Sunday, January 15, 1989
THOUGHTS ON A MARRIAGE (A Sermon Dedicated to Joel and Julie)
John 2:1-11

"On the third day there was a marriage at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; Jesus also was invited to the marriage with his disciples." (John 2:1-2)

On the last day of the year 1988, there was a marriage at First-Plymouth Congregational Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. It was the wedding of our third and youngest child, our son Joel, and his bride Julie. In my almost 32 years in the Christian ministry, I have officiated at hundreds and hundreds of weddings; however, three of these weddings have had extra-special meaning for me — the weddings of our three children. Our first daughter, Krista, was married eight years ago here in this church. Our second daughter, Caris, was married five years ago, also on New Year's Eve and in this church. And now, our son.

I had escorted each of our daughters down the aisle, and now I was escorting my son. Before we came in, I shook his hand, gave him our blessing, and hoped that he and Julie would have many happy years of married life.

Instead of giving a sermon during the wedding ceremony, I promised Joel and Julie that I would preach a sermon on marriage especially dedicated to them two weeks after their wedding — so here it is.

Personal Reflections

First, some personal comments. As I said to our daughters about their weddings, I am delighted that Joel and Julie decided to have their marriage ceremony take place in a Christian church, in an atmosphere of worship, surrounded by their families, friends from across the country, and members of this congregation. Just as Jesus was present at the wedding in Cana some 2,000 years ago, I am convinced that Jesus was present among us in this wedding service.

Marriage is always more than a private affair between two people. Two families are involved, and the community at large also has a stake in this marriage — as well as in every other marriage and every divorce.

When our first daughter was married, I said in a sermon in the form of a letter to her and her husband that at the center of every marriage is a promise. On the face of it, it seems like an absurd promise. Two people who have only a very limited understanding of one another and of what the future holds stand up in public and make the incredible statement that they are going to love and sustain one another in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, as long as they both shall live.

In marriage, we promise so much of ourselves when we know so little about what things will be like when the time comes to keep the commitments we make.

There is no one who will be quite the same person tomorrow as they are today. Each person will change, and they will change at different times and at different rates. Our needs will change. Our desires will change. So will our feelings.

Thus, to some, the commitment in marriage seems like a mad and risky thing to do, and it is. The personal commitment each partner makes in marriage is one of life's high-risk adventures. Yet, I would suggest that the madness or the absurdity is the romance. Without risk, there is no beauty, strength, or goodness.

Furthermore, the right kind of commitment makes good sense because it is the only way to keep good human relationships alive. And good human relationships make everyone's life better.

Commitments are worth the effort, and sometimes the sacrifice, because when all is said and done, people are almost always better off because of them. Without trust and commitment, not only would marriages and families fall apart, but so would society at large. Keeping commitments is the only way to have a community, and there is no human life that is not lived in human community.

Guidance for Lasting Commitment

Here, then, are several suggestions from our Christian faith that can help make the committed love in a marriage last a lifetime.

First, remember that committed love gives us the power to give up our compulsion to always have what we desire so that the person we love can get what they need.

Notice the careful distinction between desires and needs. There are many things we desire, but that does not mean we need them. I might desire a new stereo color television, but I do not need one. There's probably more confusion between desires and needs than in almost anything else. This is especially true today in our consumer-oriented society. Advertisements are continually working to convince us that we actually need what we desire and that we deserve what we desire. Sometimes it's helpful to make a two-column list — in one column, list your needs; in the other, your desires. Then try to determine how many of what you have listed as needs are actually only desires.

Note too that committed love is not the surrender of our needs for the sake of the other person's desires. Committed love does not turn us into stooges for another person's whims — obedient servants of their brutality — suckers for their betrayals.

As committed love matures into caring, committed love, then her needs become my desires, or his needs become her desires. So, I say to you, my newly married son and daughter-in-law, and to all of us, always be careful to distinguish between desires and needs. And be patient — it takes time for love to mature. It takes time to sort out needs and desires.

Second, remember that committed and caring love in a marriage is strongest when it is between two people as equals.

The marriage vows you took are the same and equal for each partner in the marriage relationship. Though you are united in marriage, this does not mean you are to give up your identity, your uniqueness. Do not let either one of your personalities be submerged into the other.

Sometimes married couples, without thinking of the implications, will introduce the other partner in the marriage as "my better half." I know it is usually meant as a compliment, but a

marriage is not made up of two halves. There are, hopefully, two whole individuals in each marriage — people who remain separate selves even while being totally committed to the marriage relationship.

Also, be aware that each one of you in a marriage will be a different person than you were before you made a commitment to each other. Whenever you make a lifelong commitment to another person, you begin a new chapter in your own story. In her book Personal Commitments, Margaret Farley writes, “The ultimate meaning of the promise I make today can be clear only at the end of my life; and the meaning of my life at its end will be different because I made this promise today.” When you make a marriage commitment, you put yourself in a stream that flows in a certain direction. You won’t know for sure until you get to the end what it really meant when you entered the stream.

The good news is that what makes it possible for a real person to write a continuing story out of their life is the capacity to commit oneself to concrete affiliations and to abide by such commitments, even though they call for significant sacrifice and compromise. This is what Erik Erikson says in his book Childhood and Society.

Hannah Arendt’s book The Human Condition has this to say about commitment and personal identity: “Without being bound to the fulfillment of our promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of each person’s lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities.”

Third, remember that every commitment is an act of hope, and this is especially true in the commitment of marriage.

When we make a commitment, it’s because we have hope for the future. If we have no hope for the future, why should we make serious, long-term commitments?

There are many people in our society who fear commitments not only because they have little hope for the future but also because, in their personal lives, they have been abandoned one or more times. One person said, “I needed my father terribly, and he went out one night and took his life. He couldn’t help it, I suppose, but he left me alone with nothing to hang on to, and I felt as if it were my fault that he did it. I’m not going to risk being left alone that way again.”

There are others who are afraid to make commitments because they cannot trust themselves. One person said, “I never stuck with anything. How could I stick with another person for the rest of my life?”

What is the source of our basic hope for the future that makes commitment possible? For those of us who claim the Christian faith, the ground of our hope comes from our faith in God, especially as revealed in the birth, life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We believe that God is committed to the whole creation and to us as human beings.

When we have faith that God is there with us — in the worst as well as the best of places — then we feel that keeping personal commitments is what holds life together for us and gives our life a future. Commitment is what makes any human sort of life together possible on this earth.

It isn't that commitments suddenly get easy to keep when we believe God is committed to us. But when we have faith that God keeps commitments to us and with the creation, then it makes more sense for us to keep commitments.

We furthermore believe that the unconditional love of God is present in all human relationships, ready to empower and undergird those relationships, but that love does not work without our permission. We need to accept the love of God in our lives and let it do its work.

Another way to say this is that our human love for one another has an eternal and spiritual quality to it, and the love between husband and wife can help us experience that Eternal Love which we call God.

Although our marriage commitments are in the here and now and have a lot of very practical aspects to them, that's only a part of what life is all about. Love and commitment also have a quality that transcends the here and now. All of this is to say that marriages are immeasurably strengthened when God is self-consciously a part of our everyday lives, and for this to happen, we see the support of a Christian congregation.

The scripture reading for this sermon is the story of a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the statement is made in the story, "Jesus was also invited to the marriage." Invite the Eternal into your marriage, and your lives separately and together will have a quality that can be gotten in no other way.

It has been said that we human beings possess two powers to create a future worth living in. One of them is the power to forgive. The other is the power to make and keep commitments. We need to use both of them to secure a future for the marriage relationship.

The power to forgive frees us from past pain that we cannot accept and cannot forget, and the power to make promises creates a foundation for a hopeful future.

Conclusion

Now, a final word to my newly married son and daughter-in-law, and to all of you as well. By using the twin powers to forgive and to make and keep promises, your marriage can be one of the most beautiful experiences of your life on this earth. Some people try to achieve satisfaction and happiness through gaining wealth, status, admiration, and power, but all of these are only temporary. Marriage can bring you a whole different set of satisfactions: the profound satisfaction of making life more orderly, more joyful, more warm and loving, and hopefully, as in the case of your mother and me, the joy and satisfaction of having children and watching them grow and mature and make a life of their own.

May God continue to bless you in your individual lives and in your marriage. Amen.