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Don't hang wallpaper or try to paddle a canoe together and your marriage may last, say Disciples professors and couple, Mark and Bonnie Miller-McLemore.

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Two in the canoe: a reflection on marriage

By MARK AND BONNIE
MILLER-MCLEMORE

Here we are, two ordained ministers and teachers: committed to families personally and professionally; committed to our marriage and our three sons; committed to shared child rearing and household work; open to many forms of being family. On the occasion of the marriage of a young couple, so many thoughts come rushing. What should we say?



(Photos © 2000 W. P. Wittman)

Out of the thousands of possibilities that are worthy of mention about a Christian marriage, we want to talk about mutuality, commitment and joy as three essential ingredients in a healthy, good and godly marriage. Christian history and congregations have long upheld all three qualities as exemplary of Christian love within marriage.

Making mutuality work

We've heard that married couples never should hang wallpaper together. We'd add to that: they never should canoe together. Marriage has a great deal in common with canoeing, in which two people have to work together in specific ways to reach a common destination. The person in the front provides power and navigates; the person in back adds power and steers. When it works, you get somewhere. When it doesn't, you bounce from bank to bank and get nowhere fast.

We are committed to equal sharing in our marriage and one way we express that is through

sharing household and child-rearing tasks. And that is mostly good. But on a canoe in the Boundary Waters 14 years ago we tried to trade positions and roles in the canoe. We found we couldn't be all that flexible. When Mark tried to navigate and Bonnie tried to steer, we wobbled all over the lake and couldn't find our portage. We reached our destination when we put anger and frustration aside for the sake of sheer survival and reversed positions.

A commitment to mutuality is critical in marriage because it requires of each partner the utmost respect of the other. It requires us to know each other's gifts and to affirm them—no matter what social roles may be operative. It requires flexibility, when experiments with different roles don't work.

When the care of children or the care of family members in need enters the family picture, the ability to sustain mutuality within the family can become increasingly difficult and often depends

**Marriage ...
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on the support of the wider community, including the church. Throughout its history, the church's understanding of mutual love at its best has challenged and subverted relationships based on domination and hierarchy. At its foundation, mutuality offers an opportunity to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

On commitment

The gift of a pair of wooden geese is an integral part of the traditional Korean wedding. That's because of three characteristics geese have that people should emulate: Geese are faithful, mating for life; they are disciplined, always flying in formation, females on the left, males on the right, oldest spearheading the formation, youngest flying at the tail; finally, geese always leave a mark where they have been! Besides droppings, they make knee-deep depressions in the vegetation to show that they have passed through.

Commitment requires all three of these qualities:

- fierce loyalty in a world that tries to draw our desires in a thousand and one different directions;
- discipline in a society in which the hard work of good long-term relationships often is overlooked and undervalued; and
- contributing to the common good in a context in which many people feel pressure to look out only for themselves.

Commitment flourishes best when partners are clear about the values they share—values such as the love of children or dedication to family. In celebrating a wedding within the walls of the church, the congregation gives public witness to and affirms the importance of a sustained, steadfast relationship. The wedding places the promise of marriage within the longer history of a covenantal religious tradition in which vows of love undergird human and human-divine bonds.

Then comes joy

A third piece of this relational puzzle is joy. Joy is something deeper than happiness or fun, even as it includes these. Happiness and fun often are fleeting; joy endures through pain and trial; thus, "tears of joy." Many people mistake joy for happiness and thereby miss the mark in their marriage.

Joy is a transcendent feeling of contact with the One who is love complete and entire—the source of all human loving. Joy is a way in which divine love becomes human. It is a primary vehicle of the certain knowledge of God's grace in this world, in worship and in a home. Joy is the presence of Christ as the hidden "third partner" in the marriage.

Joy comes even in the pain of childbirth and the bittersweet emotion of a child's marriage. Joy can come in saying good-bye in death to a spouse, after a long and

fulfilling marriage. Joy comes also in the marriage bed where, over the years, sexual loving acts as a deep and enriching way to recognize delight in the giving and receiving of the most intimate physical expressions of love.

Identifying these three qualities is not just a personal gift of those in ministry to those getting married. Those getting married already know much of this. Many of us learn how to love each other from our own parents, our extended families and friends, from the community of the church, and ultimately from each other. May these qualities sustain and bless all who enter into marriage. ■

The Miller-McLemores wrote a homily for last summer's wedding of Melissa Fry and Mark Konty in Oak Park, Illinois, from which this is excerpted. Mark Miller-McLemore is dean of the Disciples Divinity House at Vanderbilt Divinity School. Bonnie Miller-McLemore is a professor of pastoral care at VDS.

June is for weddings...

Preaching the Wedding Sermon

by Susan K. Hedahl

In a book that is as fascinating as it is useful, Hedahl offers pastors a complete resource for preparing meaningful wedding sermons, including how to choose texts and topics, the theology of marriage, a guide to structure and delivery, and five sample wedding sermons from well-known Protestant and Roman Catholic homiletics. 08272-29607-4A, \$14.99

Celebrating Passages in the Church

Reflections and Resources

edited by Hugh Sanborn

Sanborn and contributors from several denominations offer resources to help pastors affirm a wide range of life's passages. The chapter on marriage explores the theology of Christian marriage, then suggests practical steps in preparing for and conducting a wedding service. 08272-04728-4A, \$19.99

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