

# A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN

**Genesis 2:18-24; Mark 10:2-9**

*Preached by the Rev. Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
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Sunday, February 24<sup>th</sup>, was an exciting day in the history of this church, the day when you called a new pastor. That day was, in effect, the day when you entered into a marriage contract with Bill Hennessy. You see, calling a pastor is very much like getting married. You begin by searching for the right mate. You meet someone who seems like a good prospect for your church, you go through a courtship period, and finally you take the plunge---you ask him to marry you, to become your pastor.

And it's the same process for the pastor. Bill was looking for a soulmate in a church, he found you and liked what he saw, and finally, after a brief courtship, he answered yes to your marriage proposal. When he begins work here on June 8<sup>th</sup>, you will begin your married life together. The wedding service that officially pronounces you congregation and pastor will be when he is installed by the Presbytery on June 22<sup>nd</sup>. And everyone will wish you a long and happy marriage.

But long and happy marriages between congregations and pastors don't just happen by accident. This marriage was made in heaven. God brought the two of you together and led you through the courtship period. God guided you and Bill, so that you would choose each other. And God will continue to guide you throughout your marriage as congregation and pastor.

Both of our Scripture readings today focus on marriage. I invite you to explore with me what those passages say to all of us regarding the marriage between congregation and pastor. In the passage from Genesis, three things are noteworthy.

First, God told the man that it was not good for him to be alone, that he needed a helper. So God created the woman as the man's helper. Now the Hebrew word that is translated "helper" does not in any way imply that the woman was inferior or subordinate to the man. In fact, the very opposite is true. Of the 21 times that that Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament, 16 of those times refer to God as the helper; and the other 5 times, the helper is an equal partner, as in this case.

In the marriage relationship between a congregation and pastor, the pastor is to be the congregation's helper. It is not good for a congregation to be alone, so a pastor is called to come and help. Now in no way is the helper either superior or inferior to the congregation. The helper and those he comes to help are considered equals.

Notice also that the helper is not brought in to do all the work himself. Rather, the helper is there to assist the congregation to do its work. The helper enables the congregation to do the work of ministry.

In 1954 Roger Bannister became the first person to run the 4-minute mile. Now that doesn't seem so fast anymore---the record now is about 3 minutes 44 seconds---but in those days a 4-minute mile seemed almost impossible. But Roger Bannister couldn't have done it without the help of his pacer, Chris Chattaway, who was supposed to run ahead of him, but for only three-quarters of a mile.

In the race Roger Bannister got so tired that he wanted to quit, but felt that he couldn't because his friend Chris Chattaway was running ahead of him. When Chattaway had run three-quarters of a mile, instead of stopping, he kept on running and shouting encouragement to Bannister. Chattaway ran the mile in 4 minutes, 2 seconds, just 2 seconds short of Bannister's record-shattering run. Bannister later gave the credit to Chattaway for enabling him to break the record.

In churches, it is generally the pastor who is the Chattaway, running slightly ahead of the congregation, setting the pace, giving encouragement, and enabling the congregation to do its best. Thus, the pastor's role is to be an enabler, in the good sense of that word; and your role as the congregation is to work hard to do the best job you can in ministry and mission.

The second noteworthy thing in this passage from Genesis is that God told the man that he needed a helper as his partner. The emphasis here is on partnership. The Hebrew word that is translated "partner" literally means "corresponding to" or "equal to." This passage from Genesis clearly indicates that God intends the marriage relationship between spouses to be an equal partnership.

Similarly, the marriage between a congregation and a pastor is intended to be an equal partnership. The Presbyterian form of government rightly emphasizes shared leadership and collegiality between lay and clergy. There is no place in the Presbyterian system for an authoritarian pastor who seeks to dictate policy to the congregation; nor is it appropriate for a congregation to try to dictate to the pastor what to preach about. Ideally, the congregation and the pastor work together as a team, as partners. The marriage relationship between the people and the pastor is a partnership.

This idea of equality and partnership in marriage is reinforced by the way the writer of Genesis 2 describes the creation of the woman. The writer says that God took one of the man's ribs and made it into a woman. Now the important things about this story are who created the woman and what this story is intended to convey.

The writer wants us to know that God created both the man and the woman, and that originally the man and the woman were one flesh---they were one and the same substance. God created the woman from the very body of the man, so in the most fundamental sense---as fellow human beings---men and women are the same, equals. When the man saw the woman, he said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." In other words, "This one is part of me; she is equal to me." Biologically, of course, and psychologically as well, there are gender differences---women are from Venus, men are from Mars, so the book says---but those differences are not as important as the similarities.

This same thing is true with regard to pastors and congregations. There are certainly differences between clergy and laypersons regarding their training, job descriptions, and particular call to ministry, but the similarities are more important than the differences. Pastors originally have come out of some congregation and so have been laypersons just like you. They are bone of your bones and flesh of your flesh.

And, of course, pastors are human beings just like you. Bill Hennessy, for example, experiences joys and sorrows, just like you do. He gets angry, and frustrated, and tired, and discouraged. He will sometimes be stressed out, and he needs to take time off regularly, just like you do, in order to avoid burnout.

Bill will also need to have ample time for his family, just like you do. That's going to be a little different for you as a congregation. For the last two and two-thirds years you have had a pastor who has lived alone and so has not had day-to-day family responsibilities. But Bill will need to have time to spend with his wife and time to be with his two children. His family will have to come first on many occasions, and you will need to allow him the time and the flexibility he needs so that he can minister to his family as well as to his congregation.

Bill will also occasionally need to be ministered to, just like each of you needs to be ministered to on occasion. In other words, he is neither a super-human person to be put up on a pedestal, nor an extra-terrestrial stranger in your midst to be viewed with suspicion. He is a human being just like you are, and because of that, you and he are called to work together as partners. Bill is coming first as your helper and second as your partner.

The third noteworthy thing in this passage from Genesis is that "a man is to leave his father and mother and cling to his wife, and they become one flesh." In our reading from Mark, Jesus quotes this verse from Genesis: "From the beginning of creation," Jesus says, "God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh."

In order for a husband and wife to become one flesh, the man must leave his parents and cling to his wife. In order for a congregation to bond with their new pastor, they must leave behind their attachment to their former, long-term pastor and their attachment to their interim pastor. Becoming one with the new means severing ties with the old. I will say more about that in my last sermon to you.

Now of course there is some sadness in leaving the past, but there is also the sweet anticipation of great joy in the future. The melding of two separate entities---pastor and congregation---into one can bring great joy to both. Becoming one community of pastor and people is exciting to look forward to.

God created us for community with each other. No person is an island to herself or himself; rather, we need community between one person and another, and between congregation and pastor. Bill will surely want to be included as part of your church family--

to be one with you. Most pastors have a need to belong, and a need to be accepted, and I know that you will extend a warm welcome to Bill and accept him as part of your family, as you have accepted me.

God also created us for community with God. God brought this marriage into being between you and Bill Hennessy---this is indeed a marriage made in heaven. God expects you and Bill to enter into this marriage with joy and thanksgiving, remembering that it was God who brought you together.

A little boy learned in Sunday School one morning about the time Jesus went to a wedding and changed the water into wine. "What did you learn from that story?" his mother asked later. The boy thought for a moment and answered, "If you're having a wedding, make sure Jesus is there!" That's good advice.

May Jesus be present at your wedding to Bill Hennessy, and at all your wedding feasts, and throughout your married life. Amen.