

Last Friday we celebrated Loving Day in honor of Mildred and Richard Loving, and the United States Supreme Court's decision to strike down laws forbidding interracial marriage. Richard was arrested in 1958 and the Supreme Court handed down its decision nine years later. I heard about the day a couple of years ago and got to thinking, "This isn't a Hallmark Day." But I think we really ought to be celebrating the institution of marriage.

Certainly the concept of interracial marriage is significant but what is wrong with acknowledging all marriages, be they made up of black, Asian, Caucasian, native American, single race, multi-race, or even same sex couples!

The institution of marriage has several variations. We're used to the traditional male-female version, and recently same-sex weddings have come on the scene. There are a few arranged marriages in the United States and don't forget polygamy.

A couple of years ago Mark Stringer offered a history of marriage going back to the days when it meant ownership of a woman, bordering on slavery and ranging to the present day American institution.

In our society we like to think of marriage as two people, yes, even same sex people, who love one another deeply, committing to one another forever and ever, amen. It's the sort of thing movies are made of.

The bottom line of marriage is the commitment a couple makes to love one another, to assist each other and to work through life's struggles. Good and bad.

We think we know about "perfect" marriages, or at least have heard of them. Every week in the Iowa Life section of the Register I see photos of couples who have been together for 40, 50, 60 years and more! I know they have had obstacles and challenges. They have probably had doubts about the marriage from time to time as well.

My great Uncle Fred was a very shy farmer near Selma, Iowa. He was in his early forties when my Aunt Rosa went after him! Rosa was an Ottumwa gal and not an aggressive person but time and her biological clock were ticking. They lived through the depression, World War II, and the great day-to-day & year-to-year gamble of farming. In the mid 1940s they had a son whom they raised on their farm. They were happy.

They had mutual respect for one another, worked hard on their farm, welcomed relatives and neighbors into their home. When the United Methodist Church pulled the plug on the local church they'd attended most of their lives, disbanded the congregation and burned the building to the ground, Uncle Fred and Aunt Rosa chipped in and helped build another one. Fred & Rosa: A great pair and a great marriage.

John & Marsha had been married 15 years when we met. No kids. By all accounts they were a wonderful couple. John was a teacher/coach and Marsha was a teacher at a small town Iowa school. They had a great life together, were well-liked and certainly were viewed as having a great marriage.

But she was in a traffic crash and sustained head injuries. Marsha made a physical recovery but there was brain damage. She'd make inappropriate remarks in mixed company. Not just potty mouth sorts of comments, but she'd ask extremely personal questions that would make everyone blush. Especially my teen-aged son.

John hired a sitter to stay with her while he was working. That went on for eight long years. Finally, when John was about to break he approached his wife's parents. He told them, "I need a rest. Would you mind taking her for one month?"

"Nope," they replied. "You took the vows, for better, for worse, and you gotta live with it. Now get on home and take care of her." He was dumbstruck.

John continued seeing a counselor and finally decided to divorce Marsha. It was the first divorce ever in his family. There were mixed opinions on the issue. When the divorce came through and the financial support was ordered, Marsha returned to her parents. She lived less than six months and died before reaching 40.

I certainly will not judge that husband. That was a tragic situation. But for a time, it was a happy marriage. Two marriages, one successful, one not.

Does the concept of marriage change if races are mixed or sexes are the same? Does marriage change if socio-economic backgrounds or religion are different? Let us hope not.

Will money be less or more of an issue? Will work schedules cause problems, Will their children drive them any more or less nuts?

I believe they will struggle & celebrate the same things. The straight A on a report card, A critical injury to a family member, the loss of a job, a teen pregnancy, a new job complete with a move to another community, a new house! Does it really matter who marries whom?

Those of you who are old enough, look back to see how your feelings toward marriage have changed. I recall my friend Katie telling me that she didn't object to interracial marriage but "they really need to consider their kids." To which I wanted to reply, "Please don't share your fears with them and keep your bigotry to yourself, and they will be fine." I wonder if Katie's views have changed.

Television has mirrored our society, or at least we'd like to think it has. During the 1950s we saw nice, normal families with minor conflicts. Of course there was no interracial marriage.

In the 1970s TV changed. We began seeing the TV married couples argue, separate and sometimes divorce! Heck! Barney Miller's marriage failed. Was it money, infidelity or religion? We never knew because they didn't get into it.

“One Day At A Time” featured a single mother with two children. In the movie theaters in 1967 we saw “Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?” which was about an engaged interracial couple facing their respective parents.

- In preparation for this week I have asked several people about their marriages. The reactions are mixed.
- She is my best friend.
- He drives me nuts.
- We have a great marriage. We don’t agree on much but I am happy.
- He is an idiot.
- It’s been a long marriage and I’m not gonna give up yet.
- (What does that mean?)
- It’s been just wonderful.
- The kids have been a blessing.

I remembered a couple of old jokes:

We’ve had 8 wonderful years of marriage. We’ve been married 20 years but only 8 have been wonderful.

OR

We've been married 25 years and not one fight. Six or seven fights, but not one.

I have been married more than 30 years to my wife, Rhoda. We have three children and three grandchildren: Amara, Jeremiah, and Isla. Now I am not going to tell you we have not had struggles. Oh my, no. We have moved three times and that will test any marriage. Those of you with children know that they can put stress on a marriage. I am a Unitarian but Rhoda is not. She is more reserved while I am a very social person. So we have our differences. Fortunately we both love Asian cuisine.

There have been times when I am out of line and am told so. But I can assure you it rarely works the other way. We have had and will continue to have our differences and sometimes some of those silent uncomfortable moments. But we must work hard on resolving them.

Most of us know of some long-term relationships that have not resulted in marriage. Some of them are right here in this church.

I recall some famous marriages, such as England's King-Emperor Edward VIII who abdicated the throne to marry Wallis Simpson, a twice-divorced American socialite..

And Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward. There are reports of troubles early on but they stuck it out.

Those are celebrities. How many of us mere mortals make the effort to stay in a marriage.

I think of the Lovings and the incredible odds they faced. Some of us deal with strange family issues, money problems, a wayward child, but to have the police enter your home at night and arrest a spouse because of his race! That is a real daunting situation.

Most of us in a marriage go through life focusing on the positives, and wrestling with the negatives. We deal with the issues as best we can. We commit to working with one another for many years. We celebrate the joys and we gut it out. Sometimes marriages are very tough, and we just stay with them.

I know a man from the Indian subcontinent who got a mail order bride from Siberia. Anyone who knew him knew the obvious reason he'd gone the mail order route. A polarizing and pretty strange guy. He asked a district court judge to marry them. During the ceremony the judge departed from the normal procedure and began an interview. "Who is this woman?" the judge asked.

The groom said, "She is my bride."

But is she your friend?

"No, she is my bride." the man said.

The judge paused for about 5 seconds, an eternity in a wedding ceremony. Then the judge told him, "She should be your best friend and confidant."

The wedding proceeded and the couple remains married after some ten years. The biggest complaint the husband had was that he was sick of borscht!

The lighting of the Unity Candle is standard operating procedure in many churches. There are three candles involved. One large in the center and a smaller candle on each side of it. At the appropriate time, the couple approaches the array takes the two smaller lighted candles and in unison lights the larger candle.

There are two ways to proceed now. One method calls for the extinguishing of the two smaller candles symbolizing the two shall become one.

In other ceremonies the smaller candles remain lighted indicating that the couple is married but they retain their individualities.

I prefer the second method because the first will probably lead to dominance by one of the parties.

So what of marriage anyway? Is it worth it? Marriage is an individual effort made by two people. I once heard a counselor say that marriage is not a 50-50 proposition. It better be 100-100.

In my mind, it comes down to commitment by both parties.

And we continue to dream and work toward a perfect relationship.

June 12<sup>th</sup> is Loving Day. On that day each year, why can't we examine our commitments closely and intentionally, and renew our commitments to the ones we love most?