

I

When I was in high school and for a few summers during college, I worked as a banquet server in a country club, where, on busy summer weekends, it was not uncommon to work two or three wedding banquets in a row. As an adult, I've had the honor and privilege of being a best man in a wedding twice, and I've been a groomsman and an usher a number of times.

As a Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, I've officiated all kinds of weddings – weddings in historic churches, weddings in grand hotels, weddings in barns, weddings in backyards, weddings on beaches, and weddings on mountainsides. I'd be willing to wager that I've personally witnessed more weddings than anyone in this room.

In all the weddings that I have personally witnessed, not once have I questioned the couple's commitment to the idea of a lifelong covenant with God and one other, forsaking all others. Not once have I had the thought in the back of my mind that this marriage might fail. If I did have that thought, then it would be a violation of my own ordination vows as a Minister of Word and Sacrament to proceed.

And yet, despite all of the preparation work, despite all of our very best intentions, despite the seriousness with which couples engage in these conversations, promises and hearts get

broken. Just this week, I learned that a couple whose wedding service I led many years ago, a couple that I know personally and love dearly, has separated.

II

Everyone in this room either has had personal experience with the pain and disappointment of a broken marriage, or you know someone who does. No one goes into the covenant of marriage anticipating anything other than a lifelong commitment, but we know all too well that it doesn't always end up that way. Despite our best intentions, despite our best efforts, sometimes promises and hearts get broken.

Now, let me pause here and note that the church has been guilty of some toxic teaching around these topics. A clergy colleague of mine once had a woman show up in her office who reported that her husband was abusing her and had threatened to kill her and her young daughter.

Though this woman was a stranger to her, my colleague sensed that this woman was a person of faith, and through the conversation gleaned that she belonged to another church in town. My colleague asked the woman if she had confided in the pastor of her church, and she said yes. My colleague asked what her pastor had said or done about it, and the woman answered, "He said that the bible says that wives should submit to their husbands and that

divorce is an abomination unto the Lord.”

That pastor who used Scripture to counsel an abused woman had apparently not continued reading the passage from Ephesians that he quoted to her, which, in the very next line, admonishes husbands to love their wives as Christ loves the church. To say nothing of the fact that all of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation and back again, paints a picture of a God who is deeply concerned about how power is exercised in human relationships, a picture of a God who is always on the side of the ones who are vulnerable and at risk.

So if you or someone you know and love has ever been told that you’re going to hell because of a divorce, if you or someone you know has ever been counseled to stay in a toxic, abusive relationship because it’s “God’s will,” I am so profoundly sorry that the church has inflicted such pain. We can and must do better.

III

This summer, we’ve been making our way through a series of sermons called, “Words to Live By” as we study the Ten Commandments. And each week, we’ve been learning a memory device using our ten fingers.

So let’s review what we’ve covered so far, shall we?

Put an index finger in the air, and notice that it looks like both the number one and the letter I. The Ten Commandments do not begin with “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not.” The Ten Commandments are about relationship, and so the first commandment begins with the word “I.” I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

Now put up your pinky finger and notice that your hands look like bull horns. We read in Exodus that before Moses was even down from the mountain, the Israelites were already worshiping a golden calf. So the two horns remind us of the second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself any idols.”

Now take three fingers and notice that your hand also looks like the letter w, which is the first letter in wrongful. Now touch that w to your lips, and that reminds us that the third commandment is “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.”

Take the five fingers on your hand, and give your thumb a rest on your palm, and then tap your four fingers to your temple like you’re trying to remember something. And then you close your eyes and rest. The fourth commandment is, “Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy.”

Now imagine that you're a small child, and you're trying to reach way up to give a high five to your parents. The fifth commandment is, "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."

Last week, we studied the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder." This one is easy. Put up six fingers, and then take your index finger across your neck.

And that brings us to today. The seventh commandment is, "You shall not commit adultery." Adultery involves the breaking of a promise. So take seven fingers. And then cross your two fingers and put them behind your back, as if you were promising something but had your fingers crossed.

As we've been saying all summer, the Ten Commandments are not a set of rules to be followed or else. They didn't just fall out of the sky one day. They form the framework around which God is transforming God's people from slaves and refugees into God's a holy nation, God's royal priesthood, God's covenant people. They are the blueprint for building a just and moral society.

One of the truths that Scripture teaches us is that you and I are social creatures. We were created by God to be in community, to engage in relationships of trust and intimacy.

In biblical story of Adam and Eve, for the very first time, God describes a part of God's creation as "not good." God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone." And so then God creates Eve, the first woman, and places them in relationship with one another.

This is not to say that it is God's will that every person be married or partnered. Scriptures speaks of many of our ancestors in faith who, to the best of our knowledge, never entered the covenant of marriage, most notably Jesus of Nazareth.

But it is to say that we were created to be in community with one another. We were created to be in close, intimate relationships of trust and mutual accountability.

And so in the seventh commandment, God prohibits adultery, because at its core, committing adultery is a breach of trust. At its core, adultery is the breaking of a promise. Adultery erodes the foundations of intimacy and accountability and mutuality upon which all human relationships are built.

We human beings are not the fastest or the biggest or the strongest animals on this planet. The reason that we have been able to rise to the top compared to other creatures is not because of our physical prowess, but because of our remarkable ability to form social bonds and work together as a team. Neal Armstrong did not become the first human to walk on the moon by himself. He was the beneficiary of

hundreds of thousands of human beings joined into social groups, working and learning together.

As social creatures, we have a basic, fundamental need to feel safe within the groups to which we belong. Not just physically safe, which of course is first and paramount priority. But also emotionally safe.

When we feel safe, when we feel like we can trust and depend upon the people within our tribe, whether that tribe is a family, or a team, or a community, or even a nation, we collaborate to accomplish truly miraculous things.

But when we do not feel safe, when we do not have relationships of healthy trust and intimacy and mutuality and accountability, the tribes to which we belong, whether that tribe is a marriage or a family or a church or a school or a nation, - those tribes begin to break apart and cease to function as God intended. The prohibition against adultery isn't just about sex. It's about creating safety in human relationships.

IV

But my brother, you and I both know that we live and move and have our being in a culture where sex is used to sell everything from trucks to toothpaste. My sister, you and I live in this culture that has a toxic view of our God-given sexuality. But here's what I want you to hear and remember. Your sexuality is a part of how God made you,

and you were fearfully and wonderfully made. Your sexuality is a gift from a God who loves you so much that God would rather go to the cross than live without you.

And like all gifts from God, God requires you to be a faithful steward of the things of God. Despite what our culture says, your sexuality is not something to be treated cheaply, or to be abused, or to be made into a commodity.

A wise elder in a church once told me that our sexuality is like a fire in a fireplace. A nice, cozy fire can be a gift. In the fireplace, it gives light and warmth to the entire home, and it's a blessing to all who enter there.

But there's a reason that we have a particular place for the fire. Because if we're not careful with it, we know that fire has the power to destroy. So we don't allow children to play with fire, and as they get older, we teach them how to respect its power. We don't take the fire out of the fireplace and set it next to the drapes. In its proper place, the fire gives light and warmth to the whole household, but when its misused, it has the power to burn down the house, cause injuries or even death, and even the power to burn down our neighbor's house, too.

My brother, your sexuality is a precious gift from God. My sister, it was given to you by a God who loves you and wants good things for you, so steward it faithfully and handle with care.

V

These have been difficult days in our nation. We are feeling raw and vulnerable as a people.

It strikes me that if we want to build a better, safer nation, if we want to build a better, safer community, if we want to build better, safer businesses and schools and churches, the place to begin that work is not in Congress, or in Atlanta, or even across the street at City Hall. The place to begin building a better, safer, more just and moral nation is in the smallest of the tribes to which we belong – in our marriages, in our families, in our households, with the people to whom we are most intimate and close and accountable.

We may not have much say over what happens in the White House or under the Golden Dome or across the street at City Hall, but we have lots of say over what happens in this house. We have lots of say over what happens in the tribes to which we belong.

So let us recommit ourselves to being trustworthy stewards of the powerful and precious gifts that God has bestowed upon us. Let us remember that despite all the noise in our culture, God has shown us what is good. Let us remember what God requires of us – that we deal justly with one another – that we practice kindness – and that we walk humbly with God.

Amen.