Sunday, June 25, 1978
CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE IN A CHANGING WORLD
Matthew 19:1-10; Hebrews 13:1-6

Last Sunday afternoon I was privileged to attend a 70th wedding anniversary celebration and reception for Fred and Ethel Groth, longtime members of this congregation. Since I had been planning a sermon on marriage, I asked Fred and Ethel if I could mention them and their marriage in this sermon, and they were delighted.

Fred is 93 years old and Ethel 95. Because of health problems, Ethel is now a resident at Homestead Nursing Home, and Fred still lives in the family home on South 31st St. However, each day after doing the household chores, Fred drives to Homestead and spends most of the day with his wife, reading to hear, bringing her up to date on the latest news, writing letters and doing for her what he can. The affection, care, and tenderness they still feel and express for each other after 70 years is a beautiful sight. They know the meaning and implications of the marriage vows, “in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, till death shall part us.”

Seventy years together. Taken all together in a lump, it boggles the mind, and yet they have piled up year after year, like thick snowflakes covering the landscape, piling into drifts, soft mountains of love and caring.

This 70th wedding anniversary also reminded me of a 50th wedding anniversary celebration I know about. Taking part in that event, one of the three children, a daughter, said this: “Looking at their marriage, all those years of marriage, I saw my own thirty married years piling up, flipping. past like the pages in a book, some chapters better than others, some sparkling with newness we shared, some full of anguish and gloom, of gentle closeness, some exciting or plodding or confused. Had it been the same for them? What did all those years together mean for them?”

“Years of commonplace things, of routine, of excitement over the events and crises of life. The miles of scrubbed floors and tons of ironing, the endless days my father left for work and came home in snow or searing heat, the time the three of us children all had chicken pox together. The time David broke his arm riding his bike, and fourteen-year-old Jerry came home from delivering newspapers drunk on cheap wine.”

The children of the couple celebrating the 50th wedding anniversary had written a tribute to their parents for the occasion and here’s a part of what it said — “Today your friends, your family and especially your children join in true celebration of the ties that support, nourish, and bind us together in spiritual oneness and human unity. We your children thank you for the gift of life, the guidance toward responsibility, and the model your life has been for caring for each other. The joy of your love and union has been the measure of our creation; the pain and sorrow, a measure of confirmation; and the constancy of your union, our reaffirmation. ‘We, your family and friends, salute’you for this past half century of life together and join you in joyous celebration and anticipation of the years to come.”

As the daughter of the couple heard herse1£ reading these words, she realized that she was thanking them now for what she had once fought against, rebelled against — their way of life, which had seemed so solid and dependable that it was stultifying, so uneventful that it was boring, their adherence to their strict standards. And yet, she realized, it was just that enduring

solidarity they represented that had influenced her the most. It was just that dependability, that capacity for sticking it out, that had carried her through many problems and crises.

As the daughter thought more about it, she realized that these two people were not only her parents; they were also two people in a marriage of their own. They too had been starry-eyed young lovers. Earlier that morning when they had restated their marriage vows at Mass, she thought how much she would've like to have been present at their wedding 50 years ago.

But now she saw them as they stood together at the altar, her mother a little stouter, less sure of her step, her auburn hair, now short, wispy, covered with a soft wig. Her father's shoulders were still squared, but his hair was thinning and gray. They held hands, one of his hands missing the two fingers lost long ago in an accident on high-tension wires.

What a privilege to take part in such celebrations. How rare they are.

Couples like this one and like Fred and Ethel, have cared for and taken care of each other throughout their married lives. When trouble came, they did not turn and run, but worked it out. That is simply what marriage is for them. The things done for one another, the love, are not accounts to be balanced daily; caring and love and obligations are evened out over the long years of a lifetime.

Seeing and knowing married couples like these and their commitment is uplifting to all of us. In contrast, I think of the others who sometimes shuck job and family and take off for the commune or art colony, or the woman who leaves her home and children, or the man I know who left his wife the day she came home after a mastectomy. I wonder if what these people find in their compelling search will ever match what we see in some other's lives like the two couples I've been talking about.

Our times are different, we say. There are different pressures today in our changing world. The pressure to be equal, to fulfill oneself, withstanding mobility, the media, changes everywhere.

Certainly, there are many differences, but there are also some fundamental elements that are common to all enduring marriages no matter what the differences in lifestyles or behavior and no matter whether it's 1970, or 1976, or 1978 or 1908.

From a Christian point of view, we know that in this life we human beings need some sense of order. Order is one of the essential needs of the soul. Marriage in the best sense of the word is the ordering of the human love relationship between a man and a woman who deeply care for each other. It is a commitment to one another for better or for worse. Amid the disorder, the confusion, the turmoils of our present world, there are few things left that give some order to our lives. Marriage can be one of them.

Clearly, marriage is not the only way to order a life. Many individuals can and do live successfully and happily without marriage. There have always been persons who have chosen not to marry at all or to marry much later in life. But for millions of others, marriage has provided a sense of place in the world where we feel at home.

No two marriage are alike. Each one is unique. But no matter how different they are and no matter how much our world changes, there are some basics which are the foundation for all enduring and happy marriages. These basics are evident in the 70-year and 50-year marriages I earlier described.

1. First, a truly successful marriage contains the com-mitment that each partner is the other's most important person in his or her life. Who comes first? Who gets the first dance, the most concern? Our marriage partner! This sense of primariness, of being each other's most important person is part of the basic structure of any happy and continuing marriage.

This being primary, or No. 1, can be expressed in a number of ways, for example, "I know that whatever comes up in our life, she would be the first one I would turn to." If you win the Nobe1 Prize, who are you going to call first to tell about it? When it's your birthday, who do you want to hear from first?

We are not talking here about possessiveness. Deep down we know that we can become too attached, too possessive. Nor does being primary mean spending all our free time together; that would be too much togetherness. Nor does having our marriage partner be No. 1 in our life, mean that we give up our own individuality. It does not mean that the person we marry is more important than ourselves. The consuming passion in a romance that places the loved. one on a pedestal, higher than oneself, is a short-lived illusion.

By choosing one person out of all the world as the most cherished, the most important, we do not have the right to expect the impossible of him or her, or to rest the whole weight of our needs, fears, and insecurities on that person.

This sense of one's being number one in your spouse's life is a positive feeling from within that is confirmed in a thousand small ways, or perhaps only in a few important ones. It is not a cut and dried allocation of time. It is a devotion, a cherishing, and a genuine caring for the other person that no hours on the clock can measure and no number of rules or specifications can codify.

2. A second basic element that is part of any happy and enduring marriage is intimacy, not only physical intimacy, but the way we open and reveal ourselves to our spouse. Marriage should be the kind of place where one can truly be oneself; when one has the ease and security and time to fulfill one's needs. It is a place where the deepest intimacy is possible.

Intimacy in marriage encompasses all aspects of knowing each other, from how many lumps of sugar one's partner takes in coffee or tea and how bad tempered he or she is in the morning, to the deepest physical intimacy. Sex in marriage is not an end in itself but part of the greater intimacy that enables couples to grow and survive.

This total intimacy in marriage can also give continuity to our lives. In our changing world, we have fewer and fewer threads of continuity. Friends come and go. We or they often move to other parts of the country. Parents and other relatives often live elsewhere. So today as never before, marriages are assuming more responsibility for fulfilling the need to be known and for providing some continuity in our lives.

Again, this overall intimacy we are talking about does not mean that we are together all the time. No relationship can sustain the pressure of intense intimacy a hundred percent of the time. We can smother each other with intimacy. While I am convinced that most of us could benefit from and need this deeper intimacy, I also believe it needs to be balanced with our need for being apart at times, for being absent from one another, for exploring and growing in other areas, for renewing oneself and coming back to intimacy with our partners enriched and replenished.

In recent years, we have been bombarded with cries for total honesty in all our relationships and in the process, we may well have lost some our awareness that some courtesy and some self-control can show our concern and love as much as telling the whole truth all the time. The result is that in the name of honesty sometimes people hurt others and expect the person who's hurt to take it and not respond in a hurt way. It's frankness to the point where if someone says to be today, "I'll be frank with you," I say, "Please don't! Be considerately honest." Frankness is saying, "You look terrible today," Being considerately honest is saying, "How are you doing today? You seem troubled; you seem tired." With total frankness we are naked of concern or consideration.

Too much of the wrong kind of total honesty in a marriage can take its toll, and what starts out to be a mutual exploration of our inner selves can turn into dumping on the other. In a marriage, there needs to be intimacy and openness, but also individual privacy.

3. A third element in any happy and secure and enduring marriage is faithfulness to the basic commitment we have made to each other. It means not giving up the first or second or third time a conflict rises. It means holding on to the commitment we made to each other in spite of our changing moods. For moods or feelings will change.

There was a time when many marriages were held together by external pressures and coercion. Some marriages still are. People didn't get divorced because it just wasn't the thing to do no matter how bad the marriage was.

Today most marriages are no longer held together by such external pressures; they are held together more by their own internal cohesion — by love, by being primary to one another, by intimacy and companionship and by an overall sense of commitment to one another. This sense of commitment and responsibility to do one's best to work things out when trouble comes, runs like a common thread through all the good marriages I see.

People who have this kind of commitment are aware that marriage is a process, a fluid relationship that assumes different forms through the years, a relationship that is always either growing or deteriorating. Because rates of growth differ in individuals, and circumstances and interests change, conflicts naturally arise. Overall, the survival of a marriage often hinges on the key question, "How much can each partner let the other grow without feeling unbearably threatened?"

A marriage vow that is frequently used takes this into account. "I promise that I will strengthen and support you by sharing my joys and fears, and at the same time in patience and trust, give you room to grow and the freedom to be your own self."

Though times have changed and will continue to change, our basic human ne eds have not changed. We still need affection, love, recognition, respect, support, sharing, and companionship. Marriage is one way of providing and satisfying these basic human needs. Furthermore, enduring and happy marriages are still possible. It's up to us! Amen.