Sunday, September 7, 1986
AN ABSURD PROMISE
John 2:1-11

This past Friday, September 5th, Rowena and I celebrated our 32nd wedding anniversary. To some of you here this morning or listening on the radio, thirty-two years of marriage is only average. Each year we have a number of 50th wedding anniversary celebrations in this church and some more than that. A few years ago, for example, I was privileged to attend a 70th wedding anniversary for two of our church members. It was a beautiful occasion, not just because they had been married for 70 years, but because of the affection, care, and tenderness they still felt and expressed for each other. The older they grew, the more aches and pains they had and they came to know the full meaning of the promise — in sickness and in health.

So 32 years of marriage is nothing special in terms of numbers. We cannot measure the quality or happiness of a marriage in terms of quantity. But these 32 years have been very special to Rowena and me, and to our children. And I think we have learned some things about ourselves and about marriage because of being together that long and I'll tell you what some of those things are a little later.

But first some words to those of you who are listening and who are single; maybe you've never been married and do not choose to be, or perhaps you are divorced, or your spouse has died. Clearly, marriage is not the only way to order a life. Many individuals can and do live happy, fulfilling, and useful lives without marriage. There have always been persons who have chosen not to marry at all or to marry much later in life.

As far as the Christian faith is concerned, being single and remaining so is as much a natural state for individuals as being married. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul remained single as far as we know. Each person, male or female, is created a single unique human being and we do not need marriage to complete ourselves.

At the same time, as far as our Christian faith is concerned, we believe God can bless us in our marriage, just as we can be blessed in being or remaining single. In the story read this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus was invited with his disciples to a wedding at Cana in Galilee. Jesus gave his blessing to marriage as one way of living in God's world. Marriage, in the best sense of the word according to our Christian faith, 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.

This means that at the heart of all marriages is a promise. And when individuals make a lifelong promise to one another we seem to intuitively know that there is something sacred about that. Many couples come to a church to be married even when they are not members of a church and do not think of themselves as being especially religious. They come to be married in a religious ceremony because they have a deep, though inarticulate, suspicion that marriage has some special, eternal, theological significance because of the promises and because children may be born into that new family. Take away all the fluff from a marriage ceremony, processionals, music, flowers, prayers, and all the rest and what we are left with is a promise uttered aloud before witnesses.

At the center of every marriage ceremony is a promise, and on the face of it, it seems like an absurd promise. Two people who have only a partial knowledge and understanding of one another and sometimes have impossible expectations of what the marriage will do for each, stand up and make the incredible promise that they will love and sustain each other in marriage from this day forward, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as they both shall live.

To some people, this seems like an almost mad and risky thing to do, and it is a risk; all promise-making is a risk because each one of us is imperfect and we have trouble keeping promises. Yet I would suggest that the risk of the promise is the romance of it. Without risk, there is no beauty or strength or goodness. It doesn't take any courage to say to someone, "I will stay with you as long as I feel like it."

And since we live in an interdependent and connected world, no promise is purely personal or individual. Every promise has social and political consequences. Keeping a promise builds human society; breaking a promise contributes to social disintegration. So the church in marriage asks that the promises of marriage be said aloud. The ceremony takes place before "God and these witnesses." Too much is at stake to leave marriage to private conscience or romantic notions.

So 32 years ago, my wife and I made our promises to each other in a Christian public marriage ceremony. This past weekend, our two married daughters and their husbands were our guests over the Labor Day weekend. I told them that I planned to do a sermon on marriage this Sunday because of its nearness to our wedding anniversary. Then I asked them what they would say if each of them had the assignment to give a speech and describe our marriage. This got us into a good family discussion on the joys and pains of being married. I'll not tell you all they said in describing our marriage as they had experienced it growing up — but overall it was very positive, and they felt it provided a good model for their own marriages.

What they wanted to know from us was some of the things we had learned about marriage by being married happily for 32 years within the context of the Christian faith. Here then are some of those things we have learned and are still learning.

First, we have learned that marriage is not meant to be everything and cannot be everything. Marriage is not God. I cannot be everything to my wife and she cannot be everything to me. To put it another way — all of life's meaning and purpose is not to be found in marriage. I say this because I'm convinced that one source of contemporary frustration with marriage for many people is the attempt on the part of many couples to make marriage do everything for them. They want marriage to be their God and Savior.
These high expectations begin to bloom in the steamy climate of our adolescence, when tenderness and sexual passion converge; when we fall in love with someone who embodies for us (with a little help from love's blindness) the perfect fulfillment of every human desire. We have then a "you-are-my-everything, I-can't-live-without-you" passion.

As most of you know, we do many weddings in this church, and for a time it was the fad for couples to write their own vows and some still want to do this. Some of these self-written vows show that the couple involved expect the marriage to be everything because they try to include everything. They said that they would always be there for each other; that they would always be faithful and loyal to each other; that they would accept each other's imperfections; that they would never consciously hurt each other; that though they expected to disagree on many minor matters, surely they would always be in agreement on major matters; that they would

always be open and honest with each other; that they would always support each other's decisions; that they would always go to bat for each other; that their marriage would be their sanctuary, their refuge, their haven in a heartless world.

One would think that keeping a promise to love each other in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, and in joy and in sorrow would be challenging enough. If we make marriage our only sanctuary and our God, then it will surely fail us. In our marriage, we do not always agree on minor matters or on major matters. We often simply agree to disagree. In marriage, two personalities are not blended into one, even though married, we remain two distinct individuals. There are times when we like to be apart from each other. And what brings some conflict into our marriage and into every marriage is that these times do not always coincide. So we have to compromise. In marriage, we have to learn to leave some of our unreasonable expectations behind.

Secondly, and related to what I have just said, we have learned that marriage does not exist to solve all of our problems. We each still feel loneliness at times. We still get depressed. The imperfections we each brought into our marriage did not magically disappear because of our love or our marriage. It's a myth to assume that good spouses should make their partners happy all the time. One frequent error among married people and even among friends is to assume responsibility for other people's feelings. If someone believes that happiness is in the hands of another, the tendency is to sit back and expect large portions to be dished up as if it were apple pie.
Here's an example. For 15 years, Jean catered to Lionel's every whim trying to make him happy. But Lionel was a malcontent who found fault with everyone and everything. Once Jean understood that it is impossible to make anyone happy, least of all Lionel, she became more relaxed and outgoing. When Lionel realized that Jean no longer accepted the blame for everything, he started occupying his time more productively.

Marriage does not exist to solve all our problems. Marriage is not the savior of the world. Jesus Christ is!

In her new and best-selling book, Necessary Losses, Judith Viorst writes about marriage as the imperfect connection and about the love and hate in even the best of marriages. She says in one place, "The good news is that sometimes the bond between a husband and wife is stronger than any damage that can be done to it. The bad news is that no two adults can do each other more damage than husband and wife."

She then gives this personal example. She writes, "Knowing my husband well, I know precisely which buttons to push to trigger his outrage. I also know how to soothe and smooth and make nice, and although you might think that such knowledge would keep my finger off the trouble-making buttons and allow me to fashion a marital paradise, that's not how my — or most — marriages work."

So we have learned that being married and getting to know each other very well does not solve all our problems; nor will it solve all of yours. In fact, marriage can cause new problems. "Marriage," writes Bronislaw Malinowski, "presents one of the most difficult problems in human life; the most emotional as well as the most romantic of all human dreams has to be consolidated into an ordinary working relationship."

Thirdly, we have learned and are learning in our marriage that human beings take time. It takes time, a lifetime, for me and for each one of us to develop into someone of depth and of

character. Moreover, it takes time for me to learn to trust and to care for this person with whom I have promised to be with in sickness and in health, for better and for worse, and in plenty and in want as long as we both shall live.
By making the marriage promise, we give ourselves the time to enter into the vast and unfathomable reality of another human being. And in marriage we also have the time to learn forgiveness. There is no way to live in such close proximity to another human being without learning to forgive or what is even more difficult, learning to accept forgiveness. One reason the church has such a stake in marriage is that if over time we become good enough at forgiving and receiving forgiveness from our spouse, we shall be able to forgive and to receive forgiveness from all sorts of others outside our marriage. Thus our Puritan forebearers spoke of marriage as a “little church within a church.”

We are learning that the lifelong, unconditional promises of marriage give us time to keep looking at ourselves through the eyes of another. We have time to fail, time to be forgiven, time and space to begin again and again.

And most of all, the promise in our marriage is teaching us gratitude. We are grateful because we are finding in our present love relationship some of the longed-for loved ones of the past. We are grateful for receiving in our present love relationship of 32 years some of what we never had in the past. And best of all we are experiencing the love of God as we try and work at loving each other. Amen.