

ESSAY 4: Marriage as a Rite of Passage

The catechism of the 1979 Book of Common Prayer describes the rite of marriage as a sacramental rite which “evolved in the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.” It goes on to say that “[a]lthough they are means of grace, they are not necessary for all persons in the same way that Baptism and Eucharist are” (860). This is, in part, why we describe marriages as sacramental rites rather than as sacraments.

While marriage may provide deep and rich spiritual blessings to the lives of those who are called to this state, not all marry, nor do we believe God ever intended for all to marry. From our Christian perspective, we understand the marriage covenant, like the covenant to a life of celibacy, to have a special, graced place in our lives. We pray that the Holy Spirit is at work in our daily lives through our ongoing participation in the life that proceeds out of the sacramental rite of marriage. We hold this rite in high esteem, and as Christian people we work diligently to uphold both the dignity and the integrity of the rite and of the graced life to which it calls us.

The rite of marriage carries with it a special weight and has at times been described as the one liturgical rite in the lives of laypersons where they may be invited to have a central role in its planning and administration. No one who understands our Christian theology regarding God’s sacramental presence in the world would dare diminish its significance to the life of those Christians who have been called to this sacred vocation.

There is, however, an overarching, almost universal phenomenon that applies not only to Christians entering into marriage, but to all persons of all religions who choose to engage in their cultures’ marriage rites. What are these rites about? What do they do? How important are they to their participants, and are they purely for the sake of the two people being joined to one another?

1. Marriage as a Rite of Passage

Marriage rites are omnipresent in human societies across history, cultures, and geography. How marriages take place, what their purposes are, how they are interpreted, and who officiates varies across time and space. In the early 20th century, a French anthropologist, Arnold van Gennep, began to look at rituals from a scientific perspective to try to ascertain their purposes beyond those already articulated from a religious perspective. The work he first produced has helped inform our understandings of human rituals throughout the modern era.

Van Gennep came to identify a certain type of ritual activity as “rites of passage.” By this he meant that these formal ritual actions were used to help individuals or communities transition from one life state to a new one. They provided a ritual passage that enabled the members of a society to navigate the complicated and often perplexing waters from pregnancy to parenting, from uninitiated to initiated, from childhood to adolescence, from adolescence to full adulthood, from singlehood to married life, from follower to leader, and from life to death. Marriage fits within this category that he labels rites of passage — along with initiation rites (including Baptism and Confirmation), ordinations, *quinceañeras*, monastic rites of profession, adoption rites, marriage-anniversary celebrations, burial rites, and a host of other, less-formalized rites practiced in our journey from birth to death.

There are, of course, other forms of ritual that serve other purposes; that help remedy sin or a rupture in the relationship with the divine; that call upon the divine for assistance, that return people to health and wholeness; and that create a pathway for communion with the divine. Van Gennep asserted that, somewhat differently from these other forms of ritual, rites of passage served core sociological, cultural, psychological, and political purposes within a society. They help to keep society intact. They serve the needs of not only the individual but, just as important, they serve the greater good by making ways forward that mediate against

chaos, confusion, and anomie within particular communities during specific moments of transition and change.

2. Liminality in Rites of Passage

As van Gennep examined rites of passage across cultures, he began to notice a generalized pattern to those rites. He identified a pattern that began with an event of separation from one's old identity, followed by a transition time that allowed for changes in role and status, followed by an event of reincorporation into the community with one's new identity and status.

Victor Turner built on the work of van Gennep. He further fleshed out his own sense of what was happening during a rite of passage, and how that rite reshaped the community in which it took place. Turner paid particular attention to the period of transition leading up to the rite that finalized the change in status of the person or the community. What he witnessed in his anthropological research was a kind of liminality that was particularly at work in this transition time. Individuals during this period were "betwixt and between," neither fish nor fowl. This period of liminality often both allowed for and required a kind of suspension of former rules and categories in relation to the person in transition. Because of this, there was a sense of graced time which created an experience which Turner described as "communitas."

Communitas is about more than just everyday communal relationships. It is a shared ethos and experiential context that allows for greater freedom, greater intimacy, and higher levels of care and bonding than might normally be part of the fabric of everyday life in society. During periods of communitas, trust is built. Relationships are forged, and bonds of affection are created. This period of communitas, this liminal period in the life of an individual, creates a kind of elasticity of identity that encourages and allows for greater adaptivity, creativity, and spontaneity.

If people are to reinvent themselves, there must be room to allow for trial and error and evolution. One does not come to sport a new identity overnight — not successfully. As the community makes room for this kind of liminality, these forays into communitas provide a rich and full societal environment for intimacy, creativity, and adaptive change. The whole of society benefits from its participation in individuals' rites of passage that are taking place.

Turner's studies of this period of liminality led him to believe that its significance to the change of status process was so central that he renamed van Gennep's three stages of rites of passage as the pre-liminal, the liminal, and the post-liminal stages. He also revised van Gennep's work (and the work of others who were exploring ritual) to assert that while at times rituals become the vehicles for societal stabilization and support of the status quo, at other times they become the means to overturn the status quo and create greater systemic change in the society. Sometimes what is called for is a loosening of power, an overturning of tradition, or an adaptive process of redefining the nature of life in community. All of these goals could be met, Turner believed, through ritual processes, particularly rites of passage rituals.

Turner's observations affirm that marriage rites can move individuals from one family constellation to a new one, can unite two previously unconnected families, can create avenues for dealing with important social and economic status changes within two families, can cement new political alliances and power dynamics among its participants, and can serve the greater good by promoting a culture of trust and relationship, even among those who might previously have been strangers to one another within the community.

As Christians we might posit that all of this is work the Holy Spirit might find immensely rewarding and might choose to participate in, whether the individuals taking part call themselves Christian or not. Anthropologists, of course, would have no need to affirm divine providence over this work and would assert that it is simply the natural, evolved cultural adaptation of a society to the need for growth, flexibility, and movement within human society.

3. Betrothal and Marriage

For much of the history of marriage in many parts of the world, the process of marrying has been just that: a process. While this is still true in many parts of the world, it is less true in modern, westernized societies. Often the event of separation that has marked the movement out of the pre-liminal stage into the liminal stage has been some form of betrothal rite in which promises are made and preparations are begun that will, in time, lead to a final rite of marriage. Often there have been small rites along the way that are a significant part of this liminal period. Perhaps there is a feast to announce the betrothal. At times there has been an exchange of gifts or tokens as signs of the promises being entered into. Public acknowledgements of intent have been expected.

During the period of betrothal, there have often been opportunities for the two families represented in the marriage to communicate with one another and begin to build bonds. There might be discussions and even negotiations about material goods to be transferred from one family to the other as a result of the marriage. During this period, couples have often been allowed an opportunity to come to know each other better, and sometimes a new degree of intimacy between the two who are to marry is allowed or even encouraged.

Communities have seen a marriage as taking place through a series of rites that culminate in one final ritual action that moves the couple, their families, and the communities in which they are embedded into a new understanding of the identities of the married persons and new bonds of relationship within society. An entire network of relationships is altered through a marriage, and betrothal practices have allowed time for all those within that network to grasp and apprehend this new configuration of relationships.

The ritual studies scholar Ronald Grimes has written about the ways in which contemporary society has compromised the fabric of North American and other westernized rites of passage to a degree that is potentially detrimental. The movement out of singlehood into marriage requires comprehensive transformations for the individuals involved and the families of which they are a part. Virtually every aspect of one's life is changed through the act of marrying; economic, political, legal, emotional, psychological, social, and spiritual changes are expected of those who marry. In a different period in history, couples took months or even years to make those changes.

Now, in our contemporary society, marrying is seen as a single act on a given day at a prescribed time. That rite may occur either through a legal action completed by signing a license and appearing before a representative of the state or through a religious action that requires a legal component to be fully recognized as marriage. Whichever form a marriage takes, there is currently nothing in the process that requires a period of liminality greater than the state's prescribed requirements about how long before the wedding one must obtain the license or the religious community's expectations about how far in advance one must announce one's wedding and participate in the required premarital counseling (if any is required).

By asking individuals to believe that a marriage can take place through a ritual action that might be as brief as ten minutes with virtually no period of preparation, some ritual scholars believe we have truncated our ritual processes to such a degree that the rites may no longer be able to do what they are designed to and claim to do. A legal contract can be signed in a few brief moments. But individuals, societies, and the Church believe that marriage is meant to be far more than a simple legal contract.

4. Creating a Liminal Space in a Contemporary Context

Those desiring to marry in The Episcopal Church have worked and continue to work with rubrical and canonical expectations that have to some degree been instituted to mediate against the danger of people marrying before any public preparatory liminal period has occurred. The publishing of banns originated at a time when some within society were engaging in secret marriages — marriages that were not public and did not represent usual patterns of public recognition by all in the society of the nature of the relationship. This situation left the secret spouse in an extremely vulnerable position. This private, secret marriage status

made it easier to “put away” a spouse who might prove a financial, political, or social liability. The publishing of banns militated against bigamy, against marriages by those who had taken vows of celibacy, and against marriages that would not be supported by the extended families or the legal and social communities that might, by the very definition of marriage, be expected to affirm and respect this relationship.

In the 20th century, in large part in response to changing patterns of marriage and divorce in contemporary North American society, the Church added a canonical requirement for premarital counseling prior to marriage in an Episcopal rite administered by an ordained Episcopal minister. This premarital counseling requirement set up and made use of a period of liminality in which the couple could explore the depth of change that marriage would bring to their individual and shared lives. Effective premarital counseling is meant to foster the development of “*communitas*.” It calls for attention not just to the ritual preparations for the rite of marriage, but also to preparations for all that it will mean to live in the hoped-for, lifelong state of holy matrimony.

When premarital counseling is abridged into a brief discussion of the ritual details of the wedding itself, it ceases to fulfill either its spiritual or societal purposes. While premarital counseling is not the only way to facilitate the forming of a marriage, it is at least an expression of the Church’s deep conviction that the intentional development of a relationship that can support the state of holy matrimony is both necessary and helpful to a Christian marriage.

One hears, at times, of premarital counseling paradigms that focus almost exclusively on helping the couple explore the spiritual aspects of their marriage. In this counseling there is often a great deal of attention given to the sacramental element of a marriage, the nature of marriage as a lifelong covenant, the theological meanings of marriage, and the couple’s decision to participate in some religious community as an ongoing part of their Christian marriage. While all of these are deeply worthwhile conversations, it is also important to remember the nonreligious aspects of life lived as a married couple. Economic stewardship, parenting, the roles and expectations of daily life, extended familial relationships, sexuality, and intimacy are all significant aspects to holy matrimony.

They all also have a secular parallel. Even when couples seeking to be married in the Church do not grasp the theological significance of these aspects of their marriage, their social, economic, and political significance continues to be paramount. Therefore, it behooves those preparing couples for marriage to attend actively to the larger picture of what marriage means for those who are deeply faithful Christian persons who will build their whole marriage on a spiritual frame — and for those for whom the spiritual component of marriage is viewed as simply one aspect among many.

One cultural shift we are witnessing in much of contemporary western society is a movement toward cohabitation as a stepping-stone to marriage. At a time when former models of marriage that created space for a liminal period have eroded, couples appear to be building their own liminal period betwixt and between singlehood and full entrance into a societally sanctioned lifelong partnership. Demographic evidence suggests that for those who choose lifelong partnerships, marriage is still most often the hoped-for status; however, cohabitation seems to be serving as a middle ground for those not yet able to take on the full weight of marriage expectations.

Seen from an anthropological point of view, we can view this move toward temporary cohabitation and “capstone marriages” as a potential correction to precisely the set of concerns raised by Ronald Grimes and others. Many seem to be viewing marriage as something that can and should be eased into rather than jumped into. Anthropological research affirms the wisdom of this basic intuition. Whether cohabitation is the best means possible for creating this liminal period is certainly a subject worthy of debate. But the need for a transition time between singlehood and marriage is readily evident. How this liminal time is optimally used

by the couple, the families, and the greater community (including the faith community) is another question worthy of further discussion.

5. Marriage as a Prophetic Act

While the history of marriage document in the work of the Task Force highlights the ways in which legal marriage has often been a means to maintaining existing power structures and supporting the status quo, it is important for contemporary Christians also to heed Victor Turner's assertion that marriage can, at times, be a ritual that subverts the status quo and invites the larger society to reconsider its own assumptions about how the world should be.

In an age when political tensions are high among those of different Abrahamic faith traditions, contemporary societies are also seeing unprecedented levels of interfaith marriages between Christians, Muslims, and Jews. These marriages can become both the signs of and the means to stronger bonds of mutual love and support among these groups. At a time when racial tensions run high across much of our society, we are also witnessing unprecedented levels of interracial marriage. Each of these marriages invites the societies around it to explore visions and strategies for living that enable solidarity and mutual support rather than public strife and rupture.

Marriages can cross class lines, political affiliations, ethnicities, and a host of other societal and cultural divides that have become established between peoples. These marriages can serve as grassroots training grounds for learning a new way to be and live together — a way that celebrates love, openness, communication, partnership, mutuality, community, and shalom. Marriage rites among diverse couples can become occasions for celebrating all that unites us in our humanity rather than all that divides us in our differentness. They become important public attestations to a different way of being — a way of being that speaks to the core of the Gospel message but is not always witnessed to publicly in our larger society or even in our sometimes-segregated church communities.

When marrying couples have prepared themselves for marriage; have worked with families and friends to create new bonds of relationship; have already publicly lived into vows of mutual support and fidelity; have expressed to those around them the commitment they are making to a lifelong union that will not be undone by prosperity or adversity, then these couples have made their rituals into subversive acts — prophetic acts that challenge the values of the society around them and call that society to a richer, fuller, more robust way of living human life.

The language of Episcopal marriage rites promotes this fuller vision of humanity; however, words alone are not enough. It is vital that marriage vows be entered into with integrity, with awareness, and with a truthfulness that will not ultimately call the rite into question. Instead, the couple and the enacted rite will call into question the choices of a society that does not actively protect and support this vision. Effective intentional ritual action has this capacity. It can become a means to political, social, economic, and societal justice by allowing all those who participate in the words and gestures of that ritual to see the world as it can be. But this can only take place when the rite is perceived in its execution as being wholly guileless and completely truthful in its message and its intent.

One of the very important questions the Church faces in an age when almost 50 percent of marriages end in divorce is, how do we prepare couples to be ready to enter into just such deeply truthful and culturally challenging rites? How do we imbue our marriage rites with Christic integrity, so that the truths they can proclaim can be heard and received by those present for these rituals? Are betrothal periods — periods of marriage formation comparable to baptismal formation — necessary and essential for this to take place? And how do we undergird and support processes of marriage formation that truly prepare couples not just for wedding ceremonies, but for married life as well?

There are no easy answers to any of these questions, and assuredly the answers we come to will vary across our cultural landscapes. Exploring these questions seems important and life-giving work for our Episcopal religious community. If we perceive marriage rites as substantial, life-giving sacramental acts that have the potential to call us deeper into the heart of God, into spiritual renewal and greater life transformation, then it is incumbent upon us to turn our hearts and minds to these questions for our own sake, and for the sake of the world.

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