

Dangerous vows

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [September 19, 2012](#) issue



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It was Sue and Mike's first Sunday back in worship after their honeymoon. From the preacher's chair I could see them in the fourth pew, unable to keep their hands off each other. We sang "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," which we'd also sung at their wedding. They stood eagerly with the congregation as the hymn began, smiling at each other as if to say, "This is our song."

At the other end of their pew sat a widow whose husband I'd buried just four weeks ago. This was also her first Sunday back in church, and it was the first time in 42 years that she had entered a pew alone. Two rows behind Mike and Sue sat a man and his teenage son. His ex-wife was attending another church with a man she'd married several months ago. Across the aisle was a woman who would soon be visiting her husband in the Alzheimer's unit of a nearby nursing home.

It never occurred to our newlyweds that they were surrounded by the various options for how their marriage will end.

During their premarital counseling sessions I tried to get them to talk about their fears. Mike said, as the tears welled up, that he was only afraid that something might happen to Sue. Then he looked at me with pleading eyes, hoping I would reassure them that they were young and that nothing was going to happen to either one of them. But what pastor could ever say something so ludicrous?

So instead I told him that in my experience 100 percent of all marriages come to an end. Some end tragically in divorce. Others last a long time but are so abusive that they shouldn't. The best marriages not only endure for the long haul but become more and more loving until two souls are so entwined that they don't even know who they are without the other. But one of them will eventually have to lay the other into the arms of God, and the grief will tear the survivor apart. And that's the best scenario.

I was coming in for the big punch line: "So live as a Christian who goes through life with open hands. The only way to enjoy a marriage is not to need it. What you need is a Savior. You already have him, and that frees you to enjoy all of life's temporary blessings, including marriage." Nice theology, but they looked at me like puppies that cock their heads when they're confused.

They won't be puppies at marriage for long. One day they'll be perfectly clear that they have married not only the person they knew but also a stranger, someone they can never know. There will be fights when they say horrible words that they cannot take back. Hopefully there will also be delightful and extraordinary moments of happiness. And there will be so many days when they are not thinking about being in love but are just doing what love requires. In the confusing messiness of this thing called marriage, they will need to be surrounded by those in a local congregation who have learned to pray to a Savior for help.

After their children start to arrive, Sue will gravitate to young mothers in the church who are also figuring out how to balance a professional life with parenting and marriage. Perhaps she will find herself at a Starbucks risking vulnerability with one of these sisters in the faith. She'll discover someone who understands but is not anxious about the issues that she fears are creating distance in her young family.

Maybe Mike will work with several other dads on the youth group's car wash. One of them will invite him to go on a mission trip with guys who've learned how to open their hands to the grace of God and find delight as a flawed husband and father.

On more nights than they can remember, Sue and Mike will sit on metal folding chairs in the church's fellowship hall and have another mediocre dinner across from a couple who've been married for over 50 years. There probably won't be a lot of talk about marriage, but the older church parents will offer comfort just by demonstrating that they found a way to make marriage work. And should there also be a divorced man or woman at the table, everyone will be reminded that the family of God includes those for whom marriage didn't work.

It is often said that the church needs to do more to protect the sanctity of marriage. But the way we do that is not by making marriage an idol. We work on marriage best when we just keep confronting the messy malaise of those who know they have no other option other than to pray for wisdom, patience, forgiveness and the courage to maintain a vow to always be loving. Should we fail at our vows, God's gracious vow to keep us in the holy family called the church will still hold us.