

LOVE AT SECOND SIGHT

Proverbs 5:15-20

As we continue our family emphasis this month in worship, I invite you to open your Bible this morning to **Proverbs 5:15-20**.

Do you remember your first childhood crush? How about those days in grammar school when you exchanged Valentines with your classmates? You bought a box of Valentines to sign and give away. You took an old shoe box in art class, decorated it with construction paper and crayons, and cut a slit in the top so that the rest of the class could slip a Valentine in your box. I hated that day in art class. Did you know that one of the chief differences between monkeys and humans is that monkeys do not have opposable thumbs? Well, when it comes to art projects, I don't have opposable thumbs either—never did—so my Valentine box looked like a monkey made it.

But hey, we all have our gifts, and I could pop my armpit better than anybody in my class. So what if I stunk at classic art projects; is there not a certain artistry to popping one's pit in ways that could make all the classic sounds? But I digress.

In spite of my pathetic Valentine's box, my fifth-grade Valentine's Day held the potential to be a big day for me. And here's why: Anne Wilcox. I was some kind of sweet on Anne Wilcox—this pretty little blue-eyed, blonde-haired cutie. When I first saw her, Cupid didn't just shoot me with one arrow; he emptied the whole quiver right into my heart. I'd recently moved to Branson from Arkansas; she'd just moved to Branson from Mississippi; we were the only two in class that had yet to learn that the Civil War was over and that the North had won. She was a fifth-grade southern belle. And you know what the Beach Boys were singing in that day about southern girls: "*And the southern girls with the way they kiss, they keep their boyfriends warm at night.*" I was in love, smitten. She was Juliet to my Romeo, Cleopatra to my Antony, Bonnie to my Clyde. There was just one problem. According to fifth-grade etiquette in that day, I dare not tell her. At best I could tell only a couple of *my* people who would talk to a couple of *her* people and see if she liked me back. That process was still in the works. I had yet to receive word back from my people. It was all quiet on the Southern front. So I was banking on Valentine's Day to give me my answer.

It was zero hour. Kids went around the room dropping their Valentine's into the slots on the other kids' boxes. And then it was time to open the Valentines. I tore the lid off my box, shuffling through those Valentine envelopes with the speed and dexterity of a 100-word-a-minute typist, looking for the one that said "Anne." What? Huh? None of them said "Anne." Then it dawned on me: all of them said "John." Duh! What was I thinking? Fifth-graders don't put return addresses on classroom Valentines, you moron. But I shook it off and got my head back in the game. I took the first Valentine from the box, then the next, and the next, picking up speed like a racehorse on the home stretch, searching, searching, searching, for the Valentine from Anne. And then, pay-dirt! I pulled just enough of that Valentine from the envelope to see Anne's name. So I just stopped right there to enjoy the moment. I held it to my nose to see if she had laced the envelope with perfume. She had not. I retrieved the Valentine from the envelope, careful not to tear it. Wow! It was a *great* Valentine, a cut out of some flop-eared dog, as I recall, and a message that was sheer poetry—so simple, yet so profound and so personal I'm a little embarrassed to share it even after all these years. You want to hear what it said? "*Be my Valentine.*" There was only one conclusion to draw: she loves me! She really loves me!

I dared not make eye contact with her in that tender moment, however. But I had to tell someone. So I leaned over to one of my people, "*Look at the Valentine Anne gave me.*" He took it from me, looked at it. I was desperate for a second opinion, to see if he saw in it what I saw in it. "*What do you think?*" I said.

And he said, "*I think she gave me the same one.*" Wah, wah, wah, waaaahhh. That wasn't glass my classmates heard breaking in that moment; it was my heart. There would be no Anne for me.

But a few years later, God brought Dayna into my life. What began as a crush became marriage. And marriage, well, it became marriage—over 36 years now, and we've certainly had our ups and downs. It hasn't been continual bliss—few marriages are and very few ministry marriages are. But we've hung in there, even got some counseling when we needed it. And that's okay. Love is supposed to grow and mature over time in marriage.

One of the things I like most about mission trips is that on every trip I learn something new. You want to know something I learned in India on my trip there? I learned about marriage. Did you know that in India, marriages

are arranged? I thought that was a Hindu thing. I was wrong. It's an India thing. Even the Christians there arrange marriages for their children. And it's not just parents that work this out: pastors are part of the process too. (So if any of you parents want me to help you pick your child's spouse, let's talk.) I've got to tell you that my first response to this arranged marriage thing was not enthusiasm. How could something like that ever work? I remember asking about this to a couple whose marriage had been arranged. And you know what they told me? *"In America you look for someone you can fall in love with and when you think you've found the right person, you decide to marry. Your start in love and often fall out of love. In India, in our arranged marriages, our love starts small and we spend the rest of our lives learning how to love one another."*

That makes sense to me. In America we are so emotion-driven in marriage choices. We're more interested in feelings than in logic. We worry more about *finding* the right person to marry instead of *being* the right person once we're married. We more excited about love at first sight (that often wanes under the scorching light of reality), instead of cultivating love at *second* sight when we know one another so very much better. There's wisdom in this Indian practice.

This idea of growing in love over time is critical to marriage. And it usually takes effort to keep the love fires burning. Being a sinner married to a sinner living in a sinful, broken world makes it tough enough without adding kids and job stress and the daily pressures of life. Many couples grow apart over time. As Ron Lavin put it, *"When love dies, it is not in a moment of angry battle. It lies panting and exhausted, expiring at the bottom of a carefully built wall it could not penetrate."*

And if you've been there or are on your way there, this is what our Proverbs text addresses this morning. Hear the word of the Lord ... (***read the text***).

I

There's a reason that Proverbs is called wisdom literature. The author is no dummy. He's been around the block a time or two. He understands the ways of the heart and the tendency of marriages to lose their fire. And he knows how lonely men and women may stumble their way into an adulterous relationship they never intended to pursue. So in speaking as a

father to a son, the writer encourages the son to steer clear of adultery. It will be a temptation, warns the wise father. And there will be opportunity to sin in such a way. *"But don't do it!"* the wise man warns. *"You're only asking for trouble. Instead, turn your heart to your own home and your own wife. Rekindle the flame of your marriage. That's God's plan. And there is joy and satisfaction to be found there."*

Did you notice the passion and vitality in these verses? There is talk of springs and fountains, of blessing and rejoicing. The sensual and sexual overtones are neither understated nor mentioned with a blush. And there is the call—the wise man's call, God's call—to be *"intoxicated"* by the love of one's mate. *Intoxicated!* And if that word bothers you how about these synonyms: *enchanted*, *mesmerized*, *infatuated*, and this word that often shows up in translations of the Hebrew: *captivated*. Not trapped, not captured, but *captivated*. Not bored, not inhibited, not firmly under control, but *intoxicated*. As long as we're not talking about booze, that is a good word, a passionate word. *Intoxicated* and *captivated* are not words lying lifeless on the page. They don't need a casket or a morgue. They are words with blood coursing through their veins—*intoxicated*, *captivated*. They are words with a pulse—words that drip with carefree joy and rapt attentiveness. Words that can do CPR on your marriage and bring it back to life. Words that can help you rejoice in the wife or the husband of your youth: *intoxicated*, *captivated* by one another's love.

The wisdom writer is calling the reader to marital renewal, to love at second sight, to recapture the passion and the joy of marriage. And he states his case in the context of God's plan for marriage: one man, one woman, one lifetime. But did you notice that nowhere in these verses is a lifetime marriage to be lived out as a life sentence. There is joy and blessing and satisfaction in it. The images of running water, of springs and a fountain are images of nourishment and refreshment. God intends marriage to be nourishing and refreshing. God designed marriage to have life and vigor and vitality. That's why the wisdom writer doesn't liken marriage to a scum-covered, stagnant farm pond—*"Be sure and scrape the green scum off the water and boil the bacteria out of it before you drink it."* No, he likens marriage to a mountain stream: fresh, clear, cool water, bubbling over rocks—the kind of stream that makes you want to take off your shoes and wade in, or cup your hand and scoop out a refreshing drink. That's what God wants for marriage.

So the wise man's encouragement is not to chuck the lifeless marriage you're in now for another stab at it with somebody else. The wise man's

counsel is to renew the marriage you have. To come home—really come home—and get a fresh start. *"Let your fountain be blessed,"* he writes, *"and rejoice in the spouse of your youth."* Men, don't see your wife as an old gray mare, but as a *"loving deer, a graceful doe."* And wife, don't see your husband as a stubborn old mule or a mean old snake—see him as a ten-point buck. That might be hard to do if you look with your eyes. So don't look with your eyes; look with your heart. Don't look for a new marriage; look for a new beginning in the marriage you have. Let me put it in automotive terms to help the men in the room: instead of trading for a new car, why don't you give more attention to the car you have? If you take care of your old car you can even get a special license plate that identifies your car as a "classic." A classic is something old that feels new. The wisdom of Proverbs calls us to grow a "classic" marriage. *"Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the spouse of your youth."*

II

But how do we get there? Well, it helps if both partners will commit to renewal. But even if only one will, renewal becomes more possible than it would be if neither partner made any effort at all. You can't commit for your spouse, but you can commit for yourself. I'm not suggesting it's easy or that there's some fairy-tale quick fix. Love at second sight takes prayer. It takes work. It takes play. It takes trading some destructive old habits and patterns of behavior for some new ones. But if both partners will partner with the Lord in the process, renewal can come like a refreshing rain. Your marriage may never relive the honeymoon stage, but you can experience a maturing, joyous, and refreshing love once again. Here are few steps toward renewal.

First, **quit comparing your mate to others**. None of us have much of a chance if we start comparing. Since we know our mates, warts and all, and don't know everything about the person who catches our eye, the comparison is unfair and unrealistic anyway. Quit comparing. Learn to accept your mate as is, loving your mate as God loves you both.

Second, **don't drag up the past**. Counselor Allan Petersen, whose book *The Myth of Greener Grass* is really helpful here, calls this *"refusing to saw the*

sawdust." ¹ What's done is done. You can't go back and redo it. You can't take your words back. You can't change what's been done. So repent, forgive, and let it go. You can't renew your marriage if you try to park it in the past. As my friend, Mike Pounders, likes to say, "*Some people spend a lot of time trying to make a better past.*" You can't do it. Quit dragging up the past.

A third step: **remember that marriage is an empty box.** We set ourselves up for a fall when we view marriage as a full box—a box out of which we can take things to meet our various needs. Not so. Marriage is an *empty* box. Your marriage becomes what you put into it. If you want to renew your marriage, start putting things *into* the marriage box—things like ample time, listening ears, a forgiving spirit, acts of kindness, and words of encouragement.

Another thing you can do to renew your marriage is to **play the host, not the guest.** A host looks out for the needs of the guest. A host plans, gives, serves, and offers general care for the guest while guests are usually on the receiving end of a host's hospitality. Many mates act like guests—like the other mate is supposed to serve their every need. Wrong! That sets marriage up to be about taking rather than giving. If both husband and wife will view themselves as the host rather than the guest, both will be more concerned with giving than receiving, and a renewal of passion and joy will grow.

A fifth idea for renewing marriage is simply **talking and listening to one another.** Communication sometimes breaks down over the years. As we get older and our hearing gets worse, it's even harder. Dayna and I have been married 36 years, and we say, "*What?*" and "*Huh?*" in conversation more than we ever have. I tell her not to worry. It just means our communication is double what it once was. Talking and listening takes intentional effort. Do you need to set talk-times? Dayna tells me she likes to eat Sunday lunch at Pizza Hut because we have good conversations there. Do you need to set times to do this? Do you need to learn to repeat what you hear so you can both be sure understanding is happening? Figure it out and work it out.

Here's a sixth: try occasionally to **share in at least one of your mate's passions** even though it's not your passion—like watching a ballgame or going shopping or watching a chic-flick or taking a long walk. You don't need to share in your mate's every passion and interest, but you ought to share in at

¹J. Allen Petersen, *The Myth of Greener Grass* (Wheaton, ILL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1983).

least one. It will broaden your horizons, make you a larger person, and add a spark of renewal to your relationship.

Here's a seventh: **express love both verbally and physically**. Find ways to compliment your mate about both her personality and the things that he does. And don't be afraid to touch in ways that have nothing to do with sex—cuddling on a couch, holding hands, a nice neck rub, that sort of thing. People never get too old for this. I saw a news story this week about a young woman in Portland, Oregon, who has a “cuddling” business. She makes house calls and just holds people for a certain length of time. People stay fully clothed and it's not about sex. And her business is booming. She plans on opening an office this year and employing six cuddlers. People need some of that all their lives. Just as conversation sometimes diminishes over the years, we also tend to get less affirming and affectionate too. Renewal can be sparked by expressing love both verbally and physically.

And here's one more way to spark renewal: **pray together**. And I mean more than saying grace over food. Spend some times of prayer together over things of mutual concern like your children or your marriage or the church or your workplaces or your friends in need and your friends who don't know Christ. There is an intimacy in shared prayer that renews and deepens a couple on a spiritual level. This is good as long as the praying does not become preaching—where you say things to your mate through prayer you wouldn't say face to face like, *“Lord, and help Dayna to remember that I need my white shirt ironed by Sunday.”* At its root, praying connects a couple at a deep and primal level. I confess that Dayna and I have not done much of that in our marriage, and I don't know why because when we do, it deepens our connection. Pray together.

There are other things we can do, but these kinds of things can get us well down the road. The key concept in all these steps is investment—keep investing in your marriage. Some think marriage is like an interest-bearing savings account that will grow off your initial investment whether you add to it or not. It's not and it won't. Marriage is a lot more like a no-interest checking account. It won't grow on its own; you have to keep investing in it and adding to it. These simple steps we've mentioned can help us invest in our marriages. In fact, if we start doing things like these in our marriage, foundation cracks start sealing, the walls get a new coat of paint, a little redecorating goes on, things feel warmer and more inviting and satisfying. You just may discover

love at second sight. Passion will be renewed. And a stagnant pond of a marriage can become a fresh and bubbly stream once more.

III

And the good news is that God is in this with you. In fact, when you look for a model spouse, don't look to anyone you know, look to God. The Scripture in both Old Testament and New likens God to the husband of His people. And what a great and faithful husband He is. He loves us unconditionally. He loves us with passion. He gives us measures of freedom. He doesn't nag. You never have to clean up after Him. He listens and understands better than anyone in the world. And He helps us grow. God is our model.

And God is our strength. Through the presence of God's Holy Spirit in the life of a Christian husband or wife, we are given the fruit of love, peace, joy, patience, gentleness, self-control, and more, to make a marriage healthy, to make a marriage work, to make a marriage a blessing to God and His kingdom and His church and one another. God is our model.

IV

But we can learn from others too. We can learn from those whose marriages endure over time, those who have learned to love one another through the seasons of marriage and through its many ups and downs, those who have kept their promises. And isn't that what all of us really want in marriage?

Let me tell you about Jim and Sheila.² One day they stood at their church's marriage altar before God and a host of friends and family. Nobody twisted their arms or forced them to be there. No father stood behind them with a shotgun in his hand. They chose to be there freely and with joy. And at that altar on that day they made a promise and covenant with each other to be companions for life.

²This story is an adaptation of one I read in a sermon by Thomas Troeger, *Imagining a Sermon*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 44-47.

They decided that each year they would celebrate their anniversary by putting on their wedding clothes and having a picture made to commemorate the occasion.

On the first anniversary, they did just that. She put on her wedding gown, still as white as the day she was married. He donned his blue suit. And flash, a neighbor took a picture. Later that evening, they pulled some of their wedding cake out of the freezer and ate it like a sacrament. They said a prayer, and when they were finished they looked deeply into one another's eyes and said, "*We promised ... to love and to cherish.*"

By the time the seventh wedding anniversary rolled around, they just about decided to drop their tradition. It wasn't so easy to get into the wedding clothes as it once was. Zippers were a little harder to engage, the clothes a little tight. And besides, times had been lean. Jim had been laid off a good bit of the year and expenses had been high. Their youngest child had to have surgery that year. And the old, used couch they had bought when they first married was fraying at the edges. Sheila was a little embarrassed to have anyone come in and see things so worn. But a tradition is a tradition, and they went ahead. Flash! And another year's picture was taken. And as the photographer fiddled with his camera to get a second shot, they looked at one another and the stack of unpaid bills lying on the table next to them: "*We promised,*" they said, "*for richer and for poorer.*"

By the time the fifteenth anniversary rolled around, things were much better for Jim and Sheila. They had certainly had their share of hard times when finances and job demands put great stress on their marriage. There were days when they honestly did not know if their marriage would survive. So it was nice to be on a positive roll for a change. Good jobs had enabled them to buy a larger house and furnish it comfortably. The kids had bikes in the garage and a brand new Play Station. In fact, things were going so well that Jim and Sheila decided to have their picture taken by a professional photographer that year. Dressed up in a gown yellowed a bit by age, and a suit dated by the size of its lapels, they still got on their wedding duds. Flash! "*We promised,*" they said to one another, "*for better and for worse.*" That picture got a lot of "likes" on Facebook.

When their twenty-eighth anniversary came around, they almost didn't get a picture made. There was depression in the house. The kids were gone and the nest was empty. And without the kids to hold them together, Jim and

Sheila were drifting apart. Sheila had started a new job, and her boss was paying her the kind of attention Jim no longer seemed to give her. Jim was going through a mid-life crisis of sorts and was even toying with the idea of an extramarital affair with a woman at the office. He slipped once. It was as if Jim and Sheila did not know one another anymore. And even though this once happy couple were not smiling, they honored their tradition and flash! yet another picture was snapped. This year, though, with their marriage barely hanging on by a thread, they turned to one another between pictures: "*We promised,*" they said, "*and forsaking all others, keep myself only unto you.*" In the second picture, a hint of a smile graced both their faces as they clumsily clasped hands with a squeeze that said, "*We're going to weather this storm and be all right.*"

Somehow they made it through the ups and downs of many more years. They took steps *toward* each other instead of away from each other. They learned how to pray together. And thanks to intentional efforts to build renewal into their marriage, they learned how not just to endure a lifetime marriage, but to enjoy it. And on their fifty-first anniversary, they sat out in the courtyard of the retirement center in which they now lived. Compared to the shindig their kids put on for their fiftieth, this anniversary was quiet. They didn't know if there would be another one. Jim was in a wheel chair, the victim of a stroke: numb on the left side, mouth drawn up, not able to say much. Sheila sat beside him. And as the hour arrived that would mark the exact time of their wedding fifty-one years ago, Sheila reached over and laid her crooked, arthritic hand upon Jim's. And without a word, they posed for one more picture. Flash! Jim couldn't speak, but their eyes said what their mouths could not: "*We promised ... for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part.*"

Listen to the wisdom of the Lord: "*Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the spouse of your youth.*" Love at second sight. You know, it's even better than the first go 'round.

Preached: January 29, 2014
First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR
John Scott McCallum II

