

Because of the Love he had for Her
July 17, 2005

I want to preface this Sermon (notice this week it is a Sermon – maybe a bit longer than last week’s message) with two words of explanation. First, the theme today is marriage – traditional and same sex marriage. This may not necessarily be what you came to church to hear. Thirty five years ago when I studied for the ministry, it was not what I anticipated preaching about either. However, I have felt an imperative to preach about what makes the news. Marriage is in the news. The two newspapers we read at home both carried stories of The United Church of Christ’s General Synod and the vote on same sex marriage. It was one resolution in a cast of thousands, but I didn’t see a news account referring to any others. So, I think people are talking about such matters, wanting to know what others are thinking, maybe even what the pastor thinks, so I try to expound a bit in church on what goes on in our world.

Second, I have always been acutely aware that when I preach, it is out of my particular experience. These are my beliefs that I am sharing with you – on this or any other Sunday. I try to arrive at them faithfully and with due consideration of Jesus’ teachings, my own history and my feelings. I feel it a privilege to share them with you, but not with the assumption that I am pontificating in order to necessarily coerce you into accepting something you don’t believe. However, I do think a church should be a place of healthy discussion and exchange. That is my intention here – to open “our” minds to religious ideas and begin a conversation by sharing with you my opinions, realizing we may not share the same ideas.

So, enough apology! Let me begin on a rather safe foundation by sharing what I, as a pastor, think about doing weddings. The answer is simple, but it could be different next week! Today I enjoy officiating at weddings. But I have gone through stages when this has not been so. When I have run through a sequence of couples who seem to be simply using the church for their beautiful affair and going through the motions, so to speak! A pastor dislikes feeling he or she is being used or that a church is simply a pretty place convenient for hosting an event.

But lately (today) weddings have been good. I suppose, because I am for the most part doing weddings that are for people I have seen grow and mature. For example, the wedding I officiated at in New York two weeks ago was for a woman that grew up in the church I had pastored and been extremely active. As I told the Christian Ed Committee the other day, she had made a career change in her final year of college and was now going into teaching, because she remembered how some of the happiest and most fulfilling experiences in her life derived from teaching church school while she was in High School. Why wouldn’t I be happy to do such a wedding!

Some people ask me the worst memories I have of weddings. Tops on the list is the wedding I did one hot August day. It was the third that day for me – I had never done three before and will never schedule three again. Ironically, everything had gone all too well, all day long. Until the final prayer near the end of the third wedding when I heard a terrible crash. The groom had fallen backwards off the platform in a dead faint. The organist took over, playing everything from Bach to the National Anthem, I think. (You might keep that in mind Cindy!) The question was, of course, had he been partying the

night before. No, but he had not eaten in two entire days! Too nervous! Three weddings - never again!

When I first started doing weddings, I began meeting with couples three times in preparation for their big day. This, I think, has changed a bit also. I really tried back then to share the nuts and bolts of what I thought was a successful marriage. After doing some 300 weddings, and knowing that my success rate is probably the typical 50 %, I now use these times together to primarily get to know one another better. To help a couple design a ceremony that bears their personality and spirit and is uniquely their own. And, in some small way to help them understand that the covenant they are making is not simply between the two of them but involves God as well. This God-talk generally comes about naturally, because 75% of the couples I marry only have one request – “we don’t want to recite anything that includes the word ‘obey’”. Well, that of course allows me to speak of being obedient to each other’s needs (not a bad thing) and to center themselves in their relationship to God. What does God ask us to do as we enter into sacred partnership with another? There should be a mutual love and respect for the integrity of each person.

Above all, when I do weddings these days, I truly hope that people love each other and have some clue what they are getting into. Linda and I were married in college 35 years ago. I remember the pastor asking how much effort each of us should be putting into our relationship. Seemed to me then that if each of us put in 50% we would end up with a whole. I guess he had heard that answer before because he adjusted the percentage upward. Each partner should give 100% or more all the time; marriage takes that much time and that much commitment!

So, as I counsel and officiate at wedding ceremonies these days, I simply try to get people off to a good and sacred beginning, hoping that their love for each other will carry them over the years. That love will grow and they will prosper. In looking back, some couples I was sure were a fine match long ago discovered divorce, much to my chagrin. Some I considered too young, too different, too footloose and fancy free even – they are prospering today as I would never have suspected.

The morning I officiated at that wedding in New York, I read Anne Lamott’s story entitled “Flower Girl.” I asked Linda if I should quote these words at the wedding and she advised me against it. However, this pretty well sums up matters. “Building a wedding is a recipe for muddle – the bridal party, the families, the guests, the minister, the vows, the food. You’re attempting to make something beautiful out of unruly and unpredictable elements – the weather, the nuttier relatives, the rivalries, the disorders and dreams. Out of mostly old neurotic family and friends, you hope to create something harmonious.”

I haven’t really mentioned same sex marriages yet. Not much experience there! Wedding ceremonies – been there, done that. Same sex marriages – haven’t been asked to take that road yet. But is there a difference? Would a same sex relationship change anything I have just said? When we lived on the Vermont border, I thought what Vermont worked out was pretty innovative and a good compromise. Civil Unions. If nothing else, it gave me time to think through a bit an idea that was new and seemingly a

break from tradition. Then more recently Massachusetts legalized same sex marriage. I don't live in Massachusetts, as I did for over 20 years, but I have heard people question whether the marriage of a gay or lesbian person would lessen the meaning of traditional marriage.

I don't want to stand before you and try to argue away the barriers to same sex marriage. Does it affect my marriage? I don't think so. Does it break with tradition? Yes, but traditions change. We don't do as Jacob did in Genesis – be forced to live with the one we don't love in order to marry the one we truly desire. “Because of the love he had for her” the scripture records, Jacob lived 7 years with Leah before marrying Rachel. Even at that he ended up with two wives! That doesn't sound very healthy! We don't expect dowry's when we marry as once was the case, and still is in some cultures. The Biblical standard. Jesus has instruction regarding marriage, but he never refers to same sex marriage. My guess is that he would have spoken against it; however, he also broke with certain rules and standards by encouraging people to place true love for another before anything else. Jesus ministered to the alienated and dispossessed. Would that have been the case here? It could have been, but we will never know for sure.

In thinking about today, I defer to my mother. Not always a good strategy, but this story bears repeating. My mother was a rare person, much different than my father in that she wore her feelings visibly upon her sleeve for all to see. I recall the day when she received a phone call from her sister. Her sister's oldest daughter was going to marry. An Indian. A man from India. You can guess what was foremost on her sister's mind – the color of his skin. How dark was it? They hadn't met Dharam yet. But my mother's sister was trying to gauge how dark the skin could be and still be acceptable. My mother pretty much thought the whole matter irrelevant as long as they loved one another. For some reason, she had no difficulty seeing beyond skin color. She could be so incredibly radical at times! (She liked Sonny and Cher and the Beatles too!) And because you will ask after the service if I don't tell you, the couple is still married today (probably nearing 45 years). I mention this story, because the more I ponder same sex marriage, and admit still I think to certain prejudices inside myself, I say “well, isn't it ultimately about love?” It's not whether it affects me in some way or changes tradition or even breaks with church or civil standards...it is ultimately be about love...between two people.

It's funny, but since I have been here I have heard more people say, “I understand the open part of open and affirming, but I'm not so certain what the affirming part really means.” Well, I think this is the crux of the debate here! When we open our doors to others – whether they be racially different, handicapped, or of a different sexual orientation, what we are saying is that not only are they welcome here. But that we accept them fully as human beings! That we affirm their humanity – that (by gosh) we are all people who have the same needs and desires. To affirm that person is not to limit this openness by then saying, “you are welcome here but you remain somehow different than the rest of us.” Or that we draw a line with respect to what they can or cannot do. If we welcome anyone in to church, shouldn't we affirm the fact that that person also loves just as we do? That that person seeks commitment in lasting relationship? If not, then what does humanity mean, if we try to limit or measure it in others? As if we ever could!

Before I came here I applied for a part-time position in a church in Maine. Believe me I was relieved that this opportunity came along. At two separate meetings I had with the Search Committee, I overheard different people use the phrase we have all

heard to refer to homosexuality. “Love the sinner, hate the sin.” I cringed when they said this. Yet, they claimed to be open to all who wanted to worship in their church. Again, I ask, can we be open if we fail to affirm the full humanity of the one we say is welcome to sit next to us in the pew. That’s the question before us. Do we accept the person but deny their personhood? Do we welcome them as human while denying their humanity? What does it mean to be a child of God?

The resolution passed at Synod affirms the right of same sex couples to marry - to fulfill their human calling and live in sacred trust and partnership as a couple in love. To set up a life together – to live the great American dream. The resolution asks local churches to consider this, but does not bind them to it. In fact, a sentence was added at the Synod, stating that churches and church members may well not be at that juncture yet. I have only been here ten months, but I know full well that this church has a fairly typical representation – some for the measure, some opposed and some still in the consideration stage. It’s one of those things that we probably never thought much about until recent years. Yet, the positive side of it is that it asks us to consider our faith more carefully, offering us the opportunity to once again understand how God wants us to live our lives as we journey together. And I emphasize...what it means to be together as one humanity.

I think today’s message has been a bit of a mish mash presentation, a lot of scattered thoughts. I hope you will consider them; I hope we can share. As I told Diaconate, my image of the church should be the place where people of differing beliefs are somehow able to put them aside as they come to worship and to the table. Ultimately the challenge is to find Christ in our midst and to discover how to be in ministry together. But to do this, we must discuss (wrestle with, if we use Jacob as our guide) what it means to love another and to affirm that person’s integrity.

On a final and perhaps lighter note, I will leave you with three thoughts on marriage that apply to any marriage, I think. 1. I have been married 35 years. I will never understand how. It’s a mystery, but I give all the credit to Linda and God. 2. One thing I have learned, however, that is most effective and applies to all loving relationships. No matter what your partner says, if you respond “You are right Honey” things go much more easily. 3. Finally, if you want the pastor to come to your wedding reception, the time to issue the invitation is not during the picture taking following the ceremony.