

Let us pray: "Father in Heaven, You have always been, You are now, and always will be faithful to us. Lord there are some promises in Your word, and we would like to claim them today. You have promised to be with us! We are trying to enter in experience in worship here, an experience that is super natural, and that is something that can only happen because of what You do. Lord we are humbling ourselves before You, and we are asking that when Your word is open you will speak to us with power. That our lives will be changed; we are praying Heavenly Father for You to manifest Yourself in a powerful way. We ask this in Jesus name, Amen."

I was haunted by the conversation. It took place last spring. A young man, upper 20's, lower 30's, somewhere in there, talked to me. He said, "Pastor Jerry, do we have any program in our church to help people with pre-marriage counseling?" I said, "Yes we do." He said, "Do we have any program in our church for divorce recovery?" I said, "Yes we do and it's well run with some wonderful people, a lot of blessings there." He said, "Do we have anything to help people who are married?" I said, "Well, not really." He said, "Why is it that churches have a lot to say to people before they get married, and then they have a lot of ministry to them after it fails, but they don't have much ongoing?" I was haunted by that, and it donned on me, you know there is something wrong because over 50% of all the people who get married end up divorcing. You realize that of those who divorce over 50% of them will divorce within the first 2 years of marriage. There is something wrong! Either we don't understand what marriage is, or we are not prepared for it or both. And today, we are beginning to work with this question. You know, why are marriage vows so difficult to keep? Why are they so difficult to keep?

Let's turn to our first passage in Acts chapter 5. Acts chapter 5 we'll read the story of Ananias and Sapphira. We've been here for some time, and we will be here for some time as we are going to deal with marriage and marriage vows. And those of you who are visiting today, welcome, and we are glad you are here, and you'll see and understand why we are preaching about marriage out of this story.

"A certain man named Ananias," Acts 5 verse 1, "...with Sapphira his wife, sold a possession. And he kept back part of the proceeds, his wife also being aware of it, and brought a certain part and laid it at the apostles' feet. But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Then Ananias, hearing these words, fell down and breathed his last. So great fear came upon all those who heard these things. And the young men arose and wrapped him up, carried him out, and buried him. Now it was about three hours later when his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter answered her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for so much?" She said, "Yes, for so much." Then Peter said to her, "How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." Then immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. And the young

men came in and found her dead, and carrying her out, buried her by her husband. So great fear came upon all the church, and upon all who heard these things.”

Ananias and Sapphira apparently had made a deal with God, they made a vow. “Look we’ve got this property, we’ll sell it, we’ll sell it for X amount of money, we’ll take all that money, we are going to give it to You God through Your church.” And they sold the property, and they decided to keep some of it back, and as a result, they died. Vow! That’s amazing. Fear came upon all the people. Fear came upon all the people! The last time I was here with you we studied about the vows in general. We saw in the Scriptures that God no where requires of any of us to take a vow, but if we do, He wants us to keep it. But yet, there are so hard! Marriage vows are especially hard to keep. When we are done studying about marriage and marriage vows, we are going to go to baptismal vows because they are also hard to keep. You take people who were married 10 yrs. ago, 50% of them are not married, at least not to that person. You take people who were baptized 10 years ago, 50% of them no longer attend church anymore. There is something difficult about these vows, and we need to explore and understand what it is?

Marriage vows, it is fascinating, we usually consider marriage vows to be this: as long as you don’t commit adultery, you are keeping the marriage vows! And so, some guy and some woman can treat their partner like dirt, but if they don’t run out on them, well, they are keeping the marriage vows. Well that’s very ridiculous. In fact, there is a lot to marriage vows, and being faithful to one another, well that’s a part of it, but there is more to the marriage vows. Most of the marriage vows usually end with the question, so the proper answer response is, “I will,” or “I do.” And I make a habit of speaking to the bride, and speaking to the groom, and saying, “Now when you say that, say it meaningfully, say it enthusiastically, other wise it sounds like a question.” “I will, I do!” No you want to say, **“I will, I do!”**

These vows, if a religious service, the vows are something like this: “Promising before God and in the presence of these witnesses will you, (and a certain groom’s name), have this woman, (and a certain bride’s name), to be your wedded wife? To live together after God’s ordinance in the Holy Estate of Matrimony, then you begin. And here are some of the elements: “To have and to hold,” I don’t know how many times I told my wife, that’s my favorite part. You are to love, you are to comfort, you are to honor, you are to cherish, it’ll have this element, whether in sickness or in health, whether in prosperity or adversity. These are heavy deals here; this is a big, big vow. Then you know, forsaking all others, keep yourself only unto them, as long as you both shall live. Do you so declare? “I do”, “I will.”

What is wrong with the picture of marriage in our country and our denomination? Within two years, the majority of the people who will divorce will be divorced. My brother in law was driving around St. Louis and he was listening to a radio program. They were talking, and they were talking about the expenses of weddings. And if you haven’t had a wedding lately, wait! I mean, they are expensive. A cheap wedding is expensive. And this guy calls and says: “I spent \$30,000 on my daughter’s wedding, and within a year she was divorced.” And he said, “The second daughter approached me just the other day.”

“My turn Dad!” And he said, “I have a different program for her. Here is what that program is,” he said, “I’ll give \$10,000 for your wedding, and in 10 yrs. if you are still married, I’ll give you the other \$20,000.”

Now that makes a lot more sense, doesn’t it? A lot more sense! Do you know that many people get married, and they have no clue as to what to expect. They are thinking perhaps, you know, it’s going to be a honeymoon for the whole time they live, and these other people didn’t get it? I want you to know, I used to think that about parenting. I figured, other people, they just didn’t know how to do it. My kids proved me wrong! I have a quote from a book. Dr. Neal Warren has written in this book, called “The triumphant marriage.” You may recognize his name? He is the man who invented e-harmony.com. Some of you have been on there. You’ve been checking out the world to see if he or she is out there waiting for you?

Well Dr. Warren, when he wrote this book he had 36 yrs. of clinical experience as the licensed marriage counselor. He is a psychologist and teaches at Fuller Theological Seminary, so he is a Christian man. And what he did for this book, “The triumphant marriage,” is he interviewed 100 happily married couples. I have no idea how long it took him to find them, but he got them, and he interviewed them, and this is what he has to say: “I know a couple who fight like cats and dogs, but they are wildly in love with each other. What’s more, they have one of the healthiest marriages I know. Does that shock you?” He goes on to say, “If it does, get ready for some bigger shocks. My years as a psychologist have slowly taught me a difficult to believe fact. The amount of conflict in the marriage only determines the speed at which the marriage is moving toward greatness or toward destruction.”

Let me share something with you. A young couple comes to me, I give them pre-marriage counseling, ah, I’ll talk about listening skills and stuff like this, but there is no way I can prepare them in that process for the reality of what is like to live with another human being. We all have different rhythms. And I don’t care how pretty she is, and how wonderful he is, on and on. He’s got a different rhythm than you, and at some point conflict is coming. If you are in the marriage with no conflict, you are eating spaghetti with no sauce. It’s the conflict that makes it exciting; it’s the conflict that demonstrates that there is life. But as we shall see today, there is an unhealthy way to deal with conflict, and there is a healthy way to deal with conflict.

If you are married, you’ve got conflict. The question is how are you dealing with it? Dr. Warren goes on to say, “If you want to sit still in your marriage, rule out all conflict. If you want your marriage to crash and burn let the conflict rage, but refuse to learn the skills necessary for managing it. Well managed conflict is like a stairway that can lead you to a higher and higher level of marital greatness.”

I get nervous when a couple comes to me for premarital counseling, and they’ve never had a single argument. They are complete strangers to a crucial part of married life. They don’t have the slightest idea about their combined skillfulness to handle that part of marriage that brings so much potential for positive or negative change. If any couple

thinks they are not going to have disagreements, they are tragically self deceived and headed for trouble. Almost 50% of all divorce takes place within the 2 years of their wedding date think of that! Couples get married, and encounter conflict, and give up, all within two years.

There are 2 points about this scenario that I find disturbing. First, those couples must have been profoundly unaware of how challenging it is to make a marriage work. They were certainly unaware of the number of conflicts that would arise. And second, they must have been alarmingly ill equipped to handle their conflicts. The management of conflicts is a perplexed but entirely learnable skill. Unfortunately, those couples never developed the skill, at least not to the required level of proficiency. And I'll conclude with this. Let me make this point clearly! Conflict is a necessary part of every marriage as long as the marriage lasts. If you've been married 5 years or 55 years, marriage is a conflict! It is filled with conflict, but that's what makes it exciting and that's what makes it alive.

Perhaps you can relate to this? Do you know why God invented marriage? So you wouldn't have to go through life arguing with strangers. There is conflict. To have a great marriage, you must have two authentic partners and authenticity involves the full and free expression of each person's true self with all its uniqueness. When both people are fully authentic their complete agreement on everything is impossible! Conflict is inevitable. You may have read this, but Ruth Belle Graham, the wife of Billy Graham, was asked a question. "Do you and Billy always agree on everything?" "My goodness, no," she said, "If we did, there would be no need for one of us."

We have been taught that you know, you take two lives and just meld them together and they become one. That is not entirely true. You take 2 individuals who commit to walk with each other through life, but they always remain individuals. Do you know what happens if you take 2 apples, you cut one in 2, cut the other in 2 and then take the halves from different apples, and then put them together to make one apple; do you know what you have? Fruit rotting at the core. It doesn't work! But if you take 2 apples, distinct individuals, created by God the way they are, put them together, you can begin to do something.

Authenticity and individuality and the expression of self are essential in healthy conflict. They are, if I have no sense of worth, if I have no individuality, I have no boundaries and somebody can treat me poorly. You've all seen that woman. You've seen her, she's been married 35, 45, 50 years, and the guy is an upstanding person in church, and maybe an elder or a deacon, and very straight laced and so on so forth, and you look into her face and you see the hauntingness of those shallow eyes. She stopped thinking in order to get along with the guy because he is a hammer. "You do it my way," in order to get along, she just has checked out, she has kind of surrendered her individuality. And it's true, there may not be any adultery, but those marriage vows aren't being kept. Do you understand what I am saying? Individuality and expression of self are essential in a healthy marriage.

Now I am going to read to you from a book called, "Adventist Home." One of the reasons I am going to read to you from this book is because the vary type of person who would get in my face, against this individuality, is somebody who would think they are ordering their life by what this person has to say. So, read everything, all right! And ladies, hold on. "Woman should fill the position which God originally designed for her."

Ah, we ought to do 20 questions now. What was that position? Are any of you interested? All I am going to say is, remember, this is written in the 1800's before women were even allowed to vote. "Woman should fill the position which God originally designed for her, as her husband's equal." Go Ellen! "The world needs mothers who are mothers not entirely in name, but in every sense of the word, we may safely say that the distinctive duties of woman are more sacred, more holy than those of man. Let woman realize the sacredness of her work, and in the strength and fear of God take up her life's mission. Let her educate her children for usefulness in this world, and for a home in a better world." Now here is where it gets good. "The wife and mother should not sacrifice her strength and allow her powers to lay dormant leaning wholly upon her husband. Her individuality can not be merged in his. She should feel that she is her husband's equal, to stand by his side; she, faithful at her post of duty and he at his. Her work in education of her children is in every respect as elevating and ennobling as any post of duty he may be called to fulfill, even if it is to be chief magistrate of the nation."

Yes! 1800's! Her individuality can not be merged into his. Why? That's an unhealthy person who does that. And unhealthy people will deal with conflict in an unhealthy way. Healthy people will deal with conflict, in a healthy way. So we are going to back up and see how we can become healthy, then we are going to learn the skills of conflict. Because if you are married, you've got conflict; and if you don't have conflict, one of you has caved in.

Here is another quote, same book, page 103: "In your life union your affections are to be tributary to each others happiness. Each is to minister to the happiness of the other. This is the will of God concerning you. But, while you are to blend as one, neither of you is to loose his or her individuality in the other. God is the owner of your individuality. Of Him you are to ask what is right what is wrong, how may I best fulfill the purpose of my creation? God has blessed us with individuality. And that individuality is never ever to be surrendered to another individual. It is ours and ours alone."

Strange words! We as Christians must learn our self worth. It's funny because we preach all the time how we all are so self loving, and selfish. It's true, but yet, there is a worth that God has given us that gives us dignity that allows us to say to somebody else, "That is enough, you will not talk to me that way." I learned this as a young pastor. By nature, I don't like conflict, I just don't. I grew up in a home; I was 19 yrs. old before I ever heard that my mom and dad had an argument. They did all that privately, never argued in front of us children. You may say, "What a healthy environment." I am telling you, my brother and I. Well, I'll tell you first, my 3 sisters have all been married and divorced. They didn't know at that time how to deal with a conflict. They've never seen it and dealt with.

My brother and I, we haven't been divorced that's because we married well. We married good women. And they have taught us how to have conflict.

But as a young Pastor, you know, I was born with enough self esteem for 20 people. If you liked me, good for you! If you didn't like me, I didn't need you. And so conflict to me was, I never embroiled in it, I didn't need anybody. I was okay by my self. It's your problem, dude, you know. And so as a young pastor, you bring all that, it's your life, it's who you are, and as a young pastor I met this church and they are treating me in an unholy, unkind way, and my initial reaction was: "I don't need you people. I'll get a paycheck, and some day I'll be getting it from another conference and another church." I just got to hang in here long enough until they recognize my skills and then I'll be gone. "I don't need you, it's your problem."

But then God began to work on me, and He said: "Jerry, it's not just you, it's the position you hold. You are a minister; you represent God in body to a congregation. And if you sit in a board meeting and allow people to treat you unkindly, it's a direct reflection on you concept of the holiness of your calling and on God." Wow, it went against my nature, but I've learned to like it. And that is this, and I'll say it. You will not speak to me that way. I am a minister of this church called by God. You see, if you are healthy in your sense of self worth, you are able to draw boundaries.

I had a phone call and the person was asking me, "What should I do? My boyfriend is an alcoholic, and he is still drinking, and across the room from him, in the building where he lives, there is a woman and she keeps inviting him over to drink with him, and she keeps assuring me that there is nothing that she has in mind, but he sure is cute. You know, what should I do?" "Dump the creep! Hello! Why are you allowing yourself to be treated that way?" Unhealthy people have conflict, but they don't deal with it in a healthy way, are you with me? So we can find out how we can become healthy? Look at Matthew chapter 22. Matthew chapter 22 Jesus was asked a question, and we'll read verse 36, it says: "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor more than yourself?'" You recognize I made a mistake, don't you? "You shall love your neighbor **as** yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Now this just seems so strange to us because we are all filled with self love and we are trying to fight against and all this, but Jesus said, "You can not love your neighbor until you love yourself, then you love them as you love yourself." How do you get that type of love, you get it from God. John says in First John 4 verse 19, "We love Him because He first loved us." When God loves us, we have a sense of our worth. And in the context of the sense of worth that God has placed upon us, we are then able to say, hey, I might be this way, I might be that way, I might have this fault, I might have this problem, and so on, but God loves me and considers me a person of worth, and I don't have to be treated like dirt. Now, from that vantage point I can begin to love other people. And I can begin

to deal with conflict in my home. Because if you are married, the only way there won't be conflict, is if one of you has checked out emotionally.

Look at John chapter 3 for just a moment. John chapter 3 verse 14. Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus, He says: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that who ever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life." In this passage and others, Jesus again is identifying that the single greatest dignity He has given to humanity is the freedom to choose. He allows us to choose Him or to not choose Him. The single greatest dignity we have as a human being is the freedom to choose. If God does that in our relationship with Him, how can that not be a part of a healthy marriage conflict situation?

Individuals, with ability to choose; individuals who realize their worth in God, individuals who understand that self caring is Godly, that we individually take care of our mental state, our physical state, our spiritual state and our emotional state, no human being can do that for me. I do that for my self, and when I take care of my self, I have something to contribute in the marriage. But my happiness is not dependant on my spouse. Never works, it can't work, God didn't design it that way. Always, we are an individual and marriage is two individuals who choose to journey together through life. But they always remain individuals. That individuality belongs to God, do you understand?

Now this concept of a healthy self worth, it's an easy concept. It's hard to remember as adults but it's amazing. Children can pick up on it, they can learn it. Not too long ago, Haley, your daughter, invited me to her class, 4th grade class at Spaulding to be in Miss Young's classroom, she is sitting right over there, to tell a story. How exciting, I love telling stories to children. And so I talked with Miss Young, and she said that their theme this year is "Special Treasures of God." And all the children are special treasures of God. You walk in that 4th grade classroom, is decorated like Egypt, and there are God's special treasure taking them to the Promise Land, it's just wonderful.

So I went and told the story to the children that they are special. And I want to read a couple of the cards that Miss Young had them write thank you cards to me, and here are a couple of them. Children get this concept. "Dear Pastor Arnold. Thank you for coming, I had a great time. I liked your story; my favorite part was when the girl scouts came. And I learned that God is always there for you, and that everyone is special, including you." This young guy, he was really confident. "Open first," it says. "Dear Pastor Arnold, Thank you for coming to our class. My favorite part was when the girl scouts saw you when you were on the river trip. I learned that I am special no matter what other people say or do." 4th graders! To Pastor Arnold! "Dear Pastor Arnold, Thank you for coming to our class and speaking to us. I loved the story, my favorite part was when the girl scouts came but I did learn that no matter what, everyone is special, thanks and come again."

Now this one I particularly like. "Thank you Pastor Arnold." It says, "You are cool!" You know, the kids these days are so insightful. ☺ Now this one, I think is misspelled, it says, "You are a some," I am assuming it's awesome. And this one was one vowel off, it says:

“You are a sweat, great story.” And of course they nailed it with this, “You rock!” “Dear Pastor Arnold, Thank you for coming to our classroom. I really liked your story. My favorite part of the story was when the girl’s scouts saw you in your underwear. I learned that you are special no matter what. I hope that you come back some time.” Thanks!

This is 4th grader: “Dear Pastor Arnold, Thanks for the intriguing story.” It’s spelled right too. “My favorite part was when the girl’s scouts came, that was funny. I learned that we are priceless no matter what anyone says. And that we all feel insecure sometimes even adults.” Children get it. You see, self caring, personal choice, individuality, dignity, authenticity, self worth and value, are essentials to us being healthy. And from that vantage point we are able to deal with a conflict in a healthy way.

It’s fascinating going on the airplane. And they are standing there telling you where the exits are, and how to hold this seat cushion if you crash in the ocean and all that stuff. And then they say if the oxygen falls down, you put the mask on, and they tell you how to do that. It’s interesting to me that they tell parents, if there are any of you that are parents here, put the mask on yourself first, then on your children. Because if you are not breathing, there is nothing you can do to help. That’s my message today brothers and sisters. Get connected today to God, and learn your value and worth. And from that vantage point you’ll be able to begin the process of learning how to deal with conflict in a healthy way.

And if today you would like to say to the Lord, “Lord, I want Jesus as my Savior, and I want to begin to understand my worth in Him, I am going to ask you to stand right where you are at.