SUNDAY, JANUARY 15, 1989

Book 18

"THOUGHTS ON A MARRIAGE"

John 2:1-11

(A Sermon Dedicated to Joel and Julie)

"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 in First-Plymouth Congregational Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. It was the wedding of our third and youngest child, a son named Joel and the 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 an extra-special meaning for me--those of our three children, the first daughter Krista, was married eight years ago here in this Church, the second daughter Caris, five years ago (and this one also on New Year's Eve, and in this Church) and now our son. I had escorted each one of our

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

Instead of giving a sermon in 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.

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, their friends from across the country and members of this congregation. As Jesus was present at the wedding in Cana, some 2000 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. There are two families involved, and the community at large also has a stake in this marriage and in every other marriage as well as in every divorce.

When our first daughter was married, I said in a sermon in the form of a letter to them that at the center of every marriage is a

promise and on the face of it, it seems like an absurb promise. Two people who have only a very limited understanding of one another and of what will happen in the future, 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 a marriage, we promise so much of ourselves when we know so little about what things are going to be like when the time comes to keep the commitments we make.

There is no one who will be quite the same person tomorrow that he or she is today. Each one will change, and we will change at different times and different rates. Our needs will change. Our desires will change. So will our feelings.

Thus to some persons 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 absurdness is the romance. Without risk there is no beauty or strength or goodness.

Furthermore, the right kind of commitment keeping makes good sense because it is the

only way to keep good human relationships alive. And good human relationships make everybody'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 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.

Here then are several suggestions from our Christian faith which can help make the committed love in a marriage last a life time.

1. First of all, 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 he or she needs.

Notice here the careful distinction between desires and needs. There are many things we desire, but that does not mean that we need those things. I might desire a new stereo color television, but I do not need one. There's probably more confusion between desires and needs than 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 furthermore that we deserve what we desire. Sometime make a two column list -- in one column list your needs and in the second column 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 his or her brutality--suckers for his or her 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.

2. Secondly, remember that committed and caring love in a marriage is the strongest when it is between two persons as equals. The marriage vows you took are the same and equal for each one in the marriage relationship.

Though you are united in marriage, this does not mean that 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 of what they are saying, 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 individual people 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 life-long 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 his or her 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."

3. Thirdly, 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 which 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 the 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 the 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 which 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 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.

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, 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.