Today's alternative lifestyle: holy matrimony

H. Paul Santmire

Now that leading social analysts have decreed that we live in a "post-marital era," it's time to tell the truth about marriage. We've been living with an illusion for some time: that love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage.

"Post-marital" means that our society now sanctions a variety of intimate living arrangements for men and women. Some of them are of rather short duration. Some involve multiple partners. All of them have this in common: They are essentially, by intention, temporary. Ours is the age of the "significant other."

In the meantime, what we once called holy matrimony — mutual commitment to a lifelong relationship of caring and fidelity — has become a frightful thought for many couples contemplating long-term relationships.

From this post-marital vantage point, moreover, it now appears that holy matrimony as practiced in the past was all too often neither holy nor matrimonial. By a long historical process, the ideal of holy matrimony envisioned in the Bible — "and they became one flesh" — has come to be dominated in modern times by something else: the romantic ideal.

It all goes back to the age of chivalry, which celebrated passionate but essentially episodic relationships between men and women. In response to the popular attraction of the romantic ideal, a predominantly Christian culture then tried to have it both ways — to combine the two ideals, romance and matrimony. The result was an amalgam: the idea of a chaste, premarital romance, and the hope of at least some passionate romance later on, during the course of the marital experience.

As this amalgam developed, some people understandably gave up on the idea of romance altogether, as in the Puritan tradition. Why try to make a romantic marriage work in the first place if it is essentially unworkable?

The truth of the matter is that mixing romance and matrimony has probably never worked satisfactorily for the vast majority. The two probably only rarely went together, no matter how much popular essayists, song writers and film makers tried to convince us otherwise.

When boy met girl, when boy chased girl, when girl ran just fast enough to be caught, and when both were swept into each other's arms by a tidal wave of passion, we all knew that it wasn't going to last, even as we wistfully watched the beautiful couple ride off into the sunset to live happily ever after. We all knew that there would come the morning after the night before, when the young lovers would have to get up, brush their teeth, try to find some clean underwear, drag off to work and then come home bushed, with nary a heartbeat of romance in the house.

Yet, for many decades up to our own time, a whole culture clung to the illusion that you could have both romance and marriage.

Now the truth is out. The romantic spirit has apparently won the day. It has freed itself altogether from the constraints of the marital covenant. These days, it seems, nearly everybody is into episodic relationships.

Witness the staggering divorce rate and the incidence of extramarital affairs. In large numbers today, the married as well as the unmarried chase after the true love that their fantasies project at the end of romance's rainbow.

As an advocate for holy matrimony, I say good riddance to the romantic ideal of marriage. It probably was never any kind of aid to those who opted for this holy estate, anyway.

Is this some spoilsport's resignation to the inevitable? Is this turning back the clock perchance to the days of arranged marriages, when relationships were chiefly matters of economic convenience?

No, it's something else.

I'm envisioning the possibility of a return to a marvelous paradox: that you gain yourself by losing yourself, that you find freedom by committing yourself.

This, indeed, is precisely the traditional promise of holy matrimony. When you pledge yourself to care for one another for better or worse, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death do you part — when you make a covenant together for a lifelong, exclusive relationship of fidelity, then you will gain much.

Then mutual caring and sharing, which can only grow in the context of trust, can begin to flourish. Then the passions can be free, as the Song of Songs, the great biblical love poem, so eloquently testifies.

Maybe, as some have suggested, holy matrimony in our day must now be regarded as a new kind of monasticism. Perhaps for the foreseeable future only a relatively few will see themselves as called to this alternative lifestyle. Still, now that marriage has been freed of the romantic ideal, it just might be the most meaningful, intimate living arrangement available.

Some who have chosen this holy estate will even testify that the fruit of such caring and fidelity can on occasion be ecstasy, which literally means standing outside of yourself. That's testimony all the children of this post-marital era might well want to ponder.

H. Paul Santmire is pastor of Grace Lutheran Church in Hartford.

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