



Resources

ST. LUKE'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

RESOURCES

The following pages discuss very briefly some of the key components of the Sacramental Rite of Marriage as it is understood in the Episcopal Church. By asking to celebrate your wedding in The Episcopal Church, you are telling other members of the faith community that you ascribe to the basic and fundamental elements of what we hold in common about this important institution.

Our hope is that once you reflect on these pages, you will be even more deeply convinced that Christian marriage is more than what the larger culture often understands marriage to be. In short, it is an opportunity to participate with God in bringing about the kingdom of God proclaimed by Christ – the work of God in the world to reconcile all things in him.

If any part of what follows is puzzling or troubles you in any way, be sure to bring it to the attention of the parish leadership, especially a member of the clergy. In that way, we can all be sure to have a mature and deep understanding of the great work you are undertaking.

RESOURCE: Biblical Considerations

A Traditional Understanding

Old Testament

According to Sacred Scripture, God instituted marriage as the pinnacle of creation. On the sixth day, in the first creation story, the Book of Genesis tells us: “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them, saying: ‘Be fertile and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it’” (Genesis 1: 27-28).

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In the second creation story, God says that “it is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him.” (Genesis 2:18). This suitable helpmate was formed from the very rib of man and thus woman was “flesh of his flesh” (Genesis 2:22-23).

Woman, then, is man’s equal in dignity and the one closest to his heart. Because man and woman were created for one another, “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh” (Genesis 2: 24). Scripture teaches that marriage is not a mere human institution, but something God established from the foundation of world.

Sin not only brought about a break with God, but it also ruptured the original communion between man and woman. Adam and Eve blamed each another for what had happened and were now embarrassed by their nakedness (Genesis 3:7-13). The Old Testament shows how sin affected the goodness of marriage. There is the polygamy of the patriarchs and kings. Moses allowed divorce because of the people’s “hardness of heart” (see Deuteronomy 24:1 and Matthew 19:8). Men and women did not treat one another with integrity, honor and love as God had intended. Nonetheless, while sin marred the goodness of marriage, it did not destroy it.

New Testament

Christians are new creations in Christ, healed of sin and its effects. Marriage is also recreated and made new in Christ. Jesus tells us that in the Kingdom of God the permanent union of husband and wife that God originally intended can once more be realized (see Matthew 19:6-11). By the grace of the Holy Spirit, husbands and wives can now truly love and honor one another. St. Paul tells us that marriage bears witness to the indissoluble love of Christ for his Church. Thus, husbands should love their wives, “even as Christ loved the church and handed himself over for her to sanctify her” (Ephesians 5:25-26). Wives, too, are called to love their husbands as the Church loves Christ (see Ephesians 5:22-23). The Old Testament also shows how God taught his people to revere once more the institution of marriage. God’s covenant with his people was an image of the exclusive and faithful love of husband and wife. The prophets helped the people see that God had not intended husband and wife to be separated (See Hosea 1-3; Isaiah 54 and 62;

Jeremiah 2-3 and 31; Ezekiel 16 and 23; Malachi 2:13-17). The books of Ruth and Tobit bear witness to fidelity and tenderness within marriage. The Song of Solomon shows how the love of a man and a woman mirrors God's love for his people.

Because marriage is placed within the saving mystery of Jesus Christ, Episcopalians recognize it as a Christian sacramental rite. It is a means through which spouses grow in love for one another, grow in holiness, and obtain eternal life.

Deepening Understanding and Discerning God's Will

In addition to these considerations, the Episcopal Church has reflected deeply on the nature of the human person and the relationships that enhance the lives of individuals as followers of Christ. Among these reflections has been a deep study of the Holy Scriptures relative to same sex relationships and the possibility of recognizing these relationships as sacred and blessed by God.

Throughout the Church's history, Christians have endeavored to follow the apostolic practice of prayerful deliberation in the light of Scripture in discerning the will of God—"what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Romans 12:2) in each new time and place. As the Body of Christ, our fundamental call is to live together not only when we agree in our discernment but also when the Spirit leads faithful Christians to hold more than one view. Different interpretations of Scripture are possible, provided they lead us to love God and one another.

Scripture offers little material that would address modern notions of sexual orientation, and biblical writers devoted relatively little attention to questions of same-sex relations. Biblical scholars are divided regarding the translation and interpretation of the texts most often cited on this question. Some maintain that these texts unequivocally forbid same-sex relationships; others argue that these texts do not refer to same-sex relationships *as we understand them today* and that each text must be interpreted within its own historical and literary contexts.

Similar disagreements over biblical interpretation have marked the Church's life throughout its history. For example, the Church has struggled with how to interpret Scripture amid cultural change, whether concerning economic reform, divorce and remarriage, or contraception. The practice of slavery and the role of women are two areas in which major departures from the biblical text have been especially controversial. The Episcopal Church eventually changed its positions regarding slavery and the ordination of women. The diversity of approaches to Scripture in both cases made these decisions contentious. Serious questions continue to be posed about how we understand the authority of Scripture, not only concerning slavery and the status of women but also, now, same-sex relationships.

At a pivotal moment among early believers, recorded in Acts 15, the possibility of including Gentiles in the Christian family sparked considerable controversy. The importance of this historical moment today lies not in the first-century differences between Jews and Gentiles but in the process of prayerful deliberation those early believers adopted. Facing the real possibility of irreparable division, the apostles sought a way to honor the centrality of Scripture while also attending carefully to the ongoing movement of the Spirit in their midst. The Acts of the Apostles recounts that certain believers from the sect of the Pharisees were insisting that men

could not be saved unless they were circumcised and kept the law of Moses (Acts 15:5). As the apostles and elders in Jerusalem considered this question, Peter (who had been persuaded by Paul's point of view) confirmed the work of the Holy Spirit among the Gentiles: "God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us" (Acts 15:8-9).

Acts 15 stands among other key biblical moments in which God's people have found their vision broadened to see a new thing God is bringing about (Isaiah 43:18-21), their assumptions challenged by the outpouring of God's Spirit where they had not expected it (Numbers 11:26-29; Joel 2:28), and the startling first fruits of God's new creation in raising Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:20-25). These biblical turning points, in themselves, will not settle today's disagreements, yet they urge the same apostolic process of prayerful deliberation: reliance on the centrality of Scripture while attending carefully to the Spirit's work in our midst. The Episcopal Church listened closely to the Spirit concerning slavery and the ordination of women. We are summoned similarly to listen to the narratives of sanctification and holiness within the relationships of same-sex couples and to discern and testify to the work of God in their lives. As we listen, we trust in that Spirit who, as Jesus promised, will lead us further into truth (John 16:13), praying as Christ himself did for our unity with each other in God (John 17:11) and blessing God for God's abundant goodness in Christ so that, with Paul, we may share more fully in the blessings of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:23).

With all this in mind, we can look at some fundamental realities of marriage considering Holy Scripture and apply them to our growing understanding of the sacredness of covenantal love as expressed between two persons of the same sex.

RESOURCE: Marriage as Covenant

When the Episcopal Church teaches that marriage is a covenant, it is using an ancient and rich biblical concept to describe how God's steadfast and exclusive love for his people is a model for the loving union of a married couple.

A covenant is a commitment which God initiates.

The Old Testament writers trace the relationship between God and the chosen people of Israel by speaking of the covenant he offers to them through Abraham, Moses. This covenant is an invitation to enter into a relationship in which "I will be your God and you will be my people" (see Exodus 19:5ff).

A covenant is a commitment which God initiates. The Bible tells a story of Israel repeatedly straying from the demands of this covenantal relationship and God always trying to call the people back to their original commitment (see Jeremiah 22:9 and Hosea 2:4). Even though the people continually break the covenant, God still promises them a new and everlasting covenant (see Jeremiah 31).

These prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In his life, death and resurrection, God manifests in a definitive way his desire to draw us into a loving relationship with him and with one another. St. Paul teaches that marriage is a pre-eminent symbol (or sacrament) of the covenant which Christ has with his people. This is because marriage is a commitment by which spouses pledge to each other all aspects of their lives "until death do us part."

But also, in daily acts of kindness, service, mutual love and forgiveness couples are called to imitate, however imperfectly, the unconditional love which Christ offers to us. Seeing marriage as rooted in the broader covenant of love between God and humanity has led others to say that marriage is a sacrament "from the beginning" and not merely after the coming of Christ.

The teaching of the Episcopal Church places special emphasis on understanding marriage as a covenant, while not ignoring that every marriage also involves contractual obligations between spouses. Placing covenant at the heart of a marriage shows that the interpersonal relationship of the couple, their unitive love, is what makes all other dimensions of a marriage possible.

Understanding marriage as a covenant which establishes between individuals a partnership of the whole life in which they mutually hand over and accept each other can greatly enrich our appreciation of this special union that is: (a) sacred in the plan of God; (b) permanent, faithful, and fruitful; and (c) a living symbol of God's love for his people.

RESOURCE: Marriage as Sacramental

When the Episcopal Church teaches that marriage between two baptized persons is sacramental, it is saying that the couple's relationship expresses in a unique way the unbreakable bond of love between Christ and his people. Like the other sacramental rites of the Church, marriage is a sign or symbol which reveals the Lord Jesus and through which his divine life and love are

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communicated. Sacraments have been entrusted to the Church to be celebrated in faith within and for the community of believers. The rituals and prayers by which a sacramental rite is celebrated serve to express visibly what God is doing invisibly.

In a sacramental marriage, God's love becomes present to the spouses in their total union and flows through them to their family and community. By their permanent, faithful, and exclusive giving to each other, symbolized in sexual intimacy, the couple reveals something of God's unconditional love. The sacramentality of Christian marriage involves their entire life as they journey together through the ups and downs of marriage and become more able to give to and receive from each other. Their life becomes sacramental to the extent that the

couple cooperates with God's action in their life and sees themselves as living "in Christ" and Christ living and acting in their relationship, attitudes, and actions.

The Episcopal Church holds that sacraments bring grace to those who receive them with the proper disposition. Grace is a way of describing how God shares the divine life with us and gives us the help we need to live as followers of Christ. In marriage, the grace of this sacrament brings to the spouses the particular help they need to be faithful and to be good parents. It also helps a couple to serve others beyond their immediate family and to show the community that a loving and lasting marriage is both desirable and possible.

RESOURCE: Marriage as Vocation

The Episcopal Church holds that marriage is a Christian vocation. This means that the couple's relationship is more than simply their choice to enter a union which is a social and legal institution. In addition to these things, marriage involves a call from God and a response from two people who promise to build, with the help of divine grace, a lifelong, intimate, and sacramental partnership of love and life.

The concept of "vocation" in the Church means that all Christians in whatever state or walk of life are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity. The call to marriage is a particular way of living the universal call to holiness given to every Christian in the Sacrament of Baptism. The calls to priesthood, or to the vowed religious life, or to the single life are other Christian vocations. Along with marriage, all of them equally though in different ways, are a response to the Lord who says, "Follow me."

The call to love is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. In the vocation of marriage – something which is written in the very nature of the human person, we see that the love of partners becomes an image of the absolute and unfailing love with which God loves.

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A vocation is a personal call. It is offered freely and must be accepted freely. Attraction to a certain way of life or to a specific person can be a good sign of being called. Most often a person comes to recognize and accept a vocation gradually. This process, sometimes called discernment, is an opportunity for growth. It can be helped by prayer and guidance from trusted mentors, friends and family.

However, what begins as attraction must deepen into conviction and commitment. Those who are called to the married life should be ready to learn what their vocation means and to acquire the virtues and skills needed for a happy and holy marriage.

The vocation to marriage is a call to a life of holiness and service within the couple's own relationship and in their family. As a particular way of following the Lord, this vocation also challenges a couple to live their marriage in a way that expresses God's truth and love in the world.

RESOURCE: A Spirituality of Marriage

“Spirituality” is a way to live out one’s religious beliefs. A spirituality of marriage, therefore, is a way to help husbands and wives live out the vocation of marriage in light of faith. Christian marriage has a distinctive spirituality that is sacramental, communitarian, and missionary.

Marriage is sacramental because it is a sign of Christ’s unbreakable love for his people. It is communitarian because it creates and deepens a permanent partnership of life and love. It is missionary because in Christian marriage couples are called to share with others the good news of their relationship in Christ. A spirituality of marriage helps couples shape their attitude toward life and provides a framework for living one’s marriage in the light of faith.

In the tradition of those Church’s that consider marriage “sacramental,” marriage is a concrete expression of Christ in the world. The Eucharist, for example, is a sacrament. Within the Eucharistic liturgy, the physical signs of bread and wine become Christ really present. Likewise, the Episcopal Church believes that marriage is sacramental. In marriage, the couple’s life, love, and witness can make Christ visible to others. All sacramentally married couples are invited to reveal Christ’s loving presence and generous action in the world.

Marriage is a sign of Christ's unbreakable love for his people.

Just as God is a Trinity of persons – a community – marriage also is communitarian. In marriage, couples form a permanent, life-giving community. We’ve already described this relationship as sacramental, a sign of Christ’s love in the world. Sacramental couples live as communities that reveal God’s blessings, reach out to heal the brokenness of the family and the world, and share their gifts with those around them.

Couples live as communities when they experience the blessings that come from making a total commitment to another person. Making permanent commitments is becoming rare; sacramental couples demonstrate that it is possible. Another blessing of marriage can be children. A couple’s willingness to be open to the gift of children, and to demonstrate the generosity and sacrifice necessary to raise them according to Gospel values is a real blessing.

Couples also live as communities when they recognize and heal the brokenness in their individual lives and in their life together. Brokenness is a part of everyone’s life; a spouse is in a unique position to heal the pain that inevitably arises in relationship. Couples create sacramental communities when they build a life of sharing – with each other, with their families, with local communities, with the Church. As couples grow in their love for each other, their communities of life and love enrich the larger communities in their lives.

Finally, sacramental marriages are missionary. Part of the joy of a faith-filled marriage is showing others what it means to be in a loving, Christ-centered relationship, and making known to others the gift of faithful married life and love. Couples have the potential to show others what

it means to embody the life of the Holy Spirit within them. Married couples, while never perfect, are missionary through the witness of their lives and love in the midst of the world. They are characterized by openness to the life of the Spirit within them, by loving service to their neighbors, and by sharing their talents and blessings with and for the local and global communities. As missionaries, married couples can witness Gospel values in their daily lives.

A spirituality of marriage shows how couples reveal Christ, build community, and reach out to others in love. It is a powerful way to describe how couples live out their Christian vocation of married life.