

Ladies and gentlemen, friends and family -

We are happily gathered here today to witness and celebrate the marriage of Todd Cottrell and Alison Wilkinson. On behalf of the bride and groom, I'd like to thank you all for coming.

Marriage predates recorded history. For thousands of years men and women have been paired together in a lifelong bond of devotion and fidelity. But marriage today is very different than it was in the past, or even as it still exists in some parts of the world.

Marriage had a greater affect on the larger family and community: it turned neighbors into relatives; it strengthened social ties; it could consolidate wealth, increase class status, or ensure a line of inheritance.

As such, arranged marriages were the norm, as marriage was considered too important a decision to be left to the whims of the young and the foolish.

The relationship between husbands and wives was also different. Men owned their wives as property. In some cultures, the marriage began when the groom arrived at the bride's doorstep to purchase her from her father. Also, in many cultures men could have more than one wife. (Something I don't think any of us could get away with today.)

This is not to say that people didn't fall in love -- of course they did, and sometimes even to the person to whom they were married -- only that love was not a prerequisite for marriage.

That is why we live in such ground-breaking times. In the last few hundred years, romantic love in marriage has emerged from the province of fairy tales and entered our daily lives.

As men and women have grown to regard each other as equals --

As the demands of the family and community have changed to allow for individual pursuits and goals --

Men and women have been free to choose their own criteria for marriage, and the criteria at the forefront of that decision is love.

We want to marry someone we love. Someone who is our best friend, a partner, someone with whom we can envision a happy life together and help each achieve our individual goals, build a home, a life, and hopefully grow old together.

It is this criteria -- the best criteria, in my opinion, that Ali and Todd have chosen each other.

Which brings us to today. The religious or civil ceremony with which we are all familiar is actually a rather recent tradition of the last several hundred years. Prior to that, all two people had to do to be married was to declare it so -- to say to each other, "I marry you" -- and it was regarded as a spiritual and lawful union by all.

It is to that prehistoric tradition that we return today. Here, out in the world, surrounded by friends and family, Todd and Ali will declare their love, exchanging vows and rings, and will henceforth be acknowledged by all as husband and wife.

But first... [insert two readings, personal vows].

Through the exchange of vows, the exchange of rings, and your obvious love for one another, I and everyone here will henceforth recognize the two of you as husband and wife. Todd, please kiss the bride.

Ladies and gentlemen, Mr. and Mrs. Todd and Alison Cottrell!