

August 6, 2023

Faithful Relationships

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It was a hot and dusty day. July 31, 1981. Nancy Lee and I gathered with our families and a couple of hundred friends at Our Redeemer's Lutheran Church in Williston, North Dakota and committed ourselves to each other as husband and wife. We did that through our very public promises to each other. We wanted to publicly proclaim what we intended to do from "that day forward and forever more." We wrote our vows. We made a lot of promises to each other. We practiced speaking them out loud beforehand so that when that moment came, we were fully present. And everything we said to each other in those moments really boiled down to just one big promise: that we would be faithful to each other our whole lives. Faithfulness is the fundamental, foundational groundwork of a healthy marriage. Without faithfulness, loyalty, trust, reliability, and commitment to one another, the marriage will implode. And that faithfulness gets us to the absolute heart and soul of the sixth commandment found in Exodus 20:14 and Deuteronomy 5:18, "You shall not commit adultery."

From Genesis to Revelation, the Scriptures provide a clear image of God going to great lengths to model what a faithful, loyal, trustworthy, reliable, and committed relationship looks like. And God calls us to that standard with one another, specifically in the sixth commandment. The context for all of this, of course, is what we call marriage. Marriage is a remarkable and extraordinary gift of God; a way of living in an intentionally deep and purposeful relationship – intended for the joy and shared strength of those who enter it, and for the well-being of the whole human community.

But here's the deal: It's not always a breeze. To borrow a phrase, "stuff happens." You probably know that the first sign, or miracle that Jesus performed took place at a wedding in Cana. The wedding celebration was in grave danger of coming apart at the seams, and the marriage,

only just beginning, was in danger of coming to a screeching halt due to a social and cultural blunder of biblical proportions. They ran out of wine. Why is that important? Wine was a central ingredient in community celebrations. And having enough for everyone was the responsibility of the married couple. Running out brought great shame on the couple and their families. So, Jesus interrupts that social blunder with grace, and Jesus helps a couple save their dignity. He probably saved that wedding, and most likely the marriage as well, by bringing grace and joy to that sacred moment. Over and over again, God is revealed to be the biggest fan of marriage, going to amazing lengths to show us how to preserve it. And that gives us some context for the Sixth Commandment.

When you look at the heart of the Ten Commandments, even the Cowboy version of the ten commandments: "Honor yer ma & Pa, No tellin' tales of fibs, get yerself to Sunday meetin', and especially the sixth commandment in Exodus 20:14, No foolin' around with anybody else's pardner..." what we call adultery, it's all about maintaining the foundational integrity of relationships. And it almost seems like a no-brainer, right? Faithfulness, loyalty, reliability, honesty, integrity, and commitment. We should just expect that, right? We might even wonder why God would even put "No adultery" in the Top-Ten because if you only have 10 Commandments, why waste it on something that seems so obvious? Nobody enters into a marriage with the thought that someday they're going to be unfaithful, disloyal, unreliable, dishonest, or uncommitted. No one wakes up on their wedding day or any day after that expecting to break their wedding promises. Nobody starts out a marriage that way. It seems obvious that when you enter into a marriage, you're going to stay together, and you're going to be faithful to each other. So why waste one of the top 10 on marriage? What is God trying to say to us about marriage and, more specifically, what is being said about God? I'd like to offer two responses.

First, the sixth commandment is part of the Ten Commandments because God loves us endlessly and wants to protect us from all that would hurt or even destroy us. God wants to help us live thriving lives in relationship with one another. God knows that unfaithfulness happens. And when it does, as some of you know from painful experience, it crushes the person who has been cheated on, wronged. And it also slowly kills the soul of the person who is unfaithful. Everybody loses. Nobody wins. God knows that; God knows that that happens. It's not God's desire, of course, but God knows that it happens. So, the reason God gives us the sixth commandment is to remind us that marriage is a sacred gift. God gives this gift and calls us to be really proactive about nurturing this gift and to recognize that, even though we enter into deeply committed relationships with promises of faithfulness that they can crumble apart very quickly. So, God wants us to be vigilant, and wants to remind us that God is committed to our marriages and to helping us build the best marriages that we can. The sixth commandment is a gift to remind us that marriage is profoundly important to God, it's deeply important to us, and that it's a gift.

Second, we've been given the sixth commandment – the call to be faithful, loyal, reliable, honest, and committed to the integrity of our primary relationships because God wants to say something about Godself to us *whether we're married or not*. So, if you're here today and you're not married or even in a deeply committed relationship, there is still something profoundly important for us all. Every one of the commandments reveals something about God's lavishly grace-filled and loving character. In a very real sense, every commandment communicates something about God's faithfulness to us. The reason why that's so important, even radical, is because when the sixth commandment was given to the people of God, Israel was surrounded by all kinds of gods, and none of those gods were known for faithfulness. To the people of Israel, these gods were fickle and erratic; their minds were

seemingly changed by the direction of the wind. They were unreliable; you never knew where you stood, and you never knew where the gods stood. Into all that, the God of Abraham, the only true God, breaks in and says, "There are no other gods, I am the only God, and I am faithful, loyal, reliable, and committed to you. You can always count on me. You can always depend on me. I am your God." That was the original message then, and that is still the enduring message now and for all time. So, God gives the sixth commandment to show us God's character. And when God talks about being faithful, loyal, reliable, honest, committed, and full of integrity, the metaphor that God uses to help us visualize God's faithfulness is marriage. God connects faithfulness to marriage. And so, every marriage becomes a living, breathing sign of God's grace, enduring mercy, steadfast love, and faithfulness. The sixth commandment is there to remind us that God is faithful, loyal, reliable, and committed to us, and even in those times when human marriages are rocked by unfaithfulness, God remains faithful and constantly calls us back to that powerful truth that God will always be faithful.

Friends, here's what I know about the reality of this moment right here and now: many of us in this place have healthy, thriving relationships and marriages. But some of you hearing my voice today have real heartache about all of this, and that makes all of our hearts ache with you. For a host of reasons, a marriage didn't work out, and hearts are somewhere on a continuum between broken and healing. That's what I know. What I want you to know right along with me is that the Creator of all that is, the God of faithfulness, loyalty, reliability, honesty, integrity, and commitment, the God behind the sixth commandment, has two promises for you. God's first promise is this: "I am the Lord, your God who heals broken hearts, and I will heal your broken heart. And secondly, God says "I am the Lord, your God who always gives new beginnings. And I will give you a new beginning." That may not happen overnight. It takes a long time when

a marriage falls apart to put the pieces back together. But God's promise to you is that God will always be faithful. God will bring healing, and God will bring a fresh start to you and to all of us here today. God has another promise for us: No matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no matter how faithful you are, or unfaithful you have been to God, God says to you today, I will never leave you, nor forsake you. I will always be faithful to you. No matter what. And that's a promise that is rooted in the cross, and a promise that God wants to renew in your life right now.

So, what do we do with all of this? How can we make this sticky?

First, if there is pain, heartache, and brokenness in your relationship, and you need some help, ask for that. A wise person once said in response to the devastation of a broken relationship, "That didn't happen to me. That happened for me." You have the opportunity to take all of that and join it to the power of God's love and grow from that. You can. And that step isn't up to anyone else but you. If you need help with that, just ask.

Second, see if you can find your wedding vows. Find a copy of the promises you made to your spouse on your wedding day and read them through together. You made them together, now read them together. Find at least one thing in those promises that you will recommit to this week. If you are in a significant relationship and haven't had the opportunity to actually make some promises to your significant other, then do that. Be purposeful. Be intentional. Be brave and courageous. Whatever the case, this is all about maintaining the foundational integrity of your relationship.

Last, there's a really good chance you are not the same person you were on your wedding day, or when you entered into a deep, committed relationship. People grow and change. Talk with your spouse or significant other about how you see yourself as evolving in your relationship. Don't talk about how you want them to change, talk about how you are growing.

Then talk about how that can strengthen your relationship.

On that hot, dusty, late afternoon in July of 1981 when Nancy Lee and I stood together and made commitments to faithfulness, loyalty, reliability, honesty, integrity, and commitment, there were some things that we knew and some things that we didn't know. We did not know what joys would overwhelm us, or what challenges would undermine us. We didn't know what tears would toughen us or what laughter would loosen us. There was no way we could have known what headaches would pound on us, or what heartbreaks would galvanize us. Despite all that there were some things that we did know. We did know that we had each other, that God had us, and that that was enough to build on. Today I want to speak those same words into every relationship that you have and to encourage you to embrace the call to be faithful, loyal, reliable, honest, and committed to the integrity of your relationships knowing that God has you and that that will be enough.