TEN

# THE GRACE OF EROS[1]

## Paul Jennings

SUCH A TITLE, I am aware, awakens expectations. And such expectations are no doubt almost inevitably going to be disappointed in a theological essay. So let us be clear from the beginning: this essay is not about sex (at least, not directly, not in the narrowest sense). There is much theological thinking and writing that desperately needs to be done on the subject of sex, but this essay is not attempting that. By the "eros" of the title I mean not the physical manifestations, but more fundamentally that emotional and social state or event or experience which, one hopes, would underlie our sexual encounters as well as our institution of marriage. It is the event referred to in our culture as "falling in love." I propose to reflect on the connection between this basic anthropological phenomenon — so idolized in our society, so neglected in our theology — and Christian marriage; and more particularly on how a positive theological valuation of this love can inform our understanding of what we are doing in the marriage liturgy.

To call this experience "erotic love" is to invite misunderstanding on two fronts. Popularly, eros and its derivatives are associated with mere physical sexuality: "erotic" is commonly used as a euphemism for pornographic. Theologically, there is an equally reductionist tendency to discredit eros as mere "need-love," functioning as a negative foil to the Christian virtue of *agape*. One might use instead the expression "romantic love" to name the state of being "in love." But I hesitate to do so, as "romantic" has its own problems, invoking as it does certain popular cultural associations specific to the West over the last 200 years. The poverty of our language suggests the poverty of our thought in distinguishing various aspects of love.

And this poverty of thought in turn impoverishes our understanding of marriage. Beginning with Augustine's *On the Good of Marriage*, Western theological thought on marriage has been dominated by a defensive approach that begins from negative premises. Marriage, because it is intimately involved with sexuality, was seen as something that needed to be justified, particularly vis-à-vis the supposed greater good of virginity. The traditional three purposes of marriage were thus commonly interpreted from the perspective of one of them, that marriage serves to hallow sexuality. On this reading, the gift of children is seen less as a grace in itself than as the only thing that excuses sex; and the purpose of mutual companionship and support comes in a distant third, resulting in an effective separation of love from sexuality.[2] Even after the Reformation clearly affirmed the full goodness of marriage as in no way

1. An expanded version of a paper first prepared for the Primate's Theological Commission. The first half (sections I-IV) has been published on the PTC website (http://www2.anglican.ca/primate/ptc/may06.htm) and in the September 2006 edition of *Ecumenism* (42nd Year, No. 163, pp. 12-19).

2. Augustine himself, it should be noted, begins with an affirmation of the priority of fellowship in marriage; but this emphasis was soon buried by the church's concern for sexuality and child-bearing.

secondary to celibacy, the Reformation churches largely failed to develop a positive theology of marriage which could articulate the sexual love of married couples as not just acceptable, but as an instance and means of God's grace.[3] It is our centuries old failure to formulate a positive theological account of marriage, as much as any specific challenges coming from the culture around us, that has led to a crisis in the church's teaching on marriage, sexuality and relationship.

## I

Marriage is relational in character. As a relationship, it involves two specific individuals, a particular man and a particular woman. One does not simply marry *a* wife or *a* husband, in the sense that any one will do. Such an instinctive desire for any partner — while undoubtably natural to us — falls short of the relational quality of Christian marriage. This dilemma lies at the root of many tragedies of modern dating: the biological and social drive to find *a* mate can interfere with the personal discernment that keeps us open and waiting to find and be found by *the* right person. We do well to be sceptical about the romantic notion of "a match made in heaven," but there is a kernel of truth in it for all that — at least, when we strip it of its pseudo-theological pretensions. In Christian marriage, one marries a specific person, who is anything but interchangeable: Rachel and *not* Leah.

This is fairly obvious, at least within our culture, but it makes a difference when we take it as our theological starting-point. For example, as the Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov points out, the recognition of the essentially relational character of Christian marriage compels us to a critique of the traditional teaching on the purposes of marriage. While child-bearing is certainly an important aspect of marriage, the Western tendency to make it the chief end of marriage has the result of functionalizing marriage. One can conceive a child with any number of people. Similarly the "avoidance of fornication" runs the risk of turning marriage into a form of sanctioned prostitution. One's spouse is surely not just someone with whom one can satisfy sexual longing, but first and foremost the unique individual with whom one is covenanted in a lifelong personal relationship. As Evdokimov wryly remarks: "There has quite likely never existed a fiancé who would declare to a girl that he is marrying her 'with an eye to pleasure,' nor the one who would crudely say that he and she are cheerfully going to dedicate themselves to procreation."[4]

The name which our culture gives to this personal aspect of marriage is love. It is almost universally accepted in our society that one should "fall in love" before marriage. That is, one's partner is not just someone one happens to find sexually attractive, nor just someone with whom one has a strong personal affinity, nor simply an advantageous match from the perspective of social and economic interests: but above and beyond that, a *unique* individual who embodies a new sense of future, a promise of personal fulfilment. Our popular notions of falling in love invoke a sense of destiny: lovers are somehow meant for each other.

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3. Luther's reflections on marriage (to which we shall return) are an important exception to this generalisation, but one which unfortunately was not broadly taken up in the Protestant churches. A taste of his theological valuation of marriage can be glimpsed in the letter he sent to congratulate Spalatin on his wedding: "While you are clinging to Catherine in bed with the sweetest hugs and kisses, may you think to yourself 'Lo this person, this best little creation of God, has been given me by Christ, to whom be glory and honour.' And I also, guessing the day when you will receive this, will love my Catherine in the same way as soon as night falls, in memory of you." (WABr 3:635,22-28) The last sentence proved too much for Luther's followers, and disappeared from later editions of his letters!

4. Paul Evdokimov, *The Sacrament of Love. The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*. Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985, p. 21, note 8.

This image of romantic love is one that permeates our contemporary Western culture. Nineteenth century novels, Hollywood movies and pop songs all collaborate in making the experience of romantic love the normative basis of partnership and personal happiness. While the particular contours of popular expectations around love and marriage may be culturally conditioned, however, the association itself goes much deeper. The ending of any comedy of Shakespeare, for example — indeed, the Song of Songs in the Scriptures — bear witness that this association is archetypal. It shapes the experience of most of us: in our culture, we come to our own marriages through a experience of "falling in love" (deeply personal, and so different for each of us) which leads us joyfully to the commitment of marriage. Whenever we attend a wedding, we come to celebrate the gift of love. Whether it comes across as kitschy, commericalized and sentimental, or as fresh, heartfelt, and full of wonder, the love that this couple has found is basic to what is going on.

It is clear that not every couple would express their relationship in these terms; indeed, every person might describe his or her relationship somewhat differently. There is a wide variety of emotional sensibilities and styles, from the love-drunk romantic to the more soberly restrained. Not everyone will be able to articulate the dimensions of their relationship, and different people will articulate them in different ways. This account is not meant to be prescriptive. But it does seem to me that some sense of joy and awe at having found the other; some sense of being loved as an undeserved gift; some sense of responsibility vis-à-vis the irreducible uniqueness of the beloved are and should be part of the relationship of any couple coming for marriage. As a pastor I would have concerns if I had reason to believe these elements were lacking, or only on one side.

## II

If I seem to belabour this point unnecessarily, it is because precisely this notion of romantic love, and its association with marriage, appears to be problematic in the Christian tradition. This tradition, with its insight into the fickleness of the human heart, knows what lovers cannot believe: that emotion is not eternal, and is in itself not sufficient to build a lasting relationship on. It distrusts the self-absorption of lovers, their distorted perspective that can have destructive consequences. Most of all, Christian tradition must resist the idolization of romantic love in our society, which seems to accord it redemptive status as the path to personal fulfilment. The Church has been rightly and wisely aware of the limitations of "romantic" love, and has focussed instead on the agapic love of 1 Corinthians 13 as a model for married life. However, neither rightly nor wisely, it has often gone beyond *distinguishing* these two aspects of love, and has *contrasted* them by denigrating the former.

Liturgically, the Church does this quite simply by ignoring the love which the couple have already found in each other as irrelevant. It is remarkable that even the contemporary Anglican liturgy nowhere acknowledges any previous relationship whatsoever between the parties, except for the rather sobering observation that "they have complied with Civil and Canon Law and have been duly prepared to enter into marriage."[5] Our liturgy could fittingly be used for a Moonie wedding between two people who are virtual strangers. Indeed this impersonality was presumably originally intentional, as our older wedding liturgies stem from a time in which considerations of status, property, family alliance or economic necessity were much stronger factors than they are today. Historians will be quick to remind us that marrying for love is a modern phenomenon, the implication being that the Church should distrust such newfangled notions, and stick to the traditional values around marriage. We should, however, beware of trusting too blindly to this dictum. Notions of what love looks like have changed, but people have always (where social

5. *The Book of Alternative Services* of the Anglican Church of Canada. Anglican Book Centre, 1985. P. 529.

attitudes permit) fallen in love, and desired to marry the one they love. The Church should beware of adopting too uncritically the attitudes of Western modernity; but neither is there any particular merit in practices like marrying for money or trading our daughters for political gain, even if these are part of society's "traditional" understanding of marriage. In the age-old Romeo-and-Juliet struggle between romantic love and bourgeois interests, the Church may rightly resist being taken in by the former — but we would surely not want to come down on the side of the latter either. Whatever the historical reasons for the impersonality of the wedding liturgy, they have little theological weight. And so it is a serious failing that our liturgy nowhere articulates and interprets in a Christian sense what is undoubtably one central purpose of a wedding: to celebrate and give thanks for the love the couple has found in one another.[6] This love (though it may be articulated in superficial and sentimental ways) is in fact far from something merely sentimental that we can take for granted. That two human beings experience mutually such a strong bond, that each no longer wishes to be him- or herself without the other,[7] is a significant and wonderful event. A wedding is a celebration of this love.

If our liturgy has simply ignored the couple's relationship leading up to the wedding, our preaching often adds insult to injury. There appears to be a well-established homiletic tradition at weddings that attempts to inculcate a Christian understanding of love by denigrating romantic love. When the two aspects of love are too severely contrasted, the laudable and necessary attempt to proclaim the agapic qualities of selflessness, patience, forgiveness and kindness can turn into a killjoy lecture that warns couples that their passion will not last long, and suggests that the sooner they abandon these illusions and see marriage as a matter of grim duty, the better. This is, granted, a caricature; our preaching is seldom so egregiously negative. But it is fair to say that it is very easy for clergy to fall into a kind of carping distrust that contrasts unfavourably with the expectations and mood not only of the couple (who in fact, despite being in love, may not be nearly as naive as we tend to assume), but of the rest of the congregation as well. Our teaching about agapic love, our attempt to inform the congregation's understanding of love by reference to the example of Jesus, will be effective only if we are able to speak convincingly of the joy and delight the couple has found in each other. Not only will our words be better heard, but our doctrine of love itself will have more depth and integrity if we can find a place in it for the experience of lovers.

## III

The root theological problem with our doctrine of love lies in the tendency to turn the helpful and necessary distinction between *eros* and *agape* into an absolute dichotomy. *Eros* is defined as "need-love," characterized by being self-serving; *agape* ("gift-love") is then defined, in reaction, by its selflessness. This distinction quickly acquires a moral weight: when *agape* is seen to be the true Christian form of love, it appears imperative that we should love in such a way that we get nothing out of it! Such a negative criterion for agapic love is quite destructive, because it is an abstraction that does not begin to do justice to the complexity of human relationships. Even in the purely agapic

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6. Some of the new liturgies begin to move towards an acknowledgement of the fact of the couple's love for one another. For example, in The United Church of Canada's *Celebrate God's Presence* we read in the Statement of Purpose "We are gathered here to celebrate the love of N. and N." (p. 403).

7. The phrase is Eberhard Jüngel's. Jüngel's profoundly theological reflections on the structure of love as an analogy to the Trinitarian nature of God have shaped the theological considerations that follow. cf. *God as the Mystery of the World. On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*. Translated by Darrell L. Guder. Edinburgh: T.&T.Clark, 1983, esp. Section 20 "The God who is Love; On the Identity of God and Love," pp. 314-320.

context of Christian service, it is a dangerous illusion to pretend we get nothing out of serving others; on the contrary, we receive our very salvation in this new identity as members of the redeemed servant community. How much less can or should a marriage be a purely selfless relationship. No one, surely, desires to be loved by one's spouse in this way, believing that he or she is only making a sacrifice, and is in no way gratified by the relationship. Relational love is not selfless, but rather involves the self profoundly in a dialectic of self-sacrifice and self-fulfilment. As such it is a powerful experience of grace. And this points to the biggest problem with opposing eros to agape: it reduces love from a great gift of God's grace to a moral duty.

A positive theological account of the experience of falling in love must interpret it in terms of grace. The category of grace points to the sacramental potential of human love, which can serve as both a sign or analogy of God's love, and an effective instrument of that love. Erotic love is, as we noted above, personal through and through: the love for a unique and irreplaceable human being. As such it recalls particularly the intensely personal aspect of God's love, that God loves not humanity in general, but each human being in his or her singular individuality. Human love is an analogy — perhaps the strongest analogy we have — to the doctrine of election.

The mutual love of a couple is in fact quite a complex relational grace. It is not simply that we receive love as a gift: in a mutual relationship, this grace is complemented by others. Being loved is something we experience by grace, but we also love another by grace; and the fact that my love and my partners coincide is another quite distinct gift. In order to begin to do justice to the relational structure of love, we might define it more precisely as *the graceful coincidence of the grace of loving with the grace of being loved*. It is not by chance that this structure, the "graceful coincidence of the grace of loving with the grace of being loved," is trinitarian, an analogue to the ultimate mystery of God's being as lover, beloved, and *vinculum amoris*. Let us unpack each of the three aspects of this structure in turn.

*The grace of loving*. That we love another is something we often take for granted, as a natural occurrence rooted in the relational and sexual nature of our being. And so it may be, initially, quite simply natural that an attractive face should captivate our attention. This is often the beginning of falling in love. But if the relationship is to move beyond mere attraction, another process sets in. Lovers begin to know each other in a less superficial way. They see beneath the mask, the public persona each of us sets up to hide our weaknesses. The idealized image that each has of the other is corrected. The beloved's irreducible uniqueness comes more and more fully into view; and the lover finds him or herself no longer attracted to just another pretty face, but loving the particularity that is this other person, "warts and all."

In the 28th thesis of the Heidelberg Disputation, Luther distinguishes human and divine love: "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it."[8] Human beings love the beautiful; that is a Platonic axiom. In other words, Luther is suggesting that human love naturally tends to come only to the attractive, the lovable, those who are deemed deserving of love. God, in contrast, loves the unlovable, the disfigured, the hateful: sinful humanity. God's love is undeserved. It is by definition grace. By loving the unlovable, God's love then creates the beauty that is not naturally there. This is a fundamental distinction, indeed an aspect of *the* fundamental distinction between the creativity of God and the nature of humanity as derivative and reactive. It is in fact a version of the agape/eros dichotomy, and points out the fundamental truth of that as a logical distinction.

For our purposes, Luther's distinction is particularly interesting when we attempt to apply it to lovers. Here the clear dichotomy between human and divine love becomes more complicated. For lovers seem to exhibit an odd

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8. LW vol 31, p 57.

combination of the two kinds of love. They are governed not just by the love of what is objectively beautiful, the love of a pretty face, though it may begin that way. If the love has any depth, it will have moved beyond the glittering image to know the other's weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Indeed, the love will gain in depth to the extent that it incorporates a fuller understanding of the other. It grows in its agapic dimension. But — and this is the fundamental difference to a purely agapic love, exercised as a Christian virtue — it does so not just by pitying what is ugly and broken in the other, but by finding the other more beautiful. In this respect it remains erotic. What happens when people fall in love, it seems, is that they are given the grace to see the other as beautiful. Not simply superficially beautiful, the beauty that many can see; the lover sees the beauty of his or her beloved in a way that no other person can. It is given to the lover to share, however imperfectly, in the way God sees the other: clearly, with his or her limitations, but also with his or her true beauty. And in seeing the other as beautiful, the lover reflects this back to the beloved, allowing him or her to discover and grow into a vision of their own beauty that they would not have on their own. In this way, the love of the lover can also be analogous to the creative love of God. In this respect loving is a grace, a possibility that is in no way innate, but given to us.

*The grace of being loved*. On the basis of these reflections, we can now see more fully why the experience of being loved is an experience of grace: not just in the general sense of being a pleasant thing, but specifically how it can be an analogy and sacrament of the love of God. No lover experiences the fact that they are loved merely as their due (as a child may experience the love of a parent, for example); if they do, one might well fear that their conviction of their own innate lovability will be an obstacle to a deeper mutual relationship. But neither, as we noted above, does anyone wish to be loved as an act of charity. The grace of being loved is, at its fullest, the experience that the love of the other makes one beautiful. The other *finds* one beautiful; and so one can lay aside the mask of a public image, the attempt to earn the respect and admiration of others, and find the freedom of knowing that here is one who loves me for who I really am, not who I am pretending to be. But the other also *realizes* in me new potential. Through this love I learn to see myself in a new way, through another's eyes. My partner has seen beauty in me, where I cannot alone perceive it, and so I begin to live up to this vision of myself. I discover new aspects of who I am; I discover, in effect, a new identity. I become myself in a new way: a lover, who no longer wishes to be himself without the other. And so the experience of being loved — in both its aspects, as merciful acceptance and conferring of new being — parallels that mode of God's love for humanity which our tradition calls the justification of the ungodly. The grace of being loved is perhaps the strongest experiential analogy to the doctrine of justification.

*Graceful coincidence*. That one may love or be loved are common human experiences, and not necessarily happy ones; that both fall together may also be natural, but it is not self-evident or inevitable, and so already a particular grace. It is this coincidence that allows both aspects, the loving and the being loved, to grow towards a greater fullness. Love grows step by step in mutuality, as we move towards that place where (to paraphrase Paul) we know fully, even as we are known. A relationship can of course develop one-sidedly (as when only one partner has the emotional maturity to move from mere attraction to love). Such relationships can easily take on abusive characteristics; at best, they fall short of the fulness of relationship to which we are called. It is precisely the mutuality of a relationship that compels us to experience it as grace. In a genuine relationship we are not a solitary "I" who can manipulate and control the other as an object; we can only learn to approach the other as a "Thou," another subject. And so a relationship implies vulnerability, in that we can not force or compel the other, but only hope to be loved as a free gift. On a practical level, the point is obvious to anyone with an ounce of emotional maturity: one does not behave in a manipulative manner in a love relationship. What is perhaps less obvious, and needs to be reiterated by the church, is that any mature relationship already implicates the couple in a dynamic of grace and intersubjectivity that runs counter to the logic of control and instrumentalization dominant in our society, and echoes in a real if imperfect way the trinitarian life of God.

## IV

When we interpret the phenomenon of erotic love in terms of grace, it sets new emphases for our understanding of what the marriage liturgy is about. Firstly, it suggests that one purpose of the wedding is an act of celebration and thanksgiving for the love that the couple has found. Thanksgiving for God's grace is a central motive in Christian worship; if then we consider erotic love as a gift of God, it would be very odd of us not to acknowledge this motive clearly in our liturgy. Here, as mentioned above, the instincts of popular expectation seem to be ahead of the Church's formal liturgy: while weddings are easily understood by most people to be a celebration of love, it is difficult to find this perspective in the wording of our traditional marriage liturgies.

This understanding of celebration or thanksgiving as the first purpose of a wedding then in turn sets the context by which we might exegete the rest of the marriage liturgy in terms of the category of grace. There appear to be in fact three more principle features of the liturgy, three more things we do at a wedding, and these correspond to further stages in the phenomenology of grace. We gather to listen to the Word, in Scripture readings, psalms, and the homily; and we listen to it in the specific context of our celebration of the couple's love. As such the Scriptures do not just impart general precepts about marriage, but rather qualify the couple's relationship theologically as a gift of God. Luther, again, makes much of the importance of receiving one's spouse according to God's Word, by which he means not according to particular precepts, but rather as a gift of God: it is the Word (and here he is thinking particularly of the creation account) that identifies each partner as God's gracious gift to the other.[9]

The next central purpose of the marriage liturgy is the covenanting of the partners, expressed in the consent, the vows, and the exchange of rings. From the standpoint of the civil institution of marriage, these acts involve the establishment of a legal contract; but when we approach them from the perspective of the recognition of grace, they receive a different, more theological emphasis. Grace is by definition an act of God towards us that is unearned and unexpected. However, it is not the nature of God's grace to leave us in passivity, but to invite our response by affirming and accepting this gift in faith. If the love that has brought a couple together is an experience of grace, then the exchange of vows is the event in which the couple formally, intentionally and publically says "Yes" to what has happened to them. They "take ownership" of their love, becoming active participants in this gift that God is working in their lives.

It is important perhaps to state clearly, so as to avoid possible misunderstandings, that the grace of falling in love discussed in the previous section is connected with the step of covenant faithfulness as part of a whole; it leads to covenant and receives its meaning from it. The grace of eros is real, but it must not be isolated from agapic commit-

9. Cf. for example this passage from a sermon on Mt 5: ". . . it would be a real art and a very strong safeguard against [adultery] if everyone learned to look at his spouse correctly, according to God's Word, which is the dearest treasure and the loveliest ornament you can find in a man or a woman. If he mirrored himself in this, then he would hold his wife in love and honour as a divine gift and treasure. And if he saw another woman, even one more beautiful than his own wife, he would say: "Is she beautiful? As far as I am concerned, she is not very beautiful. And even if she were the most beautiful woman on earth, in my wife at home I have a lovelier adornment, one that God has given me and has adorned with His Word beyond the others, even though she may not have a beautiful body or may have other failings. Though I may look over all the women in the world, I cannot find any about whom I can boast with a joyful conscience as I can about mine: 'This is the one whom God has granted to me and put into my arms.' I know that He and all the angels are heartily pleased if I cling to her lovingly and faithfully. Then why should I despise this precious gift of God and take up with someone else, where I can find no such treasure or adornment?" (LW, vol. 21: "The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat" (J.J.Pelikan, H.C.Oswald & H.T.Lehmann, Ed.), on Mt 5:31.

ment and upheld as an end in itself. It is an instance and sacrament of God's grace, not its consummation. It must not be invested with salvific meaning apart from the whole process of growth in relationship. So, for example, it would not be sound to conclude that God is calling one to leave one's marriage just because one feels one has fallen in love with someone else.

This affirmation the couple makes in the vows is in turn met by another act of God's grace, expressed in the nuptial blessing, as well as in the intercessions and the nuptial eucharist. Behind this blessing lies the recognition that neither the original gift of erotic love alone, nor the couple's good intentions to own and affirm this love, are sufficient to allow them to keep the commitment they have made for the rest of their lives. The success of the marriage is dependent upon grace alone, the ongoing grace of God by which he crowns our often poor attempts to respond in faith with his blessing, by which we may flourish. It is interesting to note that newer liturgies invoke God's blessing not only upon the fertility of the couple, or their common life, but also specifically upon their love.[10]

Seen under the premise that love is itself a gift of God's grace, the marriage ceremony then reveals a fourfold purpose: it is a celebration of God's grace as experienced, an interpretation of this experience by the Word, an act of assenting and self-commitment to live out this gift, and an invocation of God's blessing to complete the good work begun. The pattern is, in fact, a reflection of the fundamental pattern that governs all our relations with God: a grace which comes to us unexpectedly, invites our participation, and is carried by God's ongoing blessing. It is the very pattern of Christian life, modelled in marriage.

## V

That marriage should naturally follow and complete a love relationship is a premise that is no longer plausible for increasing numbers in our society. Traditional marriage is, notoriously, under assault, and has been since the sexual and feminist revolutions of the 1960s. And, to a large extent, justifiably so. The rejection of standardized gender roles confining women to the home, of hierarchical views of partnership that disenfranchise women by advocating a duty to obey, of institutional respectability that guards outward appearance at the cost of tolerating abuse – all these point to a change of mind (a *metanoia*) that the church can and should embrace, and for the most part has. At its most visceral, the contemporary critique of marriage appears to be rooted in a horror of the loveless marriage, the all-too-common spectacle of two people trapped in a bitter, hateful co-dependancy. As well, the high divorce rate we have become accustomed to raises the question whether these vows really do mean anything. This disgust and this scepticism are surely also sentiments that all Christians can share. It is against this background that many in our society are asking whether there is any point to the kind of formal commitment that marriage involves. The church will need to respond with a careful account of why we believe this commitment to be ultimately freely and life-giving; but if this response is to have integrity and is to be helpful, then it must be a response that has heard and understood contemporary concerns about traditional understandings of marriage.

We have suggested that the progress of love, in which each partner discovers the other and in so doing finds a new future, is to be understood as an overwhelming experience of grace. Lovers experience the reality of their relationship as both different from and infinitely more interesting than all the romantic fantasies they could have

10. Cf. *The Book of Alternative Services*, p. 534: "Let their love for each other be a seal upon their hearts, a mantle about their shoulders, and a crown upon their foreheads." Also *Celebrate God's Presence: A Book of Services for The United Church of Canada*, p.384.

dreamed up for themselves. As the expression "falling in love" indicates, the economy of this kind of love is passive; it is something that happens to one. The act of self-commitment that a marriage embodies is, then, an opportunity for the lovers to affirm actively and intentionally what has happened to them, to say "yes" to this relationship that has changed their life. They will of course have already said "yes" to the relationship in a thousand small ways. But the wedding liturgy gives them the opportunity to affirm it in a solemn, ceremonial, public, once-and-for-all way, in the face of their families and communities, in the eyes of the state, and in the presence of God.

As the word "opportunity" indicates, this is itself a gift. In the face of appallingly high rates of marital breakdown, and the scepticism towards vows that this engenders, it is important to hold on to the insight that it is not our ability to live up to them that gives these vows meaning. They are a good and life-giving ordinance of God. God entrusts this act of commitment to us not because our moral stature has somehow earned us the right to be taken seriously; but because God has graciously chosen us to be capable of partnership. The problem of marriage breakdown cannot be adequately addressed simply by an inflation of moral obligation, as though it were just a matter of people not trying hard enough. In some specific situations, this may be the case (though it would be foolishly arrogant to judge someone else's marriage from the outside); but from a theological point of view, the problem lies deeper, in our human limitations. Our human nature is fallen: left to our own strength, we constantly fall short of our ideals. And, as temporal beings, our lives are radically out of our control. None of us can say (especially in these restless contemporary times) what our lives will look like in five or ten years time. Under these conditions, to speak a vow committing oneself for the rest of one's life is a foolishly unrealistic act – unless, that is, we do so trusting not to our own power, but to God who calls us to this.[11] Only by God's graceful permission can we make this commitment, because only by God's grace can we hope to live up to it. The marriage vows give us a place to co-operate actively and freely by affirming what God is doing with us in this relationship. Our free will is not an alternative to God's grace; rather God's grace makes a space for our free will.[12]

The particular nature of the marriage commitment is expressed in the Biblical word "covenant," which the church applies to marriage.[13] Marriage is a covenant in the sense that it is a commitment involving the whole person. One

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11. The sense in which we make these vows is most obvious in the case of couples remarrying after a divorce, who make vows they know they have once been unable to live up to. I was once a witness to a pastoral encounter in which the pastor suggested to the couple he was preparing for their wedding that, since they had once failed to live up to these vows, they couldn't make them in good conscience and they should just leave them out. The couple's apparent shame and disappointment were heart-breaking. The pastor was wrong not just in his treatment of this couple, but in his understanding of the marriage vows. All of us who make these vows can only do so in the knowledge of our inability to live up to them, and in our faith that by God's grace we will be able to.

12. As such the logic of the wedding vows is an illustration of the Reformation teaching on the bondage of the will. At no point can our good intentions *in themselves* play a part in our salvation, as we are simply not capable of choosing the good with any reliability. However, neither are we to remain merely passive objects of God's grace. God has determined us not to be objects, but to be people in relationship, responding in free faith and love to God's love. And so, instead of the *liberum arbitrium* we lack, God gives us a *arbitrium liberatum*, set free by God's grace to allow us to play our part as partners of God. In this sense the marriage vows are not primarily moral obligation, but graceful opportunity.

13. The original Biblical sense of the word appears to have been political, rather than matrimonial; although Ezek. 16:8 uses it of marriage. Since both covenant and marriage are parallel metaphors used of God's relationship to Israel or the Church, the transferral of the concept of covenant to the church's understanding of marriage is appropriate.

is not simply contracting to give something or to do something specific for the other, but rather to be there as a partner. The word "covenant" names a self-giving, which, while certainly not absolute, is quite comprehensive.[14]

The terms of the marriage covenant are stated most succinctly in the Declaration of Intent (and later repeated in the Vows). I quote simply the man's version, the woman's being identical in content:

> *N*, will you give yourself to *N* to be her husband: to love her, comfort her, honour and protect her; and forsaking all others, to be faithful to her so long as you both shall live?[15]

We note that the commitment has two aspects. Its content is an undertaking about the quality of relationship: the couple gives themselves to each other, to love, comfort, honour and protect one another. This content is then given a formal framework of exclusivity ("forsaking all others") and permanence ("as long as you both shall live"). It is important to remember that both aspects of the covenant are central. Indeed it could be argued that the commitment to love is primary, exclusivity and permanence being not so much ends in themselves as supports for this relationship of mutual love, comfort, honour, and protection. This may seem self-evident; but it appears that there has been a strong tendency in the church's moral thought to focus on the formal requirements alone, as though exclusivity and permanence were themselves sufficient to constitute a Christian marriage without mutual respect and affection. This tendency is part of a general pattern of defining sexual ethics in purely formal terms, without respect to relationship, a pattern which is the greatest weakness of much traditional judgement on sexual ethics. If we pay attention to what is being promised, it is clear that a person who fails to love or honour his or her spouse has broken the marriage covenant just as fully as one who commits adultery or abandons the relationship. We will consider these elements of the covenant in turn, beginning with the formal commitments of exclusivity and permanence, and proceeding to the relational aspects.

## VI

The formal commitments are in effect the *proprium* of marriage vis-à-vis unmarried relationships.[16] These are the elements that are challenged in the widespread rejection of marriage in our society. How do we explain exclusivity to sexually promiscuous singles (or, for that matter, to people from a polygamous culture)? How do we justify permanence in a society of constant personal change?

We can, of course, answer these questions simply by appealing to authoritative rules that settle the issue. Such an answer, however, will carry no weight with those who do not accept the authority we invoke; increasingly, even Christians will not find it helpful. A truly constructive answer would be one based in Christian anthropology, in a careful and sustained reflection on the nature of our human existence and what we are called to be. Such a process of reflection and rearticulation of our basic beliefs about being human, in the face of the radical anthropological uncertainty of our society, remain an urgent task for the church. Here we can only gesture towards a possible answer.

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14. For this reason we should guard against the tendency towards an inflationary use of the term in church circles. A church that "covenants" with its secretary, for example, is in danger of using religious rhetoric to enforce intrusive demands; a contract, which clearly specifies and limits expectations, is the appropriate type of agreement in this context. A marriage, however, is more than a contract, as it requires of the partners a personal investment that goes beyond what can be specified concretely.

15. In the *BAS* liturgy; but the content of the traditional *BCP* is similar, with the exception (until 1962) of the notorious gender-specific promise to "obey him and serve him."

16. At least the explicit formal commitment to permanence is; most serious relationships in our society carry with them an expectation of exclusivity.

What are people for? One major strand in the theological tradition suggests that we exist primarily as social beings: our purpose is to be in community with one another, and ultimately with God. "Being in community" is not a political designation, as it was for the Greeks, but in the Christian tradition is qualified as love. The New Testament, for example, consistently sets forth the commandment to love God and neighbour as the great imperative of human life.[17] In light of Jesus' non-legalistic approach to the law, it seems appropriate to read this "commandment" teleologically. "Love" is not an arbitrary rule God has given to test our obedience; it is the nature of our full humanity, as realized in Jesus Christ. This vocation to love can be traced back to the very nature of God as trinitarian community of love. Our creation, understood in trinitarian terms, is God's gracious extension of this perfect and eternal exchange of love to include a creature who is loved by God and who, in turn, is called to love God and other creatures. The *imago Dei*, the image of God which humankind bears in distinction to the rest of creation, is most comprehensively understood as precisely this ability and vocation to love.[18]

This suggests that the living out of a loving community with other human beings is not just one thing we do among others in our life, but (together with the living out of a loving community with God) is fundamental to who we are as human beings. This community can and should take other forms besides that of marriage: it can be lived out with friends, other familial relations (esp. parent-child and sibling relationships), in the church, in an ordered religious community, in our work communities, and even in more abstract forms of communication (such as the relationship between an author or artist and his or her audience). Among all these possible ways of being in community, Christian marriage represents one particular shape for those who are called to it. It is that form of community in which one is called to practice mutual love most deeply and sustainedly with another single individual.

In addition to this fundamental call to community, a theological anthropology will also understand human nature in terms of its finitude. As much as we bear the image of God, we are not God, and this image is a weak and partial reflection of God's original love. It is the nature of God to love with a universal love: a love that extends to all creatures, but without thereby becoming general or abstract; a love that is infinitely personal and intense for each one of us. We, in contrast, are capable of loving only a small number of people, and that only very imperfectly. We can claim to love all people only in the most general way. We are called to live out that love of humanity, both in the body of the church, and in public service. In marriage, however, we are called to the specific task of loving one individual in depth — and in that attempt we quickly discover our limitations in new ways.

The vows of exclusivity and permanence provide the outline for this specific task of dedicating ourselves to practice loving one person in depth. Their necessity is rooted in our recognition of our own finitude; it is perhaps this fact that makes them so difficult to accept for many in our culture. As a human being I am one among many, each one just as real and valuable as I am. This is of course a fundamental discovery that each small child must make as part of growing up; and, in its abstract form, is axiomatic in our society. And yet, it is precisely the nature of human sinfulness — and we see the evidence of it all around us — that we appear unable to accept this truth completely. We slip so easily into that childish self-centeredness that sees ourselves and our needs as infinitely more important than

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17. "Consistently" is, of course, a dangerous word ever to apply to the New Testament. However, the agreement of the Synoptic tradition (Mt 5:43ff. par.; Mt 22:37ff. par.), the Johannine corpus (Jn 13:34; 1 Jn 3:11), and Paul (Rom 13:8ff.; Gal 5:14; 1 Cor 13) is a strong witness to the centrality of this commandment.

18. The Genesis account is particularly interesting on two accounts: the plural pronoun "let us make humankind in *our* image," which Christian commentators have read as a Trinitarian trace; and the words "male and female," which appear to be an explication of what it means to be made in the image of God. Yet it cannot be gender in itself that is the image of God in us, as we share that with the animals. One might suggest it is rather our structural propensity towards community, represented by male and female, which is an analogy to the trinitarian sociability of God.

other people's. Instead of genuine human beings in community, we become, in Luther's phrase, proud and unhappy gods,[19] egos that treat others not as partners, but as objects to be used.

The commitment to exclusivity keeps us rooted in our reality as one human being among many, relating in community and not in exploitation. The refusal to accept exclusivity leaves us with alternatives that demean our human vocation to community. Most obviously, a polygamous marriage implies a fundamental inequality of personhood. By setting up different levels of commitment (the woman is expected to be faithful to the man, while the man commits himself only partially to the woman as one of several wives), polygamy precludes truly mutual community. This applies not only to the institutionalized polygamy of other cultures, but also to the "double standard" with respect to fidelity which traditionally was accepted in large sections of Western society. The modern single, seeking self-realization through a number of sexual partners, also represents a failure to engage in genuine community. While there may be *social* equality in such encounters, in the sense that both partners are free to live in the same way, there cannot be true interpersonal equality. A casual encounter does not engage the full humanity of the other. The other person does not come into view as a complete human being, with all their complex needs and gifts, but only insofar as they fulfil *my* particular need. Even with the friendliest intentions, such a relationship instrumentalizes the other, and leaves me as a lonely ego using others to fulfil my needs, not as a human being capable of entering into mutual community. In a similar fashion marital infidelity is a rejection of the mutual community to which we are called — more grievous because we are turning our backs on an already existing community. The tacit implication of adultery is that the spouse's self-giving is not enough, that I am somehow entitled to more than one partner: that I am not simply one human being whose life is bound to another's, but a superior being who can use the lives of others without myself being fully implicated. In contrast, the purpose of the commitment to exclusivity and fidelity is to provide a framework in which we can live out our deepest human vocation to true community.

The vow of permanence ("as long as we both shall live") interprets that commitment of our whole persons in temporal terms. It is significant that the measure of permanence is the human life. The Christian tradition does not envisage marriage as eternal.[20] The vow of permanence is the giving of the whole self to the whole self of the other, the commitment to love not just one phase of that person, but the whole person unfolding over time. Here the uncertainty and sorrows of human life are invoked: "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health." The commitment to the whole person is explicitly a commitment to a shared experience of mortality, to the loss, infirmity and ultimately death that is part of every life, is part of the fullness of our humanity. We may and often do fail in that commitment; marriages may die, and the church recognizes and accepts that sad reality, through its willingness to remarry divorced people.[21] But this is in no way a compromise on the intention of every marriage to be permanent.

The rationale, then, of the marriage covenant is based in fundamental Christian anthropology, in our nature as social beings, created and called to love one another and God. The vows of fidelity and permanence provide the framework for one particular way of living out that vocation, that of an intimate and in-depth mutual relationship

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19. WA 5:128,36.

20. Cf. Mt 22:30 (Mk 12:25; Lk 20:35). For this reason our Church does not see marriage as indissoluble, in the way that the Roman Catholic Church does: as an ontological reality existing beyond human control. Whatever indissolubility marriage has, it is that of the "one flesh" — the human reality that when two lives grow together they cannot be separated without a very painful tearing that will leave permanent scars. With respect to the marriage bond not extending beyond death, it is interesting to call to mind one of the many forgotten changes the church has made in its teaching on marriage: the acceptance of remarriage after the death of a spouse, which in the Early Church was generally considered bigamous ("digamy").

21. The *Book of Occasional Celebrations* includes a liturgy for the ending of a marriage, as a liturgical recognition of that pastoral reality.

with a single human being. They are thus primarily descriptive in nature, in that they name the context in which this relationship is possible. When we choose freely and joyously to enter the marriage covenant, we are accepting a vocation to love this one specific human being. Through our free choice to make these vows, we accept the conditions as prescriptive for our behaviour.

## VII

We turn now from the formal framework of permanence and fidelity to consider the material content of the marriage covenant. The Declaration of Intent expresses this in a series of verbs: "to love, comfort, honour and protect;" to which the Vows add the lovely word "cherish." What attitudes and commitments underlie these words? What is the nature of the love the couple commits themselves to? As a covenant, a commitment of the whole person, the marriage covenant is lived out on many different levels.

It is a practical and economic commitment (as implied particularly in the word "protect"). Married spouses are allies who have pooled their interests and their resources for survival against a hostile world. This aspect of practical partnership has always been part of the civil institution of marriage, whether it be the consolidation of family interests of the wealthy, or the survival strategies of the poor. It is a reality that can be demeaning, when it becomes dominant over other aspects of relationship, so that marriage is entered into without love and respect for the partner. But in its proper perspective, it is part of the social reality of marriage, and not necessarily to be despised.

The theme of partnership extends also to the emotional level: spouses covenant to "comfort," support and care for one another, to take one another's side, to be a refuge to the other in the face of the indifference or hostility of others. This is, in effect, a fundamental duty of friendship, and without this stratum of friendship, a marriage is dysfunctional. Like friendship, marriage does not necessarily imply a sharing of interests. What it does imply is that husband and wife can rely on one another, emotionally as well as practically.

In marriage, however — and here it differs from other forms of friendship — the relationship is sexual.[22] The word "cherish" names the sexual aspect of marriage, and makes it clear that the sexual aspect of a relationship is not only, or even primarily, physical. Spouses share with one another also and specifically this side of themselves, the joys, desires, vulnerability and brokenness we carry as sexual beings. Through this sharing in love they are vehicles of healing, forgiveness, freedom and ecstasy for one another. This is the real reason behind the Church's traditional teaching that our sexuality is properly lived out in marriage: that this most fundamental level of human vulnerability, the level on which we see ourselves most intensively and existentially as beloved or despised, needs to be embedded within the strongest possible friendship, a friendship characterized by exclusivity and permanence. Beyond this primary insight, however, the Church's account of the role of sexuality in marriage has tended to be deficient and often destructive. By teaching couples that their sexual desires were fundamentally shameful, and by instrumentalizing sex as an evil necessary for reproduction and for defusing dangerous carnal lusts ("the avoidance of fornication"), the Church has in effect isolated sexuality from the noble purpose of Christian love in marriage, and confined it to the dark and dirty cellar of marriage.

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22. This observation is meant in a descriptive, rather than a prescriptive sense. I do not mean to suggest that sexual intercourse defines the essence of marriage, so that marriage should be forbidden if physical "consummation" is not possible, because of a handicap, for example (as some interpretations of Roman Catholic practice seem to indicate).

All of the above aspects of marriage — practical support, friendship, sexuality, and one might add, social role and procreation — are phenomenological observations that would apply in some degree to all marriages; they do not serve to articulate the particular theological identity of Christian marriage. They define marriage as a civil institution, but not in its sacramental significance as an institution of Christian life. This identity, as suggested above, is to be found in the practice of a specific and intentional community of love. It is the ultimate purpose of marriage that people live out, in the intensive context of exclusivity and permanence, the calling to love one another as God has loved us. We live it out very imperfectly; yet even in this imperfection our love is graced to be a sacrament of the central mystery of God: Christ's love for his Church.

This love is not something distinct from or even contrasted to the erotic love that brought the couple together: it is the continuation, transformation, and deepening of that same love. "Falling in love" is, as I argued in the first half of this paper, the beginning of an ever deepening process of finding joy in the other's unique being. From the very beginning, from the moment in which we move beyond our projections and illusions to perceiving and affirming the other as they really are, we have begun to see them as God does: with clarity, tenderness and affirmation. The purpose of marriage is to live out this particular and intensive form of Christian community to the fullest.

## VIII

If this Christian community is to be lived out to the fullest, there is another dimension that must be mentioned. We have so far paid insufficient attention to the third of the purposes of marriage (in the *BAS* numeration): the gift and heritage of children. The birth of a child is a powerful experience of the grace of God the creator. As any parent quickly discovers, each child is so much its own personality, so much more than the sum of the parents, that one is daily overwhelmed by the experience of the newness and openness of God's creativity. In the love for a child one discovers new dimensions of what love means. The dialectic of self-sacrifice and self-fulfilment we discussed above has different contours: the love for a child has a structural pre-disposition towards self-denial, as we rejoice in the coming of a new life that will, we pray, continue after we are no more. The experience of parenthood, interpreted from a Christian perspective, is another and different sacramental experience of the love of God whom we name as Father and Mother. All that was said above about the sacramental grace of erotic and relational love applies, but wonderfully changed again.

And yet, for all that, child-bearing is not a necessary purpose of marriage. That marriages may be childless has always been a reality; as much as this may be an occasion for grief, it does not make these marriages in any way inferior or defective. If the essence of Christian marriage is the mystery by which our covenanted love represents and embodies the love of Christ for the church, then that essence is as fully realized in a childless couple. Our tradition has always married couples past the age of child-bearing, and the *BAS* has recognized this by bracketing this as the third purpose of marriage.

But if the actual bearing and raising of children is not an essential element in every Christian marriage, it points to something that is, something that must be named in somewhat broader terms. In Christian marriage, every couple is called to move beyond themselves, to make their love fruitful to a wider community: children and family, friends and strangers. If it is indeed the case that the love of a couple is rooted in God's love, and has as its purpose to be an instance and example of that love, then this dimension of openness must necessarily be part of it. For it is fundamental to Christian belief that God was not content to rest in the eternal love of the Trinity as a closed system; rather, the love of the Trinity was intrinsically a love which overflowed into creation, seeking out the other. So too, our marital love, if it is to reflect God's love, cannot remain a purely self-absorbed couple relationship, but must open itself and become fruitful for others. The birth and raising of children is a fundamental sign and realization of this fruitfulness, but it is not the only way. A couple (whether they have children or not) is called to live their relation-

ship in community. They are, as the Marriage Rite reminds us, "linked to each other's families, and are called to begin a new life together in the community." It is a call to hospitality: towards family, friends and neighbours, but also towards the stranger and the friendless. If marriage is a training ground for love, where one learns to love one person with depth and perseverance, it is not for all that separate from the totality of our Christian commitments to love others. They are called not just to incarnate God's love towards each other, but to live their couplehood in such a way that "their lives together may be a sacrament of God's love in this broken world, so that unity may overcome estrangement, forgiveness heal guilt, and joy overcome despair."

## IX

In our present context, a discussion of the theology of marriage invites also reflection upon the question of same-sex unions, with which many of our churches are struggling. And so I will close by asking what the above considerations have to say to the question of same-sex couples. If the love of a couple, the whole rich history of mutual discovery and affirmation a couple experiences before they come to church to be married, is potentially a gift and sign of God's grace, what light does this viewpoint shed on same-sex relations?

It seems evident that same-sex couples who approach the church seeking a blessing of their relationship do so on the basis of a previous experience of falling in love that is comparable to that described above. This dimension is often lost sight of in our current debates about same-sex unions, which tend to deal with generalized abstractions. When the church is asked to bless a relationship, what is at stake is not primarily whether certain sexual practices are pleasing to God, or even whether homoerotic love in general is pathological; what is being asked is first of all a response to the grace-filled and unique experience of two people who have fallen in love. That is not to say that the other questions are not important, and they must be addressed in turn. But they can only be addressed with honesty if we approach them from a basic recognition of the fact of two people in love.

The primary question which the church must decide, then, is whether it can recognize, in the phenomenon of two people of the same gender falling in love, a potential gift and sign of God's grace. In Luther's terms, can same-sex partners be recognized as God's gift to one another? Which is to say, can they be seen to receive one another according to God's Word? The question is thus an exegetical one. But Luther refers to the Word in this context in a particular sense: not as a compendium of general principles, but as the living voice of the gospel, spoken to and heard by a Christian couple in the context of their particular, and for them overwhelmingly real, experience of grace. As such the question cannot be solved by analytical exegesis alone (although that is an essential tool), but by a communal listening for God's Word alongside those who believe they are discerning God's call for their lives.

This question is fundamental in how we see same-sex blessings, and it is for this reason difficult. But our reflections above suggest that there may be an additional factor in making this decision so difficult for us: if we as a church have not been able to articulate with any great fullness heterosexual love as a gift and sign of God's grace, it is to be expected that we will find it difficult to say the same of homosexual love. And so, it seems, the question about same-sex love points to a still more fundamental question: whether we as a church are able to recognize the grace of God at work when two people enter into a love relationship. If our answer to this question is negative, then we will presumably see little reason to be open to homosexual relationships. Without a valuing of emotional and interpersonal factors in a relationship, we are left only with an impoverished understanding of sexuality as dealing merely with the gratification of subconscious urges, and of marriage as a duty for the propagation of the species. On this view, it is then not surprising that many conclude that the suppression of these urges in a celibate lifestyle is the appropriate response to homosexual orientation.

If, on the other hand, the church is led to affirm the action of God's grace when two people fall in love, then a certain degree of openness at least to the possibility of same-sex unions would probably follow. Such an affirmation

would not settle the issue; other questions, such as the symbolic importance of gender complementarity, or the ethical evaluation of sexual practices, would still need to be addressed. But if we take seriously the possibility that God may be at work when two people develop a mature love relationship, then it is scarcely enough to ask what reasons we would need to find same-sex unions acceptable. We would have to ask ourselves also what reasons we have for denying what may be a work of the Spirit, and at least to understand the gravity and danger of rejecting what God has found acceptable. It is not so much a matter of reversing the burden of proof (such forensic language is not conducive to constructive, consensus-seeking theological reflection), but rather of understanding the moral seriousness of our dilemma. There will be a right and a wrong answer to these questions; but there is no risk-free default position. Each answer has its own risks, and its own cost.

But such a risk is ultimately inherent in the theological enterprise. With heterosexual couples as well, we have suggested, the church has traditionally neglected to value theologically their experience of falling in love. This experience is part of a couple's history before they come to church to be married; they may well not bring sufficient resources of conscious faith to be able to articulate their relationship as a gift of God's grace. We are dealing with an experience of grace that is prior to and independent of any mediation through the church, and for this reason, presumably, the church has such difficulty in even acknowledging this experience. We choose instead to ignore it in setting forth our liturgy and even theology of marriage, treating it only as a problem to be regulated. Presumably, it seems safe to do so, as erotic love is an irreducibly intimate affair, always outside the ecclesiastical box. But God's grace is at work in this world outside the church. It is not "safe" to ignore it, because to do so distorts the living fullness of God's goodness into the cramped staleness of our parochial vision. This lack of vision has too long crippled our theology of interpersonal relationships. Whatever we may decided about the blessing of same-sex unions, we are being called as a church to an intentional, critical and imaginative interpretation of the grace of eros.