Sunday, September 5, 2004
FIFTY YEARS
John 2:1-11

On Sunday afternoon, September 5, 1954, at 4:00 p.m., fifty years ago, my wife Rowena and I were married in St. Paul Methodist Church in Springfield, Missouri. The temperature was 102 degrees with high humidity, and the church was not air-conditioned. Following a brief reception with punch and wedding cake in the church basement, we packed our car with everything we owned — wedding gifts, clothes, and other personal items — and began the long drive to Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut, where I would begin my second year of seminary. We moved into a tiny, one-bedroom furnished apartment with a shared bath down the hall.

To some of you here today, or listening on the radio or watching on television, 50 years of marriage to the same person is not unusual. Each year, there are a number of 50th wedding anniversary celebrations in this church. There are also 60-year celebrations and beyond.

A few years ago, I was privileged to attend a 70th-year celebration for two of our church members. It was a beautiful occasion, not only because they had been married for 70 years to the same person, 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.”

Thus, 50 years of marriage is nothing unique in terms of numbers. You cannot measure the quality or happiness of a marriage in terms of years. However, these 50 years have been very special to us, to our children, and now to our grandchildren. We have learned some things about ourselves and about marriage because of being together that long.

Before I describe some of what we have learned, I want to say something to those of you who are single. Some of you have never been married and do not choose to be. Others have been married and are now single because you are divorced or because your spouse has died. Certainly, marriage is not the only way to live a life. Many individuals can and do live happy, fulfilling, productive lives without marriage.

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

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 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.

I also know from my experience that those who agonize through the decision of whether or not to seek a divorce do not make the decision lightly. They experience a deep sense of failure and of grief. God does not love you any less. The good news is that you can learn as much or more from your failures as from your successes.

At the same time, as far as our Christian faith is concerned, God can bless you in your marriage. In the story read today from the Gospel of John, Jesus was invited with his disciples to a wedding reception at Cana in Galilee. His presence there was a powerful symbol of God's love that can be experienced in marriage.

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 and want to make a public commitment to care for one another for better or for worse, in sickness and in health, as long as both shall live. It forms the foundation for the possibility of bringing children into the world and for raising them in a loving, secure environment.

This means that at the center of a marriage is a promise — a covenant between two people. When individuals make a lifelong promise to one another, whether or not the word "God" is used, they seem to know intuitively that something sacred is taking place.

That's why so many couples come to a church to be married, even when they are not members of a church and have not thought of themselves as being especially religious. They want to be married in a religious ceremony because they have a deep, though sometimes inarticulate, knowledge that marriage has some theological significance because of the promises made and because children might be born into that relationship.

Take away all the fluff from a marriage ceremony — processionals, music, flowers, photographs, and all the rest — and what you 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 of them, 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 seems a mad and risky act to take — and it is. All promise-making is a risk because each person is imperfect, and no one knows what the future will bring. Yet I would suggest that the risk of the promise is the romance of it. Without risk, there is no courage, 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 else that attracts me."

Because we live in an interdependent, connected world, the marriage promise is more than personal and individual. It has social consequences. Keeping promises builds human character and strengthens all of society. Taking promises lightly weakens your character, and breaking them too easily contributes to social disintegration.

Thus, it is important that in marriage ceremonies, the promises be said aloud. The ceremony takes place in the presence of God and human witnesses. Too much is at stake to leave marriage to private conscience or only romantic feelings.

So, 50 years ago, on September 5, 1954, at 4:00 in the afternoon, Rowena and I made our promises to each other in a Christian public ceremony with our family members and friends 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 50 years?

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 Rowena, 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 and solve all of their problems. 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 look forward to their marriage in this church and in other congregations I have served.

For some people, these high expectations begin to bloom in the steamy climate of adolescence, when tenderness and sexual passion converge, when you fall in love with someone who embodies for you (with a little help from passion's blindness) the perfect fulfillment of every human desire. You have then, a "you are my everything, I can't live without you" passion.

I especially see this in some couples who want to write their own vows. Many of these self-written vows show that the couple involved expects 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 might disagree on some minor issues, they will always be in agreement on major issues, that they will always be open and honest with each other, that they will support each other in all their dreams, and 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 and sustain each other in sickness and in health, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow would be challenging enough.

If you try to make your marriage your only sanctuary and your God, then it will surely fail you. In our marriage, Rowena and I do not always agree on minor matters or on major matters. We often agree to disagree.

In marriage, two people are not blended into one. 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 leave some of our unreasonable expectations behind.

To put it another way, we have learned that even a good and happy marriage does not solve all of our problems. We each still feel loneliness at times. We still have our ups and downs. 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, is that you are tempted to assume responsibility for another person's feelings or to assume that someone else is responsible for your 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 put on your plate, as if it were apple pie.

Second, we have learned and are still learning in our marriage that everything good in life takes time. It takes time — a lifetime — for you to develop into someone of depth and character. That's true also in your Christian faith. It's not enough to be born again; you must also grow up, and that takes time. 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, in plenty and in want, as long as we both shall live.

By making the marriage promise "as long as we both shall live," we give ourselves the time to enter into the vast and mysterious reality of another human being.

In marriage, it also takes time to learn forgiveness. There is no way to live in such close proximity to another human being without learning to forgive and to accept forgiveness.

One reason that the Christian way is so important in marriage is that if over time you become good at forgiving and receiving forgiveness from your spouse, you are able to forgive and to receive forgiveness from others outside your marriage. It's never enough to forgive one person. In the act of forgiving one person, you need at the same time to forgive everyone. Otherwise, true forgiveness has not taken place. Thus, our congregational ancestors spoke of marriage as a "little church within a church."

We are also learning in our 50 years of marriage 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.

The lifetime promise in marriage continues to teach us gratitude. We are grateful for the happiness we have experienced in our 50 years together and for the hope that happiness gives us for the future. We are grateful for the gift of three wonderful and loving children, their spouses, and our nine grandchildren.

Most of all, we are grateful because we continue to find in our marriage relationship a tangible experience of God's love as we carry out our love for each other. Amen.