

## Unprotected Texts: The Difficult Dialogue with the Bible on Love and Marriage

Nancy Sehested  
May 13, 2012

The caller sounded desperate. "Please, please help me! I don't want to live in sin anymore. I have to get married! Can you help me?"

She explained that she had lived for several years with one of the men who is now an inmate at the prison where I serve. She said he had 10 more years on his sentence. Then she told me more than I wanted to know about their intimate life together. "The Bible says it's sin."

She used the biblical "f" word. You know the one...the 11-letter "f" word that we stumbled over when our Sunday School teacher asked us to read the passages from some of the New Testament letters of Paul (like Colossians 3:5). And then we asked what that word meant, and suddenly the teacher's expression looked as if an 18-wheeler was headed right for us.

The woman on the phone was frantic. "You gotta help me! I don't want to go to hell. I want to get things right with God."

I tried explaining to her that a certificate of marriage from the state of North Carolina was not needed to get right with God. "The state of North Carolina is not God, and the state cannot bestow blessing on your relationship."

"Does this mean you won't do it?"

"That's right."

"And you call yourself a chaplain? You should be ashamed of yourself! You ever read the Bible?" Then she spoke a few not-so-biblical words and slammed the phone down.

"You ever read the Bible?"

Since that question still comes up regularly in my life, my inside voice imagines saying things like: "No, but I've seen the movie." Or: "No, I've found I like the pocket version best." Better for ducking when it's coming at me.

You ever read the Bible? It is surely the least read and most often quoted book in history. With the majority of voters in our state last week voting for Amendment One—the constitutional amendment that establishes marriage as only between a man and a woman—the Bible is once again being quoted.

And this past week President Obama astonishingly offered his affirmation of same-sex marriage. Evangelical leaders such as Franklin Graham quickly responded by saying that the president was "shaking his fist at God," and that he was "going against an 8,000-year-old law of God."

There's a lot of shaking of fists going on these days. Once again, the Bible is in the dangerous position of having "unprotected texts."

*Unprotected Texts* is the title of a book by New Testament scholar Jennifer Knust. She looks at the biblical contradictions on issues of human sexuality. I highly recommend it.

How long has the church been obsessed with questions of sexuality? Certainly all of my adult life. The Bible has been forced into the public battles and asked to take sides. Is the Bible for or against the availability of abortion? For or against women in church leadership? For or against the submission of wives to their husbands? For or against gay men and lesbian women being ordained? For or against gay marriage?

During the 1800s, the controversial question was: "Are you for or against slavery?" Alongside that was the question of whether women should have the right to vote, or the right to preach, or the right to divorce, or the right to hold property.

It was not long ago when the question was, "Are you for or against interracial marriage?" Prior to 1967 and a Supreme Court decision, interracial marriage was still illegal in 12 states.

Through it all, the Bible has been used as the voice of authority. Can you name an issue in our public arena that has not invoked the Bible? War, abortion, sexuality, ecology, immigration, ordination, technology, euthanasia, death penalty, stem cell research, marriage. The list goes on.

We are not practiced in public dialogue. Diatribe, yes, but not dialogue. The public arena too often pushes us to take sides before taking time to hear from all sides. So many of the issues are complex and cannot be resolved by lobbing Bible verses at one another.

Don't you wish it was just a matter of tolerating different viewpoints? But what do we do when a perspective is damning and destructive? What do we do when it springs from the same well of water called the Bible?

Perhaps the latest public controversy swirling around us is an opportunity to look at those "unprotected texts." Perhaps it invites us to have another difficult dialogue with the Bible on issues that affect all of us in one way or another.

Let's begin the dialogue by listening, always a good place to start in any dialogue. What does the Bible say about marriage?

Turn in your Bibles...oops, I see. No Bibles in your hands. All right, then. The fasten-your-seat-belts light is on. Stay in your seats. There are storms in the area. We will be experiencing some turbulence.

In the first creation story in Genesis, God created humankind in God's own image: *male and female God created them* (Genesis 1: 27). In the second creation story in Genesis (yes, there are two): *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his woman; and they become one flesh* (2:24, Knust translation).

Notice the unusual wording, since the practice was for a woman to leave her father's house to go the man's household. The ancient Hebrew language usually stated it this way: a man "takes" a woman. She was expected to be a virgin, with dire consequences if she was found to be otherwise. (You will remember the horror of Joseph when he learned that Mary was pregnant.)

Life expectancy for a woman was 30 years, and for a man 40. The mortality rate for children under 3 years old was extremely high. Life was fragile.

"Be stewards of the earth and its creatures as well as *be fruitful and multiply*." We can see how these words were critical for survival of the community. And we can see why it was so difficult to live by.

The patriarchs of the faith had multiple wives and concubines. They wanted to father as many children as possible to keep the tribe alive. Sons were especially prized, to preserve the family lineage. Women were considered a part of the household property. Men had absolute authority over women. The primary reason for marriage was economic. It was a world of survival through bread and babies.

The Mosaic laws covered a multitude of sins in the newly formed Israelite community. Among them was the command not to commit adultery or covet another man's wife, slave, ox, or donkey. And what about that law that stated that a man was obligated to marry a woman he had raped? (Deuteronomy 22:28-30)

Stoning to death was a form of punishment for stepping outside some of the laws. Disobedient teenagers were to be stoned to death in the town square (Deuteronomy 22: 18-21). Many of us would not be alive today if we still obeyed that law.

King David's escapade with Bathsheba was particularly egregious because she was the property of another man.

So which couple in the Hebrew Bible would we hold up as an example of a great marriage? Adam and Eve? Who did sign their marriage certificate?

***Which couple in the Hebrew Bible would we hold up as an example of a great marriage? Abraham and Sarah...and Hagar, one of his concubines? Jacob and Rachel...and Leah?***

Abraham and Sarah...and Hagar, one of his concubines? Isaac and Rebekah? Remember how Isaac lied about Rebekah being his wife? He said that she was his sister in case someone tried to kill him in order to seize her. Jacob and Rachel...and Leah?

What about the man and woman of the sensuous poetic verses of desire in the Song of Songs? Don't tell our young people, but they weren't married.

So who then? You ever read the Bible?

The Hebrew Bible does not have a neatly packaged view of legitimate marriage. So what happens when we jump over to the New Testament?

Jesus never married. He asked his disciples to leave everything to follow him. When Jesus' own family stood outside the door where he was teaching, he looked at his followers and named them as his family. Jesus broadened the definition of family beyond kinfolk.

*Whoever comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sister, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple* (Matthew 14:26).

Jesus' words were radical and life-altering, daring for the times. Jesus invited his followers into a family of faith that lived by God's freeing vision. He invited his followers to commit to a covenant with one another that was not dependent on the household codes of bloodline and marriage contracts.

And what do we make of Jesus words in Matthew 19:11-12? *For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let any accept this who can.* Is Jesus encouraging voluntary castration for the most dedicated followers? I'm glad women were left out of that one.

The Pharisees asked Jesus, *Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?* (Mark 10:2). Jesus replied that God allows divorce only because of "hardness of heart." Then he quoted the Genesis verse about a man leaving his father and mother to be joined to his wife: *Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate* (vs. 6-9). Jesus' topic was not marriage but divorce.

If you read further in Mark, Jesus suggests that in the resurrection, there is no marriage, but people do marry in the present age because they are not aware of God's end-time judgment. *For when they rise from the dead they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven* (Mark 12: 25). Hardly seems like a resounding endorsement of marriage.

And jumping on down some verses, we discover Paul's words. Ah, Paul. As far as we know, Paul never married. He advised against it. He thought that Jesus was coming back very soon, so he encouraged those who were unmarried or widowed to be celibate. *To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is well to remain single as I do* (1 Corinthians 7:8).

Nevertheless, Paul did say that if you must marry, okay. If you don't know how to practice self-control, *it is better to marry than to be aflame with passion* (1 Corinthians 7:9). Take just a moment and look around this room to notice those who are lacking in self-control.

When you attend a wedding, which biblical passages do you most often hear? *Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God* (Ruth 1: 16). Those beautiful words were spoken from one widow to another widow. Ruth courageously said them to Naomi, as they forged a path in a treacherous and harsh world without husbands.

What about 1 Corinthians 13, which is often called "The Love Chapter" in the Bible? *Love is patient and kind. Love never insists on its own way...* These were Paul's poetic words written for a congregation in the midst of a huge conflict.

Many weddings begin the service by noting Jesus' attendance at the wedding at Cana as a sign of his blessing of marriage. Really? Shouldn't it take a little more than just showing up to show blessing?

Brothers and sisters, have you heard enough? There's so much more that could be said, but the more for now is this: When it comes to marriage, the Bible is a poor guide. There is no single biblical word on marriage. There is no single summation that we can call "the biblical view on marriage." Contradictions abound.

In light of these mystifying contradictions, it might be more honest to ask the question, "Are you for or against marriage?"

The contract of marriage historically has been about property and privilege. Today's marriage laws are no exception. The laws grant privileges and rights to heterosexual couples not afforded to gay and lesbian couples. This is horribly unjust. The Bible has a whole lot to say about "unjust"!

Jesus did teach us to invite all who have been left out to come to the banquet table. Jesus taught the Golden Rule and love of neighbor as oneself. We could go on.

All of us in this room are beneficiaries of one kind or another of communities of faith that have stood up against unjust and inhumane laws and practices. Therefore we will continue to pray, petition, and protest until marriage equality is a reality for all couples. And we will do it in the name of our God of justice and mercy.

And what about love?

Remember the story from *Fiddler on the Roof* about the undeniable influence of social norms and traditions in our relationships? It is a vivid story of the power of tradition, as well as the power to change

long-held traditions. In this dialogue, the old Jewish patriarch Tevye and the old Jewish matriarch Golde have been married for 25 years. They have lived through many trials and tribulations in Old Russia at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hear now a scene from the story animated by Jeanine and Russell Siler Jones:

Tevye: Golde, I have decided to give Perchik permission to become engaged to our daughter, Hodel.

Golde: What? He's poor! He has nothing, absolutely nothing!

Tevye: He's a good man, Golde. I like him. And what's more important, Hodel likes him. Hodel loves him. So what can we do? It's a new world...A new world...Love. Golde... do you love me?

Golde: Do I *what*?

Tevye: Do you love me?

Golde: Do I love you? With our daughters getting married and this trouble in the town...you're upset, you're worn out. Go inside, go lie down! Maybe it's indigestion.

Tevye: Golde I'm asking you a question...Do you love me?

Golde: You're a fool.

Tevye: I know...But do you love me?

Golde: Do I love you? For twenty-five years I've washed your clothes, cooked your meals, cleaned your house, given you children, milked the cow. After twenty-five years, why talk about love right now?

Tevye: Golde, the first time I met you was on our wedding day. I was scared.

Golde: I was shy.

Tevye: I was nervous.

Golde: So was I.

Tevye: But my father and my mother said we'd learn to love each other, and now I'm asking...Golde, do you love me?

Golde: I'm your wife.

Tevye: I know...But do you love me?

Golde: Do I love him? For twenty-five years I've lived with him, fought him, starved with him. Twenty-five years my bed is his. If that's not love, what is?

Tevye: Then you love me?

Golde: I suppose I do.

Tevye and Golde: It may not change a thing but, even so, after twenty-five years it's nice to know

In the history of humankind, marrying for love is a fairly recent development. We are no longer as worried as our ancestors about bread and babies.

And here is where we are on solid ground for our intimate relationships of love. The Bible has much to say about covenant love, steadfast love, the love that will not let us go. It is God's love for us. It is our love for God. And that love is best incarnated in our deepest loves for and with one another.

With Tevye and Golde, we know that love is embodied through a hundred-and-one small loyalties through the day. It is a covenant love developed through a sharing of life in all of its delights and difficulties.

Such covenant love is built on shared biblical values of fidelity, honesty, respect, and plenty of forgiveness. Our relationships of love are built on the promises we make, and the promises we keep.

Yet Tevye's question about love is so much bigger than the tender and endearing answer given in the story.

*Do you love me?* Don't we all want to know if someone loves us?

Jesus asked Peter that question: "Do you love me?" The question came after Peter's colossal betrayal of Jesus. It came on the heels of his failure to love.

Friends, on our way to securing the rights of marriage for all people, can we keep the conversation going about how hard it is to love, no matter if we are gay or straight?

Can we be honest enough to confess our failures in loving? Can we confess our times of befuddlement in knowing how to love? What do we do when the work of love requires the work of distance rather than closeness?

Can the church expand the conversation about love to include people who are not in a coupled relationship? How is love experienced for people who are single? Or people who are in the transgender community?

How about all those who feel like failures because they never had a close relationship with anyone? Or people who feel like failures because their relationships fell apart?

What does love look like for people with a mental illness or people with physical and mental diminishment? What does it look like for people who have a partner who has developed a chronic illness, or had a tragic accident? What does love look like for people of advancing age or people with a life sentence in prison?

What conversations do we want to have with our young people about love with all of its body and soul implications? Young people, what messages are you absorbing from our culture and from us? Do you know that there is no such thing as "safe sex"? Why? Because sex is a giving of ourselves body and soul, and that is never safe. Can we have that kind of conversation with you about love?

Can the Bible be a source for discernment about these matters? Do we choose to be what biblical scholar Phyllis Trible described as either the "Bible-thumpers" or the "Bible-bashers"? Do we dismiss the Bible as hopelessly patriarchal and irrelevant to our times? Or is there another option for us?

I leave you with my testimony.

My entire ministry has been smack in the middle of communities that have mostly given up on the Bible...or communities like the prison that have a bumper crop of people who continue to use the Bible to bash others. I have tried to live by the guiding light of 2 Timothy 2:23: *Avoid stupid and senseless controversies.* But it is not easy to pull off.

Next week I will end my one-year, self-imposed moratorium on preaching at the prison. Why did I take a year off? Weariness.

I had been preaching for more than a decade in that environment where every sermon stirred up some kind of controversy. It was mostly from prisoners who were dismayed about my biblical interpretation or angry because I did not use the 1611 King James Version of the Bible. And of course my gender has always been a stumbling block for some of the prisoners.

Generally speaking, these negative reactions have never stopped me. After all, didn't Jesus meet resistance to his preaching? *Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.* And by the grace of God, some have heard a new word.

Nevertheless, I got tired...weary with being the center of controversy...weary from the relentless attacks...weary with trying to find a common language and keep the dialogue going...weary with the deep-seated assumptions about the inferiority of women, even among men who have every reason to be humbled by their behavior that landed them in a maximum-security prison.

Endless opposition takes its toll on us, body and soul. Perhaps we don't honor enough the seasons of weariness that can overcome any of us in the living out of our faith. And this season in our public life in this country...whew! It can sink us into some weariness, can't it?

But the Bible tells the story of people working out their lives of faith in dangerous times, in weary-making times, just like us. The Bible bears witness to those who experienced God in a way that brought an inner freedom that was transforming and unshakable, even with enemies all around them.

When I first started preaching more than 30 years ago, I had not heard even one ordained Baptist woman preacher. As my husband and life partner Ken knows, I panicked before every sermon. It was not fear of public speaking. It was the public speaking that dared to offer a word about God and God's word among us.

In my head and heart, I knew it was good and right. I was not hindered by theology or biblical verses. I was hindered by cultural conditioning. I was hindered by ingrained tradition. I was hindered by what felt like ancient, historical gravity that pulled at women like me to stay seated, silent, and smiling.

Thankfully, I had the encouragement of Ken and a community of faithful and loving people who championed me to keep on. I discovered that beyond the fear was the deep-in-my-bones story—the story of God's love—the story that won't let go of me...even through those times when I have let go of it.

That story is most powerfully illumined for me in the biblical story of Jesus...the Human One...the one who preached without the authority of the establishment, the one who knew rejection even from his hometown folk. Jesus, healer of the shattered and the shunned, forgiver of the shamed, revealer of truths, lover of enemies, resister of inhumanity, embodiment of hope. Jesus, who was struck down by the powers of fear,  
and resurrected by the power of love.

That story. It is still life for me.

Is it so for you, too?