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The age to come might be near
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Of our seven sacraments in the church, marriage has always seemed to be on the shakiest ground. Scripturally, that is; personally I'm very fond of marriage. Baptism and Eucharist are evidenced clearly — Jesus did these things and told us to do these things. Confession and reconciliation, that's there, "confess your sins to one another" says James and the like, very direct. Prayers for healing and anointing with oil is commonplace in the Bible, the laying on of hands for something like ordination is all over Acts. Confirmation is trickier but there are certainly themes of coming-of-age and declarations of faith. But marriage — if you've been to an Anglican wedding in the past 500 years, you'll have heard an introduction that says something like, "Marriage is good and given to us and we know Jesus supported this because he performed his first miracle at a wedding in Cana." We're saying his proximity to the marriage and his miracle there was giving the thumbs-up to marriage. Seems like a less-than logical argument to me. Jesus did miracles while sailing or walking on water, but that doesn't mean captaining a boat should be considered for our eighth sacrament.

We are in the midst of a secondary wedding season here at Calvary; some of you know this because you give your time over and again on flower guilds, altar guilds, usher teams. There was a massive wedding here last night, and amidst all the joy and preparation, I've been quietly amused our lectionary today playing in my head: Jesus seeming to say that ultimately, beyond the blip of our existence, marriage doesn't matter.

In fact, I bet there's more direction about not being married in the New Testament than there to commend it. The reading that all of us hear at nearly every wedding is 1 Corinthians 13 — love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it keeps no record of wrongs. It was written by St. Paul, who I imagine keeps fit by turning over in his tomb every time this happens, because not only did he never marry, he also wrote, "I wish everyone was like me and would stop with this silly distraction of marriage. Oh all right, if you really can't control your carnal lust, then get married, but let the record show that I'm not happy about it." And the majority of Christians in history have been happy to let him remain unhappy and got married anyway.

Pre-marital counseling is one the requirements we ask of those who want to be married in the church. If I did your pre-marital counseling, it would look something like 4 or 5 sessions where we ask the hard questions. When conflicts arise, how do we handle them — and how does our partner handle them? Do we fume and say things we regret? Do we avoid and harbor resentment that grows under the surface? Do we understand our own feelings enough to know the thing we're actually upset about? How does our ability to honor and cherish the other even through difficulties trickle out into our decisions around how we spend time together, or handle our finances, or deal with that annoying habit she has of thoughtlessly leaving a trail of candy wrappers throughout the house?

Now there is one piece of work we do in pre-marital counseling that I might use specifically to argue with old St. Paul about why marriage might not be such a bad thing to undertake. I ask a bunch of questions to determine how much you see your relationship through rose-colored lenses. That is, how lost in the agony and ecstasy of desire are you so that you're willing to overlook difficulties in the relationship that need work?

Because it's only by removing those lenses, seeing the other person for who they are — not who you wish they were or what they represent to you — that the real work of love can be done.

This is the joy and trial of marriage: to see one person as fully as you can, their flesh and blood, their angels and demons, sickness and health, richer and poorer. We rarely do this many other places in life — or go to such depths. You cannot choose the families born into, friendships come and go. And of course, marriages do, too. The greater the intimacy of a relationship lost leaves correspondingly deep scars. We quote Genesis in marriage, too, that two become one flesh. And the divorce process feels a bit like being cut in half — even if that process was years of slow severing before reaching the actual point in time of a legal divorce, even if it was necessary — necessity is a poor salve for pain.

There were times in my life when I was on Jesus' and Paul's side here regarding marriage — though for the wrong reasons, I suspect. I bet you've been there, on the other side of an unimaginable pain, where the risk of seeing and being seen on such an intimate level seems foolish at best. I'm not here to argue you out of it if you're there now. But when I've sided against marriage, my reasons for doing so were not Jesus's.

In his time, the Sadducees were a group who honored only the first five books of Scripture, the Torah. There was no mention of resurrection in them, life after death, and if Moses had no idea of a resurrection, then it couldn't be true. The only hope of living on after death was by having children — and the ultimate tragedy, the ultimate death occurred if a man didn't have any children before dying. If this happened, his brother was legally obligated to marry his brother's widow and to have children in the name of his dead brother — to keep him alive. The spirit and the family line could live on in this way.

The Sadducees thought they'd test Jesus, see where he stood. They took a popular riddle of theirs, designed to frustrate anyone who believed in resurrection, and told it: there were seven brothers. The first married and died childless, and his wife went on to marry the second brother. He died childless. She was wed to the third brother, and so on, until all were dead and line ended, childless. So whose wife will she be in the resurrection?

Jesus says that marriage is for this age. But there's an age to come where those who are ready will become like angels or children of God. In this age, the brothers avoided death by marrying, but in the age to come, everything that existed to help us avoid death will be of no use. His argument here really isn't about marriage or if it matters. He's saying that death doesn't matter. There is no bride to fight over, because there will be nothing to fight over — our rivalries, our competitions, our comparisons, our territory (which the woman certainly was), will be no more. I think the woman in the story is breathing a sigh of relief, if anything. Who knows? Maybe in the age to come, she would have been free to choose which brother she liked best — not because she needed him to avoid death or family shame or out of fear or need or complacency or because she was so afraid of being alone, but because of love. Only the structures built of love will last.

And after all, that's where the church landed on marriage, and on relationships in general. It is a rule that the specific begets the general. Our ability to love another person, the person right in front of us, ultimately reflects our love of God, who shatters the self-serving idols we make of him over and over. This process of discovering, I think, is one of many things we call sacraments — the ordinary imbued with the divine — like seeing another person and beginning to see Jesus — it's like picking up the pitcher of water and finding it turned to wine.