evolution in his book, *Growing Young*.⁶ He believes that adults can

revolutionize their lives by discovering that we are intended to “grow young” our whole lives long through developing the traits present in children, such as playfulness, joyfulness, laughter, imagination, curiosity, a sense of wonder, creativity, and love. I believe that one of the central purposes of marriage is to help us “grow young” lifelong.

The seasons of suffering and of pleasure in a marriage seem to be related. Periods of pleasure frequently spring forth right after times of the deepest misery, much as spring follows winter. Oscar Wilde’s phrasing in “The Selfish Giant” seems applicable to marriage: “the Winter is only Spring asleep.” Married partners often come to an impasse in their struggle with each other that feels like a barricade to their movement, or like a pit of despair—a situation experienced as having no escape or resolution. While some couples remain blocked at a seemingly unresolvable impasse, other couples break out of the impasse through a sudden leap of the imagination, a flash of new learning, a triggering of the child-like creativity in their spirits that enables them to see their situation and each other in a new light. Such a constructive resolution of an impasse usually leads spouses to let go of their attempts to change each other and to begin to view each other with increased acceptance as real human persons.

Experiences of moving into and out of an impasse feel like a baptismal dying and rising again. The married partners have first descended into the depths of their pain, resisting the temptation to ignore or run away from the suffering. They have then been resurrected from the depths through an experience that enables them to transcend the suffering. Each partner may well undergo individual soul-growth through this passing over the seemingly impassable barrier. Each may feel grateful for having been graced by the hand of a transforming Holy Spirit. Paul’s words to the Philippians take on fuller meaning for them: “...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; *for God is at work in you*, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13).

II. SALVATION OF THE WORLD

While marriage’s suffering and pleasure facilitate the individual soul-growth of the married partners, the purpose of marriage does not stop there. A wider purpose of marriage is to further the salvation of the world.

The Bible’s understanding of salvation is not limited to our securing individual salvation but extends to God’s calling Christians to participate in his

⁶Ashley Montagu, *Growing Young* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981).

restoration of all of humanity and of the cosmos itself. Married partners who are experiencing soul-growth and “growing young” through God’s transforming activity in their relationship are being called to contribute toward the whole world growing young along with them.

James Lapsley has argued that as married partners develop intimacy they need to find a deeper purpose for their marriage beyond the marriage itself, a high level of participation in God’s salvatory process in the whole cosmos.⁷ A focus on the marital “we” can become self-serving and idolatrous. Growing married partners need to channel their love outside the marriage through involvement in such arenas as career, congregation, friendship networks, community service, and the alleviation of human suffering throughout the world.

Every marriage needs a mission outside itself in order to thrive. Edward Dufresne holds

that to be truly married is to marry the world. “We discovered,” he writes, “that it made little sense to commit ourselves simply to being married; marriage is not something that can live on itself. Our partnership was at its best when it was committed to something or someone beyond itself.”⁸

Guggenbuhl-Craig reminds us that individuation is not individualism, that cultivation of marital soul-growth connects us with the collective soul of humankind.⁹ Relational pain that we suffer enables us to identify with all those who suffer. What we learn from transcending impasses is a gift of hope for persons beyond ourselves.

An important part of the world beyond the couple is the extended family context. Contemporary family systems theories show us that a marital couple does not exist as an independent, isolated dyad but is always in interaction with other systems, most powerfully those of the partners’ extended families. The couple is part of a long chain of human relationships from which the partners are gradually differentiating themselves, while at the same time giving birth to children who in turn will need to grow away from them as parents. Leaving father and mother involves much more than a physical move. Reading a family biography that tells a family story over several generations can give a picture of soul-growth slowly evolving from generation to generation as married partners choose spouses who help them to evolve beyond where their parents were able to grow.

While this is the ideal, most married partners in our society do not pay deliberate attention to differentiating from their own parents. The most common tendency for young adults is to move out of their original family directly into a new partnership without having worked out issues with their own parents. The new partners have not learned how to be separate selves who are pursuing their own individual emotional and spiritual growth. They find themselves very needy and overly dependent on each other. Although they may attempt to deal with their original families by distancing from them emotionally or geographically, or both, they tend to repeat or react against central family themes instead of evolving in relation to them.

⁷James N. Lapsley, *Salvation and Health* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 103-104.

⁸Edward R. Dufresne, *Partnership* (New York: Paulist, 1975) xiii, 65-68.

⁹Guggenbuhl-Craig, *Marriage*, 34-35.

What married partners need in order to grow beyond their original families is a process of re-membering. Re-membering is done by the married partners returning to their families of origin for face to face contact in which they develop empathetic understanding of other family members and resolve issues with them while simultaneously becoming new, separate members of the family.

III. A MEANS OF GRACE

The purposes of marriage described thus far seem to flow out of each other and to form together a repeating cycle akin to seasons of the church’s liturgical year. The cycle begins with the partners moving toward each other in joyful expectation of wedded love, with all the anticipation and celebration of the Advent-Christmas seasons. A second movement of the cycle follows as a descent into suffering and the dying of the spouses’ expectations and illusions, akin to the somber Lenten season. Suddenly the couple experiences the rebirth of their marriage in a

third movement, much as Easter follows Good Friday. Afterward the partners move forward into the world to help it also grow young, even as the church marches outward through the Pentecost season. But this energized outward movement will itself come against a new barrier that triggers another period of suffering and a new repetition of the cycle.

The cycle of four movements repeats itself over and over again in the natural growth history of a marriage. Of course every marriage is unique and no two marriages look alike in the length of time spent in the movements or in the depths or heights of their descents and ascents. For example, some couples experience only minor descents into relatively brief times of struggle, times they would describe more as “frustration” than “suffering.” Other couples by contrast descend slowly into depths of misery over a period lasting several years. Still others cycle rapidly through brief periods of pain and joy. Some once-stalemated couples report major breakthroughs to new heights of pleasure and growth, while others stay locked in a grim struggle over a lifetime with infrequent periods of minor release from their suffering. Other partners divorce and later seek rebirth in a new relationship or in a life apart from marriage. The death of a spouse sends others into a cycle of pain and search for renewal of life.

Varied as the experiences of married persons are, in each marriage God is present, seeking to transform persons gradually into his own likeness and to prepare them for service to the world. God does so by loving each of us through our spouses. This is the final purpose of marriage I wish to suggest: marriage serves as a means for God to draw near to us and grace us with his love.

This dimension of marriage represents its deepest mystery. Paul’s comment in Ephesians 5 on the wonder of two profoundly different humans becoming one flesh describes marriage as a powerful symbol that reflects the loving union between Christ and the church. “This is a great mystery, and I take it to mean Christ and the church” (v. 32). Paul admonishes spouses to serve, love, nourish, and cherish each other as Christ does his church. By doing so, married partners participate in revealing the mystery of God’s loving of all persons.

Married love is sacramental. Thomas Hart has described the love of spouses for each other as a channel of the grace of God in daily life. God’s invisible graciousness toward us becomes visible and tangible as it is mediated to us through the love of our mate. Hart adds that this sacramental dimension becomes most present in sexual union, God loving us through the concrete medium of our bodies: “If God is love, he must be present where human love is most powerfully spoken. Where will we better encounter his closeness, his gentleness, his tenderness, his acceptance of us as we are?”¹⁰ Hidden in the midst of the sacred mystery that is marriage lies a loving grace, real and present.

Perhaps the most common symbol of married love is a diamond ring. For me this symbol best summarizes the mysterious purposes of God hidden in marriage. A quarter century ago Yngve Brilioth used the analogy of a precious jewel to describe the complexity of Holy Communion.¹¹ Brilioth saw the Sacrament of the Altar as a magnificent jewel revealing endless changes of light and color when regarded from its various facets: sacrifice, eucharist, communion, commemoration, and mystery. Each of the facets is integrally related to all of the others, however, as each reveals a beautiful refraction of the one holy light, the presence of God.

The holy light of the presence of God is the Reality that underlies all things. Modern

physicists have taught us that underneath the seeming fragmentation and disorder of the universe lies another universe that is characterized by interconnectedness, order, and perfect unity. I choose to think of that underlying universe as the God who is Love. In sacred moments within marriage, as within Holy Communion, I believe that we tap in to that powerful Presence of Love. In those moments the painful fragmentation and separation that we experience within ourselves as persons, and between ourselves as married partners, is overcome. This tapping in to the Presence is the source of the creative rebirth experiences that enable partners to transcend marital impasses, to connect lovingly with the world beyond their marriage, and to re-member through empathetic acceptance of family of origin members.

In sum, I would borrow Brilioth's analogy to suggest that the precious diamond that is marriage refracts the holy mystery of Divine Love through its multi-colored facets: the sacrifice of suffering, the eucharist of playful joy, the communion with the wider world, the commemoration and re-membering of generations past, and the holy mystery of grace hidden in the midst of marriage.

¹⁰Thomas N. Hart, *Living Happily Ever After: Toward a Theology of Christian Marriage* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 25-27, 37, 47-49.

¹¹Yngve Brilioth, *Eucharistic Faith and Practice* (London: S.P.C.K., 1961) 276-288.