Sunday, July 12, 1981
A LETTER ON MARRIAGE
John 2:1-11

Next Saturday evening July 18, 1981, at 7:00 p.m. our oldest child, Krista, will be married here in this place. All of you are invited to the ceremony and reception which follows in this building. This morning as the sermon I'm going to let you hear the letter which I've written to Krista and her future husband Tom. They have not yet received the letter but will get to read it and hear it on tape later this week.

Dear Krista and Tom:

In my almost 25 years in the Christian ministry, I have officiated at hundreds and hundreds of weddings. Some of those being married have been relatives or close friends of mine; others have been strangers. Some have seemed too young to be married, others were those who were being married for the second, third, or fourth time.

This coming Saturday July 18, 1981, however, the wedding at which I will officiate will have a very special meaning for me, for I will be both father-of-the-bride and the minister. In the countless times I have spoken the words of the marriage ceremony, it will be as if this is the first time, and each word and phrase will be more thoughtfully said than ever before. You will hear the words and yet you will not hear them in all of their meaning and depth, so I have chosen to write this letter to both of you, hoping that months and even years later you will reread this letter.

Your mother and I are delighted that you have chosen to have your marriage ceremony take place in a Christian church in an atmosphere of worship, surrounded by your family, your relatives from across the country, your friends, and the members of First-Plymouth Church. You have chosen to make your commitment to each other in public and to have others take part in your joy and happiness. This choice underscores the seriousness with which you are approaching your marriage. It also emphasizes the fact that marriage is always more than just a commitment between two people. The larger community is always involved. Society at large has a stake in every marriage and every divorce.

Your mother and I also believe that both of you are ready to be married. We rejoice in your continuing maturity, and we rejoice in your choice of a lifelong mate. From the first time we met Tom, when he came to visit our home with you a year and a half ago, we had no reservations about the choice each of you had made. We joyously welcome Tom and his family into this new relationship with our family.

Now as a very special and personal wedding gift and because of our strong love for you, I want to put into this letter some of the suggestions which I have found to be helpful in counseling with all kinds of people in the past 25 years as they have come to be married and with those who come to see me because they are having problems in their marriage. These are not original ideas but come from a long tradition concerning the marriage relationship.

In addition, this coming September your mother and I will celebrate our 27th wedding anniversary and what I say in this letter comes from our personal experience as husband and wife.

To begin, remember that at the center of your marriage is a promise and on the face of it, it seems like an absurd promise. Two people who have only a partial understanding of one another stand up and make the incredible statement that they are going to cherish and take care of one another for a lifetime, “till death shall part us.”

To many persons, this seems like a mad and risky thing to do, and it is. Yet I would suggest that the madness is the romance. Without risk, there is no beauty or strength or goodness.

After all, it’s not a very courageous thing for two people who have found themselves mutually attracted to say, “I will shack up with this one and this one with me, as long as we are attracted to each other.” There’s nothing unusual or heroic about that. It has no gallantry. It’s just mutual opportunism. I find nothing admirable about this at all. It’s understandable. I’m sure that it’s also delightful at least for a time. But it has little to do with marriage, and nothing to do with a promise. Two people are only challenged toward fulfillment when they understand marriage as a mutual acceptance of an incredible challenge to fulfill the seemingly impossible. Then there is something that is really worth the human effort.

The problem with the temporary, ad hoc relationships which many people enter into today is that when there is a. way out, the couple deprive themselves of the deepening effect of going all the way in. When there’s an exit, they split. This is not to say that all marriages should survive. Sometimes the damage cl.one in staying together is so great that the only answer is a dissolution. We all know marriages like that.

There are different pressures in today’s world than when your mother and I were married and certainly different pressures than when your grandparents or great-grandparents were married. Then people often had to stay together because there was no other choice. I believe it takes more commitment today than ever before because there are more temptations to take what seems to be the easy way out.

It is not necessarily the mood of today, but what we need is fidelity; the intention to do what we say; to accept discipline in order to solidify the good. Fidelity means more than not sleeping around the neighborhood. It means that we have made a promise, a commitment and that we have accepted the limitations that are a part of that promise. There are tremendous satisfactions in saying, “I have done what I undertook to do.”

From our Christian point of view, we believe that in this life we human beings need some sense of order. 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.

Our times are different certainly, and the future you face will change even more, but I believe there are some fundamental guidelines that are con1mon to all enduri.ng marriages whether it’s 1911, or 1954, or 1981, or 2001. No two marriage are alike. Each one is unique. But these guidelines which I’m going to mention are basic to all marriages.

1. First, to have an enduring and happy marriage, each partner in the marriage needs to see the other as the most important person in his or her life. Who comes first? Who gets the first dance? The most concern? Your marriage partner. This being number one can be expressed in a number of other ways, for example, I know that whatever comes up in my life, your mother would be the first to know, the first one I would turn to. When you get a raise in your job, or lose your job, or find a new job, who are you going to call first? Your husband, Tom, or for you Tom, your wife, Krista. When it’s your birthday, who do you want to hear from first?

I'm not talking here about possessiveness, but of wanting to tell the most important person in your life whatever happens before anyone else, both the good news and the bad news. This sense of 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 few important ways. It is not a cut and dried allocation of time. It is a devotion, a cherishing, and a genuine caring for one another 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 enduring marriage is intimacy, not only physical intimacy, but spiritual intimacy as well and the two go together. Marriage needs to be the kind of place where one can truly be oneself; where one has the ease and security and time to fulfill one's needs, a place where the deepest intimacy is possible.

Intimacy in marriage encompasses all aspects of knowing each other. It is never a matter of quantity, but of quality. One's mate can never be transformed into a convenient pleasure-machine, even with quiet consent without consequences. The great mistake is to think that one can use another's body and emotional responses as if one were using his or her coat, a thing that can give warmth, but can be laid aside as it become burdensome. With persons who care, the sexual experience is more than a series of unstructured ecstasies; it is a varied yet continual renewal of your sense of unity.

It takes courage to marry, the courage to face failure in the attempt to nurture the kind of love that has the power to forgive. What those who think of marriage as a trap, as an artificial social arrangement overlook, is that the real artificiality takes place when persons seek the joys of intimacy without the risks of marriage and growing love. When two people add commitment to intimacy, some think remarkable and miraculous can take place.

The people I know who have been happily married over the years, including your mother and would probably say something like this: We were and are not always successful in the most intimate moments of our marriage, and we have had to learn much about each other from each other. Yet we have found new depths in ourselves and in each other and continue to do so as we move along in our live together. Our most intimate moments have had their high points and their low points; but we wouldn't go back from where we are now. In our commitment to love, in our courage to marry — we have learned something about quality in living.

3. Keep cultivating your spiritual lives, separately and together. Although the two of you come from different branches of the Christian church, different traditions, I hope you wi11 find a Christian community where you are living which will serve you both.

Love has an eternal and spiritual quality to it and the love between husband and wife helps us experience that Eternal Love which we call God which stands outside of space and time. Although your commitment is in the here and now and has very practical aspects to it, that's only a part of what life is all about. Your love and commitment also have a quality which transcends the here and now and through it you can enter into an expanded awareness of eternity, indeed an awareness of God. Your marriage will be immeasurably strengthened if God is self-consciously a part of your everyday life and for this to happen and grow you will need the support of a Christian congregation.

There's a story in the Bible in the Gospel of John about a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the statement is made in the story, "Jesus also was invited to the marriage." (John 2:2) Invite the

Eternal into your marriage and your life separately and together will have a quality that it can get in no other way.

4. In spite of your strong love for each other, do not be surprised when strong disagreements occur between you. In marriage, you each remain a distinct and separate human being with your own feelings, and you will have arguments and conflicts.

These do not mean that you no longer love each other. They simply mean that you think differently about some of the issues that come into your lives. And that's O.K.

Also do not be surprised when some days your love for the other seems weak and almost nonexistent. Love is emotional as well as rational and our emotions are unpredictable and quite changeable. Our feelings go up and down. All human beings are subject to changing moods.

Your commitment to each other will carry you through the ups and downs of your emotional moods. Sometimes you will need to be alone, separate from each other. The need to be alone does not mean that you love the other any less. We all need time for ourselves. No relationship can sustain the pressure of intense intimacy one hundred percent of the time.

5. This leads to my fifth guid1ine. Give each other room to grow. In fact, encourage growth in each other. We were meant to grow throughout our lives. Life takes on an added quality when we continue to grow and learn. In this way your love will grow for each other, as our love for you has grown and continues to grow and mature.

6. A sixth guideline — keep and cultivate your sense of humor. Be able to laugh at your mistakes and at your failures, and also be able to laugh at your successes. Take things seriously but not too seriously. Find friends you like to be with and with whom you can laugh and have fun.

7. In addition to being lovers, also be friends to each other, and this means taking time to simply be with each other. Here, quality of time is as important as quantity of time.

If you choose to make it so, your marriage can be the most beautiful part of your life on this earth. In the world outside of marriage, some people try to achieve satisfaction through gaining wealth, status, admiration, power9 but all of these are transitory. Marriage can bring you a whole different set of satisfactions — the profound satisfaction of making life more orderly, more joyful, warmer, and more loving for ourselves and for our spouse — maybe as in our case the joy and satisfaction of having children and watching them grow and mature and make a life of their own; the satisfaction of being known and accepted for what we are. Marriage is a place for intimacy, for supporting each other in growth, for joining with another to share a life.

Your mother and I love you both very much and we believe that your choice of being married to each other can give you more of what you want and need than any other existing arrangement for living. God bless you both.

With much love,
Your Dad