Sunday, September 5, 1993
THIRTY-NINE YEARS
John 2:1-11

On Sunday, September 5, at 4:00 p.m., thirty-nine years ago, my wife, Rowena, and I were married in Springfield, Missouri. The temperature was 102 degrees with high humidity, and the church was not air-conditioned.

To some of you here today, or listening on the radio, or watching on television, thirty-nine years of marriage to the same person may seem only average. Each year we have several 50th wedding anniversary celebrations in this church, and some even more than that. A few years back, for example, I was privileged to attend a 70th wedding anniversary for two of our church members. It was a beautiful occasion, not only 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 became, the more aches and pains they had, and the more they came to know the full meaning of the promise — in sickness and in health.

So, thirty-nine years of marriage is nothing special in terms of numbers. Furthermore, we cannot measure the quality or happiness of a marriage in terms of quantity. But these thirty-nine years have been very special to Rowena and me, and to our children and now our grandchildren. I think we have learned some things about ourselves and about marriage because of being together that long. I think we have also experienced through our marriage the love of God.

But before I talk about some of what we have learned, I want to say a few things to those of you who are listening and are single. Some of you have never been married and do not choose to be. Others have been married and are now 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 productive lives without marriage. There have always been those who have chosen not to marry at all or to marry much later in life.

As far as our Christian faith is concerned, being single and remaining so is as much a natural state for individuals as being married. As far as we know, both Jesus and the Apostle Paul remained single, as did many of the women leaders in the early church. Each person, male and female, is created a single, unique human being, and we do not need marriage to complete ourselves.

I also want to say a special word to those of you who have experienced the pain of divorce. It's been my experience as a minister and counselor that some marriages cannot be saved, and some should not be saved. We all make mistakes, and some of those are in our choice of a spouse. I also know from experience that those who agonize over whether to seek a divorce do not make the decision lightly. They experience a deep sense of failure and grief. I want you to know that God is with you in your agony and that God does not love you any less. The good news is that we can often learn more from our failures than from our successes.

At the same time, as far as our Christian faith is concerned, we believe God can bless us in our marriages, 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, and it forms the foundation for bringing children into the world and raising them in a loving, secure environment.

This means that at the center of all marriages is a promise, a covenant between two people. And when individuals make a life-long promise to one another, we seem to know intuitively that there is something sacred about that. Thus, 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 religious.

They come to be married in a religious ceremony because they have a deep, though sometimes inarticulate, knowledge that marriage has some special, eternal, theological significance because of the promises made and because children might be born into that new family.

Take away all the fluff from a marriage ceremony — processionals, music, flowers, prayers, photographs, and all the rest — and what we are left with are promises between two people spoken aloud in the presence of witnesses. At the center of every marriage 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 the covenant of 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."

Looking at it from the outside, it's almost a mad and certainly a risky thing to do. All promise-making is a risk because each one of us is imperfect, and we therefore sometimes fail in keeping our promises. Yet I would suggest that the risk of the promise is the romance of it. Without risk, there is no beauty, strength, or goodness. It doesn't take any courage to promise someone, "I will stay with you as long as I feel like it," or "until I meet someone I like better."

And since we live in an interdependent and connected world, the marriage promise is more than personal or individual. It has social consequences. Keeping a promise builds human beings and strengthens our society; breaking a promise contributes to social disintegration. So, the church in marriage asks that the promises 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, 39 years ago, on September 5, at 4:00 in the afternoon, Rowena and I made our promises to each other in a Christian public ceremony with our friends and family members present.

What then are some of the things we have learned about marriage and family life within the context of the Christian faith during these 39 years together?

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 am convinced that one source of contemporary frustration with marriage for some people is the attempt to believe and try to make marriage do everything for them. They want and expect marriage to be their God and savior. I know this because of the

hundreds of couples I have talked with as they prepare for their marriage in this church and in other churches I have served. I've been officiating at weddings now for more than 36 years.

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 their marriage to be everything because they try to include everything in their vows. They say that they will always be there for each other; that they will always be faithful and loyal; that they will accept each other's imperfections; that they will never hurt the other; that though they expect to disagree on many minor issues, they will always be in agreement on major issues; that they will always be completely open and honest with each other; that they will always support each other's decisions; that their marriage will be their sanctuary, their refuge, their haven in a heartless world.

One would think that trying to keep 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 try to make our marriage our only sanctuary and our God, then it will surely fail us. In our marriage, for example, we do not always agree on minor matters or on major matters. We frequently 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 a marriage, we have to leave some of our unreasonable expectations behind.

Second, and related to what I have just said, we have learned that even a good and happy marriage does not exist to solve all of our problems. We each still feel loneliness at times. We still get depressed. The imperfections we brought into our marriage did not magically disappear because of our love or our marriage.
We have learned not to assume that good spouses are able to make their partners happy all the time, nor should we expect them to. One frequent error among married people, and in other human relationships as well, is that we tend to assume responsibility for another person's feelings. If you believe that your happiness is mostly in the hands of another, your tendency will be to sit back and expect large portions to be dished up to you 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 of our problems. In a book titled Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst, she 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: "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. But that's not how my, or most, marriages work."

So, we have learned and are still learning that being married and getting to know each other very well does not solve all of our problems, nor will it solve all of yours.

Third, we have learned and are learning in our marriage that human beings take time. It takes a lifetime for me and for each one of us to develop into someone of depth and 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 mysterious 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 and to learn to accept forgiveness. One reason that 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 are able to forgive and to receive forgiveness from all sorts of others outside our marriage. Thus, our Puritan forbearers 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 because we intend to be together as long as we both shall live.

And most of all, the promise in our marriage is teaching us gratitude. We are grateful for the happiness we have experienced in our 39 years together and which we continue to know, and for the hope that gives us for the future.

We are grateful for the gift of three wonderful and loving children and the joy we have known in watching them grow into responsible adults and parents. We are grateful for the gift of seven grandchildren who continue to bring a whole new perspective into our lives. And we are grateful because we continue to find in our marriage relationship some concrete experience of the love of God as we try and work at loving each other. Amen.