



Sermon Transcription • Abbotsford

Modern Family - Feb. 18/19, 2017 - Jeff Bucknam
Fox Catching - (Song of Songs 2:15)

[Please Note: This transcript has been lightly edited for ease of reading. Also, some headings have been added in square brackets to aid the reader in locating portions of the sermon.]

My wife came home a number of years ago. She was a teacher in Texas and in their school district they had asked a bunch of the students in the elementary schools in particular the responses to these questions. So kids from ages six to eleven were responding to questions about love, romance, and marriage. Here's some of the responses:

How do you decide whom to marry? 10 year old Alan said, "You got to find somebody who likes the same stuff. Like if you like sports, she should like it that you like sports, and she should keep the chips and dip coming" [laughter]. Kirsten, age 10 said, "No person really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry. God decides it all way before, and you get to find out later who you're stuck with" [laughter]. *What is the right age to get married?* Camille, 10 year old said, "Twenty-three is the best age because you know the person forever by then." Six year-old Freddie said, "No age is good to get married at. You've got to be a fool to get married" [laughter]. *How can a stranger tell if two people are married?* Six year-old Eddie: "Married people usually look happy to talk to other people" [laughter]. Eight year-old Derrick said, "You might have to guess, based on whether they seem to be yelling at the same kids" [laughter].

What do you think your mom and dad have in common? Eight year-old Lori said, "Both don't want no more kids" [laughter].

What do most people do on a date? Lynnette, an eight year-old said, "Dates are for having fun, and people should use them to get to know each other. Even boys have something to say if you listen long enough" [laughter]. Ten year-old Martin said, "On the first date, they just tell each other lies, and that usually gets them interested enough to go on a second date" [laughter]. Kind of true.

What would you do on a first date that was turning sour? Craig, a nine year-old said, "I'd run home and play dead. The next day I would call all the newspapers and make sure they wrote about me in all the dead columns" [laughter].

When is it okay to kiss someone? Pam, seven years old said, "When they're rich [laughter]. Seven year-old Curt said, "The law says you have to be eighteen, so I wouldn't want to mess with that" [laughter].



Is it better to be single or married? “Well, it’s better for girls to be single but not for boys. Boys need someone to clean up after them” - nine year-old Anita. Kirsten, a ten year-old said, Single is better for the simple reason that I wouldn’t want to change any diapers. Of course, if I did get married, I’d just phone my mom and have her come over for some coffee and diaper-changing” [laughter].

And easily my favourite: *How would you make a marriage work?* Marriage advice from Ricky the ten year-old. How do you make your marriage work? “You tell your wife that she looks pretty even if she looks like a truck” [laughter].

Words to live by, folks. All you men out there. Marital advice is actually not hard to come by. You can get it on T.V, I mean, it’s a real cottage industry, right? I mean, books are written, Oprah has made a living at it, right? Dr. Phil and all sorts of marriage advice is all over the place and not just that, advice about romance in marriage. You know, our culture today is just obsessed, honestly, about talking about sex and romance and all sorts of those sorts of things and so we get most of our learning about that from imbibing what the culture has to say through movies and T.V. and books. You’d be surprised actually, some of you, to know that the Bible actually was there with thoughts on this subject way before any of our modern cultural elites were. The Bible actually has an entire book on romance. It’s the book called Song of Songs.

The church has historically had an uneasy relationship with the book Song of Songs. They have treated the book Song of Songs like it’s a parable or an allegory about the love Christ has for his church, but to be honest with you, as you read through Song of Songs, that gets abjectly weird at certain points because the language is quite steamy at points. It’s all veiled in imagery, but the book actually is a song that is sung back and forth between a husband and his wife. Going back to their courtship days in the beginning, how he woos her to him and eventually they get married and they consummate the marriage. Little Jewish boys, in fact, aren’t allowed to read the book Song of Songs until they are of age because it arouses certain passions in you. Well, we’re not going to read the whole thing, don’t worry. Song of Songs 2:15, though, is the verse that I want to point out because it actually has a lot to say to us about romance and what romance looks like both in a dating relationship and certainly in a marriage.

So here’s how I want to do this: I want to actually explain this verse to you. It’s a real short verse with a little bit of background to it and some context. So I want to explain the verse and then I want to apply it to us and in the application I want to point out three foxes. You’ll understand what I mean by foxes in just a second.

1. Explain Verse
2. Apply Verse - Identify Three Foxes

[Explain Verse]

First let’s look at the verse itself, okay? Song of Songs 2:15. Here’s how it reads:



“Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards that are in blossom.”

So this is the section, as I said, the song as a whole is a back and forth song that is sung between a husband and his wife. This is the section of the song at the very beginning in chapters one and two where they are not married yet. It's a courtship relationship. If you go back to chapter one, she is reflecting on how she looks, her uneasiness at points with how she looks, and his attraction to her that he sings about. Then she sings about how she's attracted to him and back and forth they go. In this section it is springtime and so it's time for love to come to its full bloom. So the man is pictured in this section of Song of Songs 2 as a stag (as all men picture themselves, right?) outside the window of a house. She sees him and he has crossed the mountains to come and see her and he's standing, peering inside, and he's urging her to come out and be with him. So this is the way the song is trying to communicate, “I want you to be my wife. I want you to be my love. Come and be with me so we might be married and experience all the fullness of marital bliss.” She's not sure, though. One of the things that you find in the first chapter of the Song of Songs is that she's real shy. That's why she's hidden away in a house. She's like, “Um, I'm not sure, but not because I'm not sure because I'm indifferent to you, I really am attracted to you and I really want to be a part of this relationship, but there are some things that might get in the way.” In this verse she points them out. I'll read the verse again:

“Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards that are in blossom.”

In the ancient world, if you had a vineyard, you would surround it with a wall of stones. Little foxes would come in early spring and they would try to dig underneath your wall in the dark of night. Sneaky little guys and little. If you didn't hire somebody to watch over your vineyard in the evenings, the foxes would come in and they would eat all the tasty little buds off the vines and you would have no harvest. So she's drawing on this same imagery saying, “Listen, our romantic love, our budding relationship, is in danger of being ruined by these little things that are going to worm themselves in, in the dark. You don't notice them necessarily, but if you're not careful, it will destroy the relationship that we have that's being built in this moment.”

[Three Foxes to Be Caught]

So what are they? The foxes, I mean. What are they? The foxes that spoil our vineyards, the things that ruin blossoming romance, not just for people who are dating, but certainly for people who are married. What kinds of things in our modern world do we categorize as “foxes”? There's a whole lot of things that we could point out here, but I just want to point out three because I'm a preacher and everything good happens in threes [laughter]. Here we go.

[1. The Fox of the Perfect Soul Mate]

The first fox that will ruin the vineyard of your blossoming love for one another is the fox of the perfect soul mate. Let me explain to you what I mean by that. There was an article that was in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* a number of years ago about college students and how it is that they deal with their



social lives. So this professor from a University in the United States was writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Listen, if you guys (other professors) need to understand how it is that you’re supposed to deal with the millennials, the young adults in your midsts, let me just tell you a story.” His story was: “On Friday night, or Friday afternoon, when I have classes, I ask the students in my class, ‘What are you doing tonight?’ and they will list off five things. Then, on Monday morning, when I come back and I ask them what they did, here’s how the story goes: ‘Well, on Friday night, I started by going to my friends house. That was one of the options. I was there for about a half an hour and then I got a text message from another friend who said, ‘We’re about to go to the movie’ and I realized the friend that I was with at that present moment, I wasn’t really sure I wanted to stay because the movie sounded really great, so I went over and went to the movie. I was there for about an hour into the movie when I got another text from another friend that said, ‘Hey, the party over here is off the hook, and then I checked Instagram and I realized it was off the hook, so then we left the movie and went over to that party, but when we got there it wasn’t quite as off the hook as we thought it was going to be, so we went from there to a friend’s house and they got together at a coffee shop and there were a bunch of our other friends. We sat there for a while, but that wasn’t as great as the first place that we went, so we went back to my friends house’ (the first place).” His argument was, “Listen, one of the things that millennials are trying to deal with in the present world, because they have phones and because they have access to all sorts of different opportunities, is that many of their plans are only potential plans and never actual. That what’s going on in many of their minds is that there is an experience out there that is completely fulfilling and totally perfect, and that you always kind of have to hold your current situation loosely because what you’re experiencing in the present moment might not be as great as what you could experience if you were with this other group of people at this time. So, they are often chasing this elusive ‘whoosh,’ this perfect ‘whoosh’ out there.”

That’s actually true of my experience with a lot of young adults as well. It’s also true, I think, of the way that we conceive of our relationships and romance. By that I mean that we believe in the myth (and it is a myth) of a perfect soul mate. That there is a person in the world that is ideal for you and that love with them is absolutely perfect, always easy, wonderful, riding with the wind, like a wave. You’re job in life is to find this person and when you find them, you should abandon all other loves and commitments in order to be with them, right? You say to each other, when you look each other in the eyes when you meet this person, “This is bigger than the both of us.” Cupid comes and ‘fing’ <shooting an imaginary arrow>strikes you and you’re just overtaken. Love wants what it wants. You have a right to find your perfect soul mate and they are out there somewhere. Your destiny, destiny is out there somewhere (just kidding) [laughter]. The National Marriage Project in 2001 was done in the United States. They interviewed 20-29 year olds about their views on marriage. One of the conclusions was this:

“An overwhelming majority (94 percent) of never-married singles agree that when you marry you want your spouse to be your soulmate, first and foremost.”

94 percent of those who were interviewed. There were a thousand people interviewed in that study and 94 percent of them said, “No, I’m looking for my soulmate.” People have tried to define that in



sociology and other fields. Scott Stanley, who is the Director of Center for Marriage and Family Studies at University of Denver, here's how he did it: he said,

“Soul-mate-ism is the belief that you will find in a mate the one unique person on the planet who understands your deepest desires and fears, accepts all of who you are unconditionally and who becomes joined to you, making one complete whole in mind, body and soul. The power of this type of relationship is so great that you will know fully and rapidly when you find ‘the one.’ (one, one, one, one <in echoing voice>) [laughter] Further, if you have not married ‘the one,’ you should move on.”

The goal of your life, if you're going to be completely fulfilled, is if you find ‘the one.’ Listen, every romantic comedy that has come out in the last 30 years has argued this point, has it not? “Oh, you might be getting on the boat with your boyfriend and it's going to hit an iceberg, but there's some dude in the lower reaches who looks just like Leonardo diCaprio and he dances on tables. When you see him, “Ohhhh! My heart will go on...” and you stand at the front of the ship. “You're the one and I should abandon all (my mother, my commitment, everything) to be with him.” Sometimes you meet them on email, right? And you're in New York city and they might be mixing together with you in all the other places. The people you are with you don't like (You've Got Mail) [laughter], so you meet them in a park with the sun shining and the flowers blooming and the dogs barking and you see each other and cupid “Bing.” <shooting an imaginary arrow> “It's going to be easy from now on.” See? It's always been hard, love. But with ‘the one’ it's easy. In that claim is this myth's downfall. See, the problem with Soul-mate-ism is that it believes that love is easy.

My married friends, let's just all nod together and agree that marriage is never easy. Love (oh brother) love is not easy. Listen, go to the Scriptures and you find Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane who is going to go to the cross because he loves you and he loves his Father and he wants to do his Father's will and he is going to go and die for you - the greatest act of love in the history of the world. But what you find there is not Jesus on the edge of the garden going, “Ooh, let me at it. Let me at that cross. I'm just going to take it down because the wind is blowing me there.” What you find is, “Oh God, take this from me. Father, take this cup from me. If there is any other way.” It's difficult, it's sacrificial. You can ask the woman who is married to the alzheimer's patient husband who wakes up every morning and her man, who she's known for 55 years, does not remember who she is. Sometimes he calls the police in the morning because of the strange lady who is in his house. And yet she is there and she feeds him and cares for him, tracks him down and brings him home. A dear woman in our church whose husband had ALS for 10 years, I went and visited them and he could not straighten his fingers out, but she was there with him for every day of those 10 years. Every day as he lay in his bed, mind whirring but his ability to communicate was completely decimated, and there she is serving him. Do you think she woke up that morning and thought to herself: “Well, this is a cake-walk.” It's never easy, love.

Here's what happens if you buy into the Soul-mate-ism. One day you're frustrated with your spouse. You guys have your own story about love and marriage. You knew each other in college or maybe in that age and you met and you remember the places you were when you first kissed and you have all



that. But, you know, the kids have come along now and it's been hard, as it always is, to love. You guys have been in close contact with each other. Two sinners in close proximity, it is a bit of a challenge. So, you fight a little bit, you disagree about some things, and you're dreams aren't quite as fulfilled as you want. Then one day, you're on Facebook and you realize that your boyfriend from high school, he is finally on Facebook. You happily send him a note: "Hey, it's great to have you on Facebook. I've wondered where you had gotten off to." As you start corresponding with each other you remember all the times of the fun and the 'whooshy' feelings and the butterflies and all those things that go on in your heart and mind when all of this was happening back in those days. You think to yourself, "You know, the reason that we actually split up was not because we didn't like each other or fell out of love, it's just that he went somewhere else, but I never felt for others what I felt for him" (you romanticize in your mind). "We never fought," (which might be true and it might not be). So you set up a meeting and you have a coffee and gaze into each other's eyes. Cupid is there, you swear. He's on the rafters (fing) <shooting an imaginary arrow> and you say to each other, "This is bigger than the both of us." You decide that you're going to abandon everybody who has come along with you in all these years (your kids, your wife, your husband, whatever). You are going to leave it all because you have a hope for what's going to be. And you do! And for six months it's like riding a wave and it's easy until six months later you wake up one morning and you say to the guy sitting across from you, "You know, you're kind of a jerk." Because everybody is wrong, right? Listen, if you were looking for the perfect soul-mate, every one you marry is the wrong person no matter who it is, because there is no perfect one. Jesus is that, but short of him, you're stuck with an imperfect, spouse. Bloom where you're planted. There is no such thing as an easy marriage. The person in front of you is ideal for you.

[2. The Fox of Children]

Here is the second one, okay? So the myth of a soul mate, if you don't catch that fox it will wreak havoc on the marital love that you have between one another. Here's the second one: the fox of children. So, I love my kids. Can I say the caveat? There it is. I love my children. They are not here though, so let me talk about them [laughter]. I have learned that my children are not conducive to budding romance. I first learned this when I was dating my now wife. Her sisters were all married and all had kids. One of them lived near us, so we, on a Saturday night (Friday or Saturday, I can't remember) we went to their house after we had gone to a movie and dinner, as you do on a date. We didn't have kids or any incumbrances. I remember, when we got out of the car walking to the front door of the house though, saying to Jeanne, "I am so tired because I've had three classes this week," right? "I had one on Monday and two on Thursday." "You know, as a student, it's been really hard." So I'm really tired and I've had to do a lot of work and stuff and I remember she opened the front door to her sister's house and there is her sister and her sister's husband laying on the ground. Tim is laying on the ground with his arms behind him and his face pressed against the wood floor. The T.V. is on and he is kind of out of one eye watching it. It was like nine o'clock at night and his wife Kari is laying on the opposite direction, on the couch, in the same posture with her head flat, staring at the T.V. but she couldn't care less about what was on the T.V. Honestly, they looked like zombies [laughter]. I said, "Are you guys okay?" It looked like somebody had shot them. "Are you guys okay? What happen?" and he said, "We just put the kids to bed" [laughter]. Two little boys at the time. "We just put the kids



to bed” and then she breaks in and says, “We think”, because you know, they could be back at any minute, which is what happens [laughter].

Now listen, I remember we were like, “Oh, you guys aren’t really into talking” because we sat down for a minute and they didn’t want to talk. I was like, “What’s wrong with you guys? You’re so rude.” Anyways, so I walked out with Jeanne and I remember telling her, “Listen, when we’re married, that’s not going to happen because when the kids go to bed we really need to focus our time on our relationship instead of just laying there like slugs on the floor.” [laughter] Yeah, my plans have never come to fruition [laughter]. Listen, life with children is a difficult proposition. All of your attention and energy goes on the children, understandably.

My son, when he was first with us and he could walk, when my wife and I would kiss, he would come literally right between the two of us. Squirm right between us and push us apart, right? Like, “You cannot have her” [laughter]. They’re not conducive to budding romance and we understandably focus on our kids. You know that, right? When I say ‘understandably’ because we love them, of course, and we are in the business. The Bucknam Family Corporation is in the business of producing healthy, well adjusted, kind, God loving and fearing young men and women who eventually *leave* the house [laughter]. In many ways, my wife and I are business partners in this and most of our discussions are logistical, okay? “We’ve got to get them here and then you’ve got to come over here and that has to go that way and this has to come this way and are you sure that you’re able to do that?” Everything has to do with the corporation of the Bucknam Family Corporation that is going to turn out these good kids. The danger in this corporation is that you might actually start acting toward each other like it’s a corporation; that this is actually a business and our relationship is the same as that of business partners. But the romance that began all of this, the love that we shared with all of this, goes by the wayside because we’re just not able to invest ourselves in it with requisite energy. We’re so tired. This is a fox that needs to be caught.

Here’s what happens if it doesn’t, if you don’t catch this fox. 25 years down the track (as we pastors well know when we meet with many people like this) you spend all the time chasing the kids, investing in your little corporation and you come to the end of the time and your kids have finally left the home and you have turned out, as a corporation, the perfect product. You sit across from each other at the table and you look into each other’s eyes and you think, “I don’t really know you anymore... and maybe there is ‘the one’ out there who I do.”

There is a poem that was written years ago called “The Wall” that puts this in a beautiful language. It’s quite poignant and I want to read it to you. Here’s how it goes:

Their wedding picture mocks them from the table, these two whose minds no longer touch each other.

They live with such a heavy barricade between them that neither a battering ram of words nor artilleries of touch could break it down.

Somewhere, between the oldest child’s first tooth and the youngest daughter’s graduation, they lost each other.



Throughout the years each slowly unraveled that tangled ball of string called self, and as they tugged at the stubborn knots, each hid the searching from the other. Sometimes she cried at night and begged the whispering darkness to tell her who she was. He lay beside her, snoring like a hibernating bear, unaware of her winter. Once, he wanted to tell her how afraid he was of dying, but fearful to show his naked soul, he spoke instead about her beauty. She took a course in modern art, trying to find herself in colors splashed upon a canvas, complaining to other women about men who were insensitive. He climbed into a tomb called "The Office," wrapped his mind in a shroud of paper figures, and buried himself in customers. Slowly, the wall between them rose, cemented by the mortar of indifference. One day, reaching out to touch each other, they found a barrier they could not penetrate, and recoiling from the coldness of the stone, each retreated from the stranger on the other side. For when love dies, it is not in a moment of angry battle, or when fiery bodies lose their heat. Instead, love lies panting, exhausted, expiring at the bottom of a wall it could not scale.

You do see how easy it is to become just business partners, don't you? And how your relationship ends up being formed by that arrangement in ways that you don't intend it. This is a fox that is eating all the buds in the vineyard of your romantic love.

It's the question that you have to ask yourself, and as a pastor I just want to say, we have to ask ourselves, "Okay, so how do we catch that fox, what does it look like?" I just want to give you a couple pieces of advice, okay? I'm not a marriage counsellor, but I've been married for quite a long time (twenty-some years) and I've counselled people and been involved in a lot. So here, it's not rocket science. How do you catch this fox? One - I think you really need to make time for each other. In the throes of that business arrangement you need to start making time for each other so that you can remember what it was like back in the day, before the business arrangement began, and why you got into this to begin with, so the memories can be formed. Kent Hughes, who was the Pastor of College Church in Wheaton, Illinois for a number of years. He told this story, he said,

"Years ago, in the Midwestern part of the United States, a farmer and his wife were lying in bed during a storm when the funnel of a tornado suddenly lifted the roof right off the house and sucked their bed away with them still in it [it's not a real story] [laughter]. The wife began to cry, and the farmer called to her that it was no time to cry. She called back that she was so happy, she couldn't help it - it was the first time they had been out together in 20 years [laughter]."

Listen, if you've been married any time at all you know that that is the case. That sometimes, in the busyness of life and the focus on the family all that, it just makes it so that you don't actually have time just for the two of you. Listen, I've got to tell you that your kids are going to be best served by a mom and dad who love each other a lot. They're going to be better served by that than you constantly giving to them all the time. My wife and I last week, for about 48 hours, we were in Vancouver together and we just walked all over the city. I talked probably, I don't think I slept, 48 hours straight. I just talked to my wife. Dear woman, she's resting now from that [laughter]. But, both of us, we remember,



we'd sit on the park bench and watch people go by and laugh at how they're running and just remember all the great joys of our romance and the love that we've had for each other and there's like a moment in there (and you can't identify exactly when it is) when you're walking down the street and you're thinking to yourself, "That's why I married you." Listen, it's not that I don't know it. I do know it, like deep in my soul if you asked me, "Why did you marry Jeanne?" I could list off all the reasons why I married her, but in the throes of the Buckman Corporation it is hard to remember that. But when you're alone and the kids aren't prying you apart you can look into each other's eyes and say, "Yes, I love you." You need that. You need to catch that fox. Here's my fear though, in saying that to you.

My fear is that you're going to say, "Yes, yes, we need to have big romantic events in order for us to really love each other and catch this particular fox." Yes, those are all well and good, but can I press one other part? I think we need to be more consistent in noticing the little things and actually expressing them to our spouse. There are all sorts of things that your spouse does all the time that you and I think about but don't express. This week there was a blog online. This woman writes a blog called "Your mom has a blog" and it's really good. She wrote for Valentine's day. Here's what she said:

"Oh, dear married friends, what if we quit letting movies and the internet convince us that we need a rose petal-filled bubble bath or a weekend in Europe or a candlelit dinner in some fancy restaurant [to be romantic]? We don't need those things to be happy in marriage [their good things]. We just need to be kind to each other. We need to be devoted to each other's happiness [and] we need to do those little things that speak to our spouse, but even more importantly, we need to accept the little things as the most romantic offerings of all.

Someday when I'm sitting in a rocking chair looking back on our life together, it won't be the big trips or the diamond rings that I remember most. It'll be all the little things. The small gestures that he makes every day to communicate how much he loves me. If you're searching for romance in your marriage, chances are you're ignoring the most romantic things about your life. Stop and think about it, and appreciate all of the little ways that you are being romanced every day. I promise it'll make marriage more fun and meaningful if you do. Be grateful for what you have and stop pining for a version of marriage that Hollywood dreamed up. Most of the people who wrote that stuff are divorced [anyway].

Romance is real. And, it's small. And, it's glorious. [she writes] Don't miss it."

When was the last time you told your beloved what you adore? You know what is great about Song of Songs, if you read through the beginning of it, that's all it is. "Here's what I love about you." He goes through her body parts and points out all the things that he just adores about her. Don't do that [laughter]. Just do character stuff, you know what I mean? But express it. Sometimes we are so shy and unwilling to take our beloved by the cheeks and look into their eyes and say, "I know that we are working at this business venture together, but I just need you to know, above all things, that these are the specific things that I see God at work in your life and I adore you. I always have." Your vineyard will bloom.



[3. The Fox of Bitterness]

Here's the last one: The fox of bitterness. So, when I asked for my wife's hand in marriage it was predated by my asking her father for his permission. I was noble that way, I guess. My brother-in-law drove me to his office. My father-in-law was a pastor for 35 years and he had an office. It was kind of an unwritten rule that you don't interrupt him when he's studying alone in his office and nobody was around. But I am known for breaking unwritten rules, so I thought, "This is the one chance I'm going to have to have the guy alone and nobody else is going to be around, so I'm going to go ask. So my brother-in-law is driving me there and says, "What are you going to ask Jeff (my father-in-law) what are you going to ask him about?" I said, "Tim, I'm going to ask him for Jeanne's hand in marriage." He put his hand over on me and said, "Good luck" [laughter]. He had done it before me and he knew what he was talking about. I got out of the car, went inside, knocked on the door. My father-in-law is a very stern sort of guy and so he opened the door and looked at me like, "Don't you know the unwritten rule? You're not supposed to bother me at this particular moment and especially not the boyfriend of my youngest daughter. Why are you standing here?" And so I said to him, "Oh I just came because I wanted to talk about seminary" [laughter]. I thought that I could butter the dude up, right? Because he's a pastor and I want to go to seminary. "Let's talk about seminary." He's like, "Yeah, okay." I sit down and we're talking about seminary and I was waxing eloquent about all these different seminaries, paying particular focus on the school he attended and my desire to attend there as well, at which point he literally cut me off and said, "Why are you really here? [laughter] What do you really want to talk about?" I think he saw the writing on the wall, so I said to him, "Well yeah, bu... um... What I would like to talk to you, and discuss with you, about, is perhaps the idea that Jeanne... and I, and particularly as it relates to her hand, but not just her hand, her body and her feet and like every part of her, but I don't mean like the body that way, I just mean that I want you to know that, like, marriage and permissions and that..." Seriously I was fumbling all over myself. He sat there, and normally people, when you ask them questions like this, what they do is they respond by speaking. Yes or no or "Hmmm, interesting." Something. Whatever. But my father-in-law, he's not that man. I got it out finally and he said, he looked at me and he went, [looking down his nose with his arms crossed] [laughter]. He's in this swivel chair, right? [slowly turning around to face the other way] [laughter]. Seriously, he sat there for like two minutes with his back to me. I thought, "Uh-oh, unpardonable sin. There's no way." Anyway, he turned all the way back around and he looked me in the eyes and he said-- I don't remember what else he said after this, but I remember this line and I remember at the end he said, "Yes, you may," but I remember this line: he looked at me and leaned forward and he looked across the desk and he said, "Before I say anything else to you I need you to understand this. Marriage is a practice in forgiveness." So 23 years later and I can tell you that he is dead right. It is a practice in forgiveness. When you get two sinners living in close proximity to one another, explosions happen. I don't care who you are, explosions happen and they happen frequently.

I had another friend at that time that told me, when I asked him, "Do you have any advice for a young guy about to get married?" The guy had been married about five years and he said, "Yeah, Ephesians 4:26-27 - 'Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.'" Those two pieces of advice together, that forgiveness is something that you need to keep up to date, be ready to extend, and be ready to receive. Two people who are seeking the Lord and who are



constantly repenting to one another and to the Lord will remain married their entire lives. But it's when you start digging your heels in and saying, "No, no, no, that's too far. I cannot go there. That's too much of an issue and I demand my rights," or you let forgiveness lapse - that's when the vineyard starts to get destroyed.

There's a great old story about this marriage counselor who has this couple in his office and they are really fighting. They have been fighting a lot lately and they are yelling at each other in his office and they've been yelling at each other every day and finally he just breaks in and says, "Stop complaining about each other all the time. Listen, I'm going to give you this box and what I want you to do is, you (wife) I'm going to give you a bunch of pink cards and on the pink card I want you to fill every time he does something wrong. I want you to write it down, if it makes you mad, fold it up, and put it in the box, but don't yell at him in that moment. And you (husband), I want you to do the same with the blue cards and you fold it and you put it in the box and then bring the box back next week and we will work through each one of these issues in a more controlled, rational environment. I want cooler heads to prevail." So they went away and of course that afternoon he did something that really made her mad, so she grabbed (in his face) the pink card and [filling out the imaginary card, folding it and placing it in the imaginary box]. And of course, that right there, "Oh yeah?" [filling out the imaginary card, folding it and placing it in the imaginary box]. All week long - pink, blue, pink, blue. They come back the next week, they open up the pink cards and oh man she has a list of a whole bunch of stuff that he has done wrong. He reads through them all. He gets to his list though, gets the blue cards and opens up the first blue card and says, "Let's see what your husband has to say." First blue card says three words: I love you. The second one says, "I love you. I love you. I love you. I love you" is all that it said.

So that is a great preacher's story, but isn't it deeply Christian? Isn't it? We of all people have reason to extend forgiveness to one another, we who believe in the Lord Jesus. Because isn't our Lord the one who came and chased us down and continues to come after us no matter what? Who constantly receives us back whenever it is that we want to repent. He welcomes us back with open arms and celebrates and throws a party for us. Isn't that the kind of God that he is? So when you choose to follow Jesus (the one who goes to the cross for you and keeps chasing you down your whole life) when you choose to follow this Jesus, all he's saying is, "Yes, I bid you come follow me and I'm putting you in this situation, in this marriage relationship, so that you can express the kind of love that I've shown for you towards this other person. And you know what? It's going to be really, really hard because they are not 'the one' (even though they totally are). There are all sorts of barriers in the way, lots of little foxes, but if you commit yourself to catching those foxes, you will see that vineyard grow and grow and grow.

"Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that spoil the vineyards, for our vineyards that are in blossom." - Songs 2:15

Let me pray for us,

Father, I love this text and I love the opportunity I've had this weekend to share it with my friends. I pray, Father, that you would use it in our married lives and in those who are thinking prospectively



about marriage. The church will flourish, Father, in this land when marriages are strong, so I pray Father for that, and I pray that this might be the first step, or maybe the fifth step, however you want to use it we ask that you do. By the power of the Spirit and in the name of Jesus we pray, Amen.