**To Love and to Cherish … Until We Are Parted by Death
Sunday, April 18, 2021, 11:15 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman**

Nearly 29 years ago, at Calvary Episcopal Church in Columbia, Missouri, Robin and I stood in front of a community of family and friends and bound ourselves to each other with sacred vows of marriage.

We looked in each other’s eyes and promised “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow.”

We were incredibly young. I was so young that I couldn’t legally drive the rental car on our honeymoon. I look back on that moment now and realize we had no idea what we were getting into … what those words might mean. Or, at least I’ll speak for myself … I had no idea what I was getting into … and what those words might mean.

In the three decades since, I know enough to know that I am still learning. I have experienced enough of my own marriage and I have experienced enough of other people’s marriages to know that like anything rooted in love and aspiring to love, marriage is wonderful and fraught.

Like anything rooted in love and aspiring to love, marriage is complicated and messy because we are invited to bring our whole selves into it … and we are complicated and messy. We bring all our unique beauty and all our glorious pathology into it.

At our best, we try in marriage to create a space safe enough for us to have unguarded hearts … where there is enough trust to let the other see pieces of ourselves that we may not even be comfortable seeing ourselves … or that we may not even be aware of … so deep have we buried them.

The vulnerability that marriage invites us into can be a beautiful gift. It can break down those walls we put around our hearts and let us be touched by love in deep and profound ways. It can help people like me who struggle with believing I am lovable begin to trust that maybe, just maybe, I am. It can, at its best, be an arena where the maxim that perfect love drives out fear can prove actually to be true.

And … the vulnerability that marriage invites us into can be an opportunity for violence and abuse … and that can take many, many forms. The greater access we give each other to our hearts and bodies, the greater the potential for healing and joy … and also the greater the potential for harm.

We bring into marriage hearts, minds and spirits that bear the caresses and scars not just of the life we have led before but those of generations of ancestors before. We forget that about each other and about ourselves. We forget that each of us is holy ground that the other should take their shoes off before entering, should walk carefully and lovingly through. Too often we forget and indiscriminately tread on each other in ways that reinforce longstanding wounds and create new ones.

In the three decades since that moment in Columbia, Missouri, I have presided at more weddings than I can count, have sat with more people than I can count and heard about their marriages, have celebrated more anniversaries and renewals of vows than I can count and have walked with more people through the ends of their marriages than I can count.

In the three decades since, I have learned that sometimes “until we are parted by death” is not the death of a person but the death of a marriage that has become toxic and death producing instead of healing and life-producing. That oftentimes divorce is simply the acknowledgment that death of this form of relationship has occurred and striving to have it be the holiest death possible.

In a lifetime of experiencing marriages – my parents’, my own, and so many others – I am still just beginning to learn about what marriage is. And one of the biggest things I am learning is that it is never just about two people.

There is a brief … incredibly brief … far too brief moment in the Episcopal wedding service where, after the couple have done what is called the “declaration of consent” … essentially announced their intention to bind themselves to each other with sacred vows and that they are doing it of their own free will, with enthusiastic consent and without coercion … there is a moment right after that where the presider speaks not to the couple but to the entire gathered community and says:

“Will all of you witnessing these vows do all in your power to support these two persons in their marriage?”

And the response of the congregation is “We will!”

That’s another line where I generally think we have no idea what we are saying, what we are promising, what we are getting into.

When I was a young priest, a friend and colleague, Dan Handschy, told me he thought this was one of the most important and overlooked parts of the service because, as he explained, it was the moment when the couple’s relationship becomes “community property.”

This is the moment when we affirm that no marriage is ever just about two people … and that we all have a stake in it and that marriage has a claim on all of us.

The truth is, if a couple has gotten to the point of getting married, they have most probably in various forms, said some version or versions of the content of the marriage vows to one another along the way. The reason we gather our communities of family, friends and faith with us when we take these vows is because the whole community needs to take a vow, too.

“Will all of you witnessing these vows do all in your power to support these two persons in their marriage?”

Marriage is never just about the couple.

Marriage is always about the community.

It takes a community to support a marriage and help it to grow and thrive.

It takes a community to heal the wounds that marriage can cause … and it takes a community to celebrate fully the love and joy that can be born from a marriage.

It takes a community to remind each person that they don’t stop being an individual when they bind themselves to the other – and it takes a community to remind each person that, married or not, they are more than just an individual, too.

And it takes a community to remember and embody that everyone is deserving of God’s safe love whether it takes the form of marriage or not.

That last one leads to another reason that marriage is always about the community. And that’s because on some level, marriage is both aspiration and accommodation.

Marriage is aspiration because the safe, mutual love we hope for in marriage is the love we aspire to as and for an entire community.

Marriage is accommodation because that kind of love is so hard, we know our best chance at achieving it is trying it with two people instead of the whole lot of us. And we hope that somehow what can happen is that the love that can be nurtured in a marriage will spill out and over into the rest of the community. And that those who are experiencing it in forms outside of marriage will see it spill into both marriages and the rest of community life.

This is the reality that Jesus is naming in this morning’s Gospel.

This morning’s Gospel has a little theatre of the absurd in it. Some religious types came to Jesus trying to trick him … ‘cause you know we religious types are always trying to trick people. And they ask a question wrapped in a story worthy of a 10-episode Netflix series.

“Teacher, Moses said, ‘If a man dies without having children, his brother shall marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother.” Now there were seven brothers, among us; the first married, and without having offspring, died, leaving the woman to his brother. The same for the second, and the third, to the seventh. After everything the woman died. In the resurrection, then, for which of the seven will she be wife?”

Now we could have a whole graduate seminar on issues with this Gospel reading.

First off, as our lectionary’s architect, Dr. Wil Gafney, notes in her reflection on this passage, the woman in this story is pretty much treated as a passive object to be passed along from brother to brother without consent or agency. It reflects marriage as essentially a patriarchal economic arrangement whose purpose, in this case, is to prevent a woman who has no economic power of her own, from becoming destitute … and also from ever having any agency or power of her own.

Second, what the heck is going on with this family anyway … and by the sixth or seventh brother, I gotta think he is getting not only pretty nervous but more than a little creeped out. And as far as the woman, I gotta think she’s thinking “is there any way out of this family??? Maybe a greater range of spousal choices wouldn’t be a bad idea!”

But those things are beside the point that Jesus makes with his answer.

Jesus says, “You all are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage, rather they are like angels in heaven.”

Jesus is saying that marriage is both aspiration and accommodation. At its best, it gives us a glimpse of the kind of relationship that God dreams for all of us as community. At its best, it is the definition of the Beloved Community for which we are striving and which we trust and hope is our destiny.

Every culture has marriage vows, and they are overlapping in their similarities and differences, and they are reflections of the evolving understandings of gender and sexuality, justice and equity. None are perfect, and yet I imagine most if not all strive for a sense of mutual love that is a great good. So, let’s just take those Episcopal marriage vows again as an example.

“To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.”

What would it look like if we lived that way not just as two people, but as a community?

What if in every relationship in our lives, we recognized that we are bound together by sacred vows. That we would not embrace each other more if we are doing better, or richer or healthier and we would not discard each other when things got worse, or we lost everything, or became sick.

What if every person we encountered, every relationship we had, we looked at the other and said “I will love and cherish you, until we are parted by death.”

It sounds both wonderful and impossible. It sounds life-giving and, frankly, more than a little exhausting … until I remember that what this would mean is not only me having to care for every person this way … but every single person caring for me this way, too.

I am convinced this is the dream that the FIRE OF SINAI had for the people of Israel in the wilderness when she revealed the 10 commandments. God was trying to take 12 disparate tribes and forge them into one nation, one community of love. Love was always at the center of these commandments. They were always supposed to be scaffolding to support mutual loving, community relationship. As Jesus later said, and as Paul repeated in the segment of his letter to the Romans we heard this morning,

*Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet” and, any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

And yet that is not how we live. We have taken the rule of love and swapped it out for a million rules that we make ostensibly to provide community safety and predictability but which more often than not function to keep the powerful in power and the powerless in line.

Far from equal love for rich and poor, we who are rich and privileged make the rules.

We twist the rules to suit those of us in power.

We enforce the rules with guns.

We punish when people break the rules and call it deterrence.

We use the rules and fear of what would happen if “the other” is allowed to break them as an excuse for violence.

When people break the rules, we say it’s because there isn’t enough violence, isn’t enough enforcement.

Or the rules aren’t tough enough.

SO we make tougher rules.

And have more violence.

We have abandoned the values of interdependence and mutuality and sacredness of life for the worship of independence and the capitalist value of personal property rights.

We have traded the ideal of community for the reality of a retributive criminal justice system.

We have institutionalized fear and the guarded heart as a greater good than the vulnerability that can lead to belovedness and joy.

And all the while Jesus is crying, “what are you doing? Don’t you remember the only rule that matters … is love?”

“To have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.”

What would it look like if we lived that way not just as two people, but as a community?

What if when the rule of love was broken instead of looking at punishment, we asked questions and listened deeply to the answers:

What is the wound?

What does healing look like?

What does forgiveness look like?

What does accountability that longs for restoration look like?

What song does love have to sing even as together we weep for the damage that has been done?

What if every person we encountered, every relationship we had, we looked at the other and said “I will love and cherish you, until we are parted by death.”

We would be a world with universal health care, housing and education. Where the community would gather both to grieve and to dance without fear. Where our bodies and stories would be embraced as sacred .. and everyone would have the power equally to define community and share their gifts.

And believe it or not, that would just be the beginning.

That’s the essence of walking with the revolutionary Jesus. It is that earliest of Christian communities described in Acts where everyone was together and held all possessions in common and gave to each as each had need.

That’s the essence of walking with the revolutionary Jesus. It is looking deeply into each other’s eyes and saying “I will not permit you to be homeless or hungry. I will not permit you to be struggling with mental illness without care. I will not permit you to not have the joy of learning or the ability to let your inner artist dance free. And I know you will not permit any of those things for me either.”

All of us together, loving and cherishing one another, until we are parted by death.

What is our dream for the world? That’s it. That’s the vision of tomorrow. And it was the vision that the revolutionary Jesus offered from the first time he sat down at table and invited anyone and everyone to join.

What is our dream for the world? That’s it. And so, we begin here. We begin with this community. We begin by supporting and loving each other in all our relationships – married and otherwise. We begin by creating a community of All Saints Church that lives deeply into our values of Radical Inclusion, Courageous Justice, Joyful Spirituality and Ethical Stewardship.

We begin by looking at our past and our present, together telling the whole story so together we can write a new story.

We begin by making space to grieve deeply all we have lost and to celebrate wildly the precious gift of life and love that is ours.

We begin by inviting anyone and everyone to come into this community – whoever you are and wherever you find yourself on your journey of faith – and to say to each one and ourselves as we enter.

“Beloved child of God, we vow to have and to hold you from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.”

This is our call.

This is our joy.

This is our solemn vow. Amen.