
For Better or For Worse

BY MARGARET KIM PETERSON

When I married Hyung Goo Kim, I had concluded that his HIV infection was not the most important thing about him. Our minds were concentrated wonderfully. We were always waiting for the end to come, as indeed it did, and this intensified the happiness we found in and with each other, the intimate bond we forged as we moved deeper into marriage and into illness.

The contemporary American marriage fantasy goes something like this: after years of waiting and hoping and suffering through too many bad boyfriends or girlfriends, you finally meet The One, the perfect match, the person with whom you finally can anticipate a future of pure bliss. Together you plan a wedding that expresses your uniqueness as individuals and as a couple in every one of its multitudinous details and that, like your anticipated marriage, you expect to be perfect in every respect. And then you ride off into the sunset together, having left behind the loneliness and uncertainties of singleness and ready to receive all the benefits that inevitably come to those who marry.

I wish this were a caricature, but it's not. This is, in fact, not just a contemporary American fantasy; it is a contemporary Christian fantasy, one that is held by at least ninety percent of the scores of young people who enroll in the senior-level college course in Christian Marriage that I teach. And those young people have often been encouraged in this fantasy by their elders, who are eager to portray marriage as a means by which Christian people gain access to the good things of life—sex, children, emotional intimacy, adult status—and who are very reluctant therefore to consider whether marriage might occasionally or routinely have a dark side as well as a sunny side.

I notice this particularly because once upon a time I made a decision to marry that was unlike the fantasy scenario described above. Fifteen years ago I was being courted by a young man who, a few weeks after we had started dating, had informed me that five years earlier he had tested positive for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. I married him anyway, and was widowed four years later. And in the times before, during, and after that brief marriage, I had ample opportunity to think about what constitutes a wise decision to marry and what it means to marry “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.”

NOT A CLOUDLESS FUTURE

My boyfriend-and-then-husband was a Korean-born molecular biologist named Hyung Goo Kim. I had been slightly acquainted with him in the years before we began dating and had privately thought his name was rather funny. A few years later, I was Mrs. Hyung Goo Kim, and it served me right (I thought, penitently) for laughing at his name. His HIV status was, of course, no laughing matter. I could not possibly have been more shocked and dismayed when Hyung Goo told me of his diagnosis. I had, in fact, been wondering whether perhaps Hyung Goo might be that perfect person for me, the one who would answer all my longings and with whom I could step into a blissful and cloudless future.

I never entertained that fantasy again. And I missed it. I missed it intensely, and increasingly so, as it became apparent that I was essentially alone in my dismay and bewilderment over what I was supposed to make of this relationship, my feelings for Hyung Goo, and the obviously problematic nature of his situation. Because of the highly stigmatized nature of Hyung Goo’s health condition, I didn’t disclose it to everyone I knew, but from those I did tell, the response was swift and unanimous: end the relationship, and end it now. Some of the responses were kind and some were not so kind, but the substance was the same: sensible Christian people do not even think of marrying people who have serious things wrong with them.

A particularly harsh reaction came from a male friend who, when I told him of Hyung Goo’s HIV status, responded with the story of his own first marriage. His wife had developed chronic kidney failure, a burden with which my friend found it impossible to live, so he divorced her. “If I had known that this would happen, I would never have married her, and I will not stand by and watch you throw your life away on this man,” he said to me, heatedly. Even at the time, this seemed a tad self-justifying, but it was still profoundly upsetting. It was also illuminating. This wasn’t just about AIDS; this was about tragedy. It was about death and hardship and loss and the supposed responsibility of sensible people to steer as clear of all of them as possible.

I think this was the point at which I began to wonder: is that really what Christian marriage and the Christian life are all about? Is it really all a grand

exercise in risk reduction? But what about all the seemingly self-abnegating behavior that Jesus seems to recommend—turning the other cheek, laying down one’s life for one’s friends, visiting the sick and expecting in them to encounter Christ himself? Is this all just so much metaphor, with no real implications for actual decision making in the course of a Christian’s everyday life? Or is there more—or perhaps something quite different—to the Christian moral life than the effort to protect and insulate oneself from difficulty and sorrow, or from the difficulties and sorrows of others?

Martin Luther draws a contrast between what he calls a theology of glory and a theology of the cross. A theology of glory finds God in sunsets and cathedrals and anywhere else that seems magnificent and triumphant. A theology of the cross finds God in a cradle at Bethlehem, in a garden at Gethsemane, on a cross outside the walls of Jerusalem. A theology of the cross, in other words, finds God not as we might imagine or desire him to be, but as he actually is, taking upon himself the frailties and sorrows of humanity, and transforming them by the mysterious power of his death and resurrection.

Too many modern Christian judgments about marriage are, in essence, theologies of glory. We may say that we believe in marriage “for better or for worse,” but in actual practice we patronize online dating services that promise bliss, pure bliss, if only we will follow their advice about finding romance with the perfect partner who, we are assured, is out there somewhere. We sanctify our unions in weddings that are designed to be showcases for all the perfection money can buy, we read marriage-enhancement books written by people who claim never to have had a problem that couldn’t be solved in ten minutes or less, and when we meet people whose problems are too serious to conceal—illness, bankruptcy, or (gasp!) divorce—we hold our metaphorical skirts aside and murmur, “Boy, am I glad it’s not me.”

The reality, of course, is that no marriage is perfect. This does not mean that everyone is an equally good marriage partner for anyone else or that some people’s circumstances are not more challenging than others. It does mean that none of us should be surprised when our marriages include both better and worse, richer and poorer, sickness and health. And it means that it is foolish to base any decision about marriage on the fantasy that every-

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thing will be perfect forever. You are not perfect, your partner is not perfect, your life will not be perfect, and Christian marriage is a promise to be companions together in all that life brings, with the expectations that what life brings is bound to be mixed and that God promises to be redemptively, transformatively present in all of it.

When I did eventually decide to marry Hyung Goo, I did so in large part because I had come to the conclusion that his HIV infection was not the most important thing about him. It was significant, to be sure, but so were other things about him: his character, his personality, the joy I found in and with him. And Hyung Goo, for his part, decided he had more to offer me than his infirmities. Yes, he was going to die, but so was I, and for reasons that even now seem simultaneously crystal clear and mysterious, he was uniquely right for me, and I for him. We were sorry we could not expect to be married for many years, but we didn't think that was sufficient reason not to marry at all.

It sounds so simple and straightforward. And, in a sense, it was. Samuel Johnson said, "When a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." Hyung Goo's and my minds were concentrated wonderfully, from the beginning of our marriage to the end of it. We were always waiting for the end to come, as indeed it did, and the anticipation of that end intensified every aspect of our life together: the happiness we found in and with each other, the intimate bond we forged as we moved deeper into marriage and into illness, the grief we felt over all our experienced and anticipated losses.

At the time, the apocalyptic intensity of both joy and grief was overwhelming. In retrospect, it is one of the things that I miss most. There was a kind of innocence to those years, an innocence that came with the singleness of purpose that our life embodied. Our marriage was about seeing each other through to the end, period. At the time, this seemed normal, even normative. Not long after Hyung Goo died, an acquaintance said to me, "You must have had a very unusual marriage." I was mystified. As far as I was concerned, Hyung Goo's and my marriage was the perfect standard by which all other marriages should be judged. Hadn't our marriage been the very apotheosis of intimacy and self-giving? Why shouldn't all other marriages be just like it?

THE SHAPE OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

The truth, of course, is that not all people are the same, and not all circumstances are the same either. For starters, most marriages are about many things, not just one thing. I speak from experience here, from somewhere in the middle of a second marriage that is already twice as long as the marriage I shared with Hyung Goo. My husband and I have careers, a mortgage, a child – all things that Hyung Goo and I did not have. We worry about saving for retirement, about how we will care for our aging parents,

about how we will pay for college, for orthodontia, for the plumber we've had to have out to the house yet again. Hyung Goo and I never worried about any of these things. We were concerned for one another to the near-total exclusion of anything else.

I thus hesitate to hold up Hyung Goo's and my marriage as a paradigm for the marriages of other people, as if it were somehow a template for all that it means to be married well, to be married Christianly, to be married "for better or for worse, until death do us part." And yet, I think there were aspects of that marriage that were not unique to us, that were part of the common heritage of the many people who have entered into and been shaped by the institution that we call Christian marriage. Christian marriage is not the same as the modern American fantasy of romance, and Hyung Goo and I were, by virtue of our circumstances, in a particularly good position to notice that. Here, then, are five distinctions that I would draw between the fantasy of romance, on the one hand, and Christian marriage on the other.

In the first place, the fantasy of romance is all about finding the perfect partner, after which the rest of the story takes care of itself. The grain of truth here is that it matters whom you choose. The big falsehood is that the rest of the story will take care of itself. In the fantasy of romance, the wedding comes at the end. In Christian marriage, the wedding is the beginning—the beginning of a journey together that will take you through uncharted territory, some of which we hope will be beautiful, some of which may be challenging in the extreme, and much of which is likely to be both. For such a journey, you don't want a partner who is "perfect" (whatever that might mean). You want a partner whom you can rely upon as a fellow pilgrim, someone whom you would trust with your very life—because when you get married, that is exactly what you are doing.

The fantasy of romance requires that you choose as your partner someone with whom you have "fallen in love." Christian marriage requires that you choose someone whom you can promise to love. I have

nothing against "falling in love," and indeed have done so twice myself. But being "in love" is not a sufficient ground for marrying anyone, if by "in love" we mean simply that we feel ineffable palpitations when we think of the beloved. Ineffable palpitations make all manner of things more pleasant, but if they are going to help get you through the hard patches of life, they

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had better be founded upon a solid grounding of mutual trust and respect. It is far more important that you choose someone—and that you be someone—whose character is fertile ground for love, than that you be “in love” with the person you marry before you marry him or her.

The fantasy of romance is all about you. Christian marriage, if it is to endure and thrive as it is meant to do, had better be about more than you. We

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live in an increasingly mobile society, one in which it is expected that we and everyone we know will move from job to job and place to place in the course of a lifetime. Part of the reason people long for marriage in such a society is that they hope to find one person who will move with them. And part of the reason Christian marriages falter and dissolve at the rates

that they do is that it is simply unreasonable to expect lone marriages to support themselves any more than we would expect lone blades of grass to hold themselves upright in a hurricane. Many of us are unaccustomed either to the demands or the rewards of the cultivation of true community, but this is a fundamental Christian virtue, and one that is essential in the practice of faithful Christian marriage.

The fantasy of romance focuses on grand gestures (the dramatic proposal, the dream honeymoon) and big-picture aspirations (the house with the white picket fence, the 2.5 children and the dog). Christian marriage recognizes that little things matter at least as much as big ones, and maybe more so. Part of the reason many people fail to develop the kind of bond that can get them through hard times is that they forego opportunity after opportunity to rejoice together in small blessings and to deal intentionally and constructively with small challenges. We are always looking over one another's shoulders at whatever it is we want and haven't got yet, rather than giving thanks together for daily bread, sharing the pleasures or the disappointments of the day, and thus putting down roots ever more deeply into the soil of a truly common life.

And finally, the fantasy of romance is about living happily ever after—a curiously timeless, bloodless, future-without-end. Christian marriage is about cherishing one another today, because today is what you have. Who knows what tomorrow may bring? What is certain is that one day there will be no more tomorrows. There is a profoundly realistic note in the Christian promise to love and to cherish “until death do us part.” By “realistic,” I do

not mean “defeatist” or “depressing.” I mean that marriage, for Christians, constitutes an opportunity to look death in the eye and choose to love anyway, because that is what God in Christ has already done on our behalf.

ALL THINGS TRANSFORMED BY THE CROSS

The fantasy of romance has a far more powerful grip on the popular imagination—including, alas, the popular Christian imagination—than does a properly Christian theology of marriage. I am still astonished and grateful that Hyung Goo and I were able to glimpse enough of the contrast between the two to realize that we could make a defensible decision to marry one another. No, neither of us was perfect: he added to my problems, and I could not fix his. We couldn’t expect to be utterly independent and never in need of anything from anyone. We couldn’t pin our hopes for happiness on children we hoped one day to have, career milestones we hoped one day to reach, or financial stability we hoped one day to achieve. We couldn’t expect to live “happily ever after.”

What we could do was to face life’s limitations and gifts together, for as many days as we were given. We could be husband and wife together, accompanying one another on the Christian pilgrimage, depending together on God, on one another, on the many people who cared for us and about us. And we did. Was it hard? Yes, it was. It was a journey into uncharted and unimaginably deep waters, a crucible in which we were individually and together being refined by fires of suffering and sorrow. And, at the same time, it was profoundly healing and transformative and, yes, joyful.

How could this have been? In answer I can only point to the gospel of Christ crucified. According to that gospel, God brings life out of death, redemption out of suffering, victory out of defeat. To be a Christian means, among other things, to live as if this story, the Christian story, is the true story of the world. And to be married Christianly is to expect this most intimate of human relationships to be shaped by that story. Sometimes this looks dramatic; at other times, it looks humdrum and everyday. In most lives, in most marriages, it is both. Most of us, when we marry, marry both for better and for worse, and our happy endings come as we encounter together the God who transforms all things by the cross.



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