Sunday, September 5, 1999
COMMITMENT ABUNDANCE HARMONY
John 2:1-11

Earlier this summer, I began a sermon series on various “disorders.” The word “disorder” has a number of meanings. It can be a lack of order or discipline, a state of confusion. In medical or psychological terms, it can mean an ailment or illness. One of the most commonly talked about disorders today is “Attention Deficit Disorder.”

However, we can have other kinds of disorders that are not medical or psychological but are spiritual — priority deficit disorder, gratitude deficit disorder, commitment deficit disorder.

The first sermon in the series was entitled “Vision Deficit Disorder.” I was not talking about the kind of vision deficit that can be corrected by wearing glasses or contact lenses or having eye surgery, but the type of vision deficit that refuses to see other points of view. It is a narrow view of life, a refusal to look at the broader picture, an unwillingness to examine one’s basic assumptions, or a lack of vision for a better future, or a limited understanding of God.

The second sermon in the series was “Faith Deficit Disorder.” Some of its symptoms are a lack of faith in one’s own abilities or potential, a lack of faith or trust in the ability of others. Another symptom is the unwillingness to take a risk or try something new because of a fear of failure. Some people have faith deficit disorder in their relationship with God.

Today’s sermon is related to the series on various disorders, but the theme is put in a positive way because I want to talk about marriage. Instead of talking about some kind of “deficit disorder,” I want to talk about the opposite. What is the opposite of “deficit"? “Surplus” or “abundance.” What is the opposite of “disorder"? “Order,” or in medical or psychological terms, “health,” “wholeness,” or “harmony.” So what’s the antithesis of “Commitment Deficit Disorder"? One way to describe it is “Commitment Abundance Order” or “Commitment Abundance Harmony.”

Forty-five years ago, on Sunday afternoon, September 5, 1954, at 4:00 p.m., Rowena and I made a lifelong commitment to each other in a marriage ceremony in a Methodist church in Springfield, Missouri. As we look back, we agree that we each brought to that ceremony an abundance of commitment, which has resulted in an orderly, harmonious marriage. I like the word “harmony” because it does not imply sameness or always being in agreement. In music, sometimes the most satisfying and beautiful harmony is experienced after some dissonance. Also, as I understand music, some of the most beautiful harmony occurs when two different melodies are played at the same time. In John Philip Sousa’s march, Stars and Stripes Forever, the final section has several different melodies being played concurrently, and the result is beautiful music. Counter melodies need to be played in the same key, but they can be different in other ways. It’s a good analogy for marriage.

To some of you here today or listening on the radio or watching on television, 45 years of marriage to the same person is only average. Each year, we are invited to a number of 50th wedding anniversary celebrations in this church as well as 60th wedding anniversaries and longer.

So 45 years of marriage is nothing special in terms of numbers. The quality or happiness of a marriage cannot be measured in terms of quantity. But these 45 years of marriage have been very special to Rowena and me and to our children and grandchildren.

Because our marriage continues to be abundantly satisfying, we believe that we should not only tell each other, but tell others how good it is. We can learn a lot from other marriages.

Here's what one person wrote as a result of observing the marriage of her next-door neighbors: "Tom and Dorothy were married 50 years. Their marriage gave me hope. For here were two people who enjoyed each other, who laughed together at muddy floors and burned dinners and overdrawn checking accounts, who acted as if living with another person was the most preposterous yet the most miraculous adventure upon which a human being could embark."

Before I talk about some of what we have learned, I want to say some 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, according to our Christian faith, marriage is not the only way to order a life. Many individuals can and do live happy, fulfilling, and productive lives without marriage and experience the love of God in other ways. There have always been those persons who have chosen not to marry or to marry 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 some special words to those of you who have experienced the pain of divorce. It's been my experience as a pastor and counselor that there are some marriages that cannot be saved and some that should not be saved. We all make mistakes, and some of those are in our choice of a spouse. No matter how committed some have been, abundant harmony never emerges.

I also know that in my experience, those who agonize through the decision of whether to seek a divorce or not do not make the decision lightly. They experience a deep sense of failure and grief. God suffers with you in your agony, and 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 in addition to blessing us in remaining single, or becoming single after having been married.

In the story read this morning from the Gospel of John, Jesus was invited with his disciples to a wedding at Cana in Galilee. In attending, Jesus gave his blessing to marriage as one way of living in God's world.

According to our Christian faith, marriage, in the best sense of the word, is the ordering of the 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 if children are born into the marriage, it can form the foundation for bringing them up in a loving, secure environment.

This means that at the center of all marriages is a promise, a covenant between two people. If one or both of the partners in a marriage have a commitment deficit, there will be trouble. When individuals make a lifelong promise to one another, we seem to know intuitively that there is something sacred about that. That's why so many couples come to a church to be married, even when they are not members of a congregation and do not think of themselves as being religious.

They come to be married in a religious ceremony because they have a deep, though oftentimes inarticulate, knowledge that marriage has some special, eternal, theological significance because of the promises made.

Take away all the fluff from a marriage ceremony — processionals, music, flowers, photographs, rehearsals, receptions, and all the rest — and what we are left with are promises between two people spoken out loud in the presence of witnesses.

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 is a mad, absurd, and risky thing to do. All promise-making is a risk because each one of us is imperfect, and we 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, courage, 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."

Because we live in an interdependent, connected world, the marriage promise is more than personal or individual. A song sometimes sung in marriage ceremonies that I dislike is called "Just the Two of Us." Marriage is never just the two of us. It has social consequences. Keeping promises builds human beings and strengthens our human community; breaking promises contributes to social disintegration. So the church, in marriage, asks that the promises be said aloud. The ceremony takes place before God and witnesses. Too much is at stake to leave marriage to private conscience or romantic notions.

After 45 years, and still counting, here are some of the things Rowena and I have learned about marriage and family life within the context of the Christian faith, and we 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 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 on their part 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 and hundreds of couples I have talked with as they prepare for their marriage.

These 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, we want to believe, the perfect fulfillment of every human desire. We have then a "you are my everything, can't live without you" passion.

There are times when couples want to write their own marriage vows, and that's okay. However, 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 they will always be there for each other, that they will always laugh with the other and cry with the other, that they will accept each other's imperfections, that they will be in agreement on all major issues, that they will always be open and honest and support the other's dreams and desires. Their marriage will be their sanctuary, their refuge, their haven in a heartless world.

I asked a couple recently if they realized the implications of promising to always support the dreams of their partner. 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, we do not always agree on minor matters or major ones. I hope Rowena will not support me in all my dreams because some of them are wacky. We try to at least listen to each other's dreams, but not always support them.

In marriage, two persons are not blended into one. Even though married, we remain two distinct individuals. There are times we need to be apart from one another.

Second, we have learned and are still learning that even a harmonious marriage will not solve all of our problems. We each experience loneliness at times. We can still get depressed. The imperfections we brought into our marriage do not magically disappear because of our love or our marriage.

Third, we have learned and are still learning that marriage is a process, a journey. Recently, at the conclusion of a marriage ceremony, the bride said to me, "Is it over already?" And I replied, "No, it's just begun." It takes time for me and for each one of us to develop into someone of depth and character. It takes time to learn to trust and care for the other person with whom I have promised to be, in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow. By making the commitment for as long as we both shall live, we give ourselves the time to enter into the vast and mysterious reality of another human being. It takes time to learn to truly cherish and adore another human being.

We are also learning gratitude from our commitment abundance harmony. We are grateful for the happiness we have experienced during these 45 years and for the hope it gives us for the future. We are grateful for the gift of three wonderful and loving children and their spouses and the joy we continue to experience as we watch them grow as responsible adults and parents.

We are also grateful for the gift of nine sparkling grandchildren who continue to bring a whole new perspective to our lives. And we are grateful because we continue to find in our marriage relationship an enduring experience of the love of God as we work at loving each other. Amen.