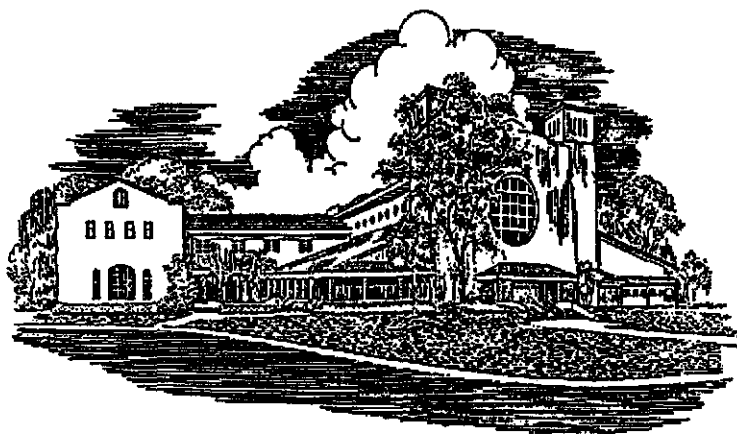


First Church Pulpit

**"TO HAVE LIVED AND LOVED TOGETHER . . .
In Honor of a Golden Anniversary"**

**Text: "And faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the
greatest of these is love"**

— I Corinthians 13:13



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Now I know this is not an ideal sermon for everybody. It will make some sad. It will sound alien to those who have had bad experiences in marriage. It will be irrelevant to those who for a variety of reasons chose not to marry. The very young will not yet be able to identify with it. The lonely growing older might shed a little tear.

But I preach it anyway, and take the risk of missing some . . . so that those now married might find some new strength for their relationship, and also, so that I can commend and congratulate those who have been married fifty years and more.

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Wordsworth, in one of his latter poems, expressed some thoughts about growing older. I have forgotten the whole poem, but I can never forget the closing lines: "God grant that when I am older, There will be someone there, Who knew me when I was young."

When life begins to round the last turn; when your confidence begins to wane and wiggle off course; when you cannot do things as well as you used to, there is great solace in being able to sit down with an old friend and talk about the days of yore, one who knew and loved you when you were young. "Make new friends, but keep the old. One is silver, the other gold."

One of the problems of the mobility of our modern families, and the transitoriness of modern friendship, is that we miss that treasured presence of those who were with us all along the way.

It is an echo of what old people mean when they say, "Everyone I used to know is gone;" or about the Church, "Nobody knows me up there anymore;" or as Updike caught 30 years ago, when his hero entered a retirement home, the frustrations were complicated by the thought -- he said -- "There is no one here who knew me when I was young."

I guess it is remembered friendship I am speaking of, and of love. Our greatest security resides in the memory of the God who holds all of our days forever in the hollow of His hand. The same loving God who cannot allow one of His little sparrows to fall to earth without taking notice. You bird and animal lovers, rest on that for a minute. Each little sparrow is precious to the Lord. All living things are remembered by the Lord, the One to whom even the hairs of our heads are numbered. He knows our mortal frame. God remembers, when everyone else forgets. And, they often do. **To Have Lived And Loved Together, A Sermon For Golden Anniversaries.**

Now I admit that this is a little serious for the opening of a sermon on marriage. Let me turn it around with a story I once told from this pulpit a half dozen years ago.

Twenty-five years ago, my friend Andrew's parents had their Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary. It was a grand occasion, which celebrated the qualities of patience, and kindness, and love. I mean, why else would anyone stay married for 50 years, if it was not for pure unending love? We sang some anniversary songs. We looked at the funny old faded pictures of their wedding day from 1929, blown up and looking grainy. We

listened to their son and daughter talk about this memory and that one. The couple renewed their old-fashioned wedding vows. She even promised again "to obey him. "They smiled, both of them, all the way through . . . "Until death do us part."

But then, a month later Andrew called me: "Richard, please go and see my parents. They have gone crazy." I said, "Why?" He said, "My mother is filing for divorce!" I laughed. What else could I do? I thought he was joking. Subsequently I went to see them and sure enough, it was not a laughing matter. Married 50 years and one month, she had summoned a lawyer, filed for divorce, and asked her Golden Husband to leave their small farmhouse in Indiana, and to let her alone -- forever.

Now that is the kind of pastoral call they never teach you how to handle in seminary. But I was much younger and braver then, so I went straight over: "Tell me, Mrs. Smith, what's going on? How do you feel about marriage and your husband?" She looked me in the eye and said with a crisp, cold voice, "Reverend, I never could stand him, and I finally got the nerve to tell him. It's over." And it was. Touché. Husbands, beware . . .

Smile a little at that, if you like. I sometimes tell that story at golden wedding anniversary parties where everybody laughs out loud. I have spent a large amount of time talking to widows through the years, many married 50 years and longer; and while I know of no other golden wedding couple who filed for divorce after their anniversary, I have heard the strangest sort of stories from wives after their husbands are gone. They finally tell the

truth. I was preparing myself to console her, but when I arrived her whole attitude seemed to say, "Oh thank God, it's over!"

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My goal is to open up the subject, "To Have Lived And Loved Together: For Golden Anniversaries." To be married for a long, long time is not simple. Part of the problem is that so many marriages just endure. They coast along with little expectation. The couple "disengages" from each other early on and keep circling around. They never confront the issues of the marriage. They stay together out of convention, or for the children, or for other fancy phrases counselors offer. It is easier not to make a fuss and to avoid the issues. It is usually easier to drift than to divorce. It is tough to go out to find a new place to live, and divide up the trinkets and the treasures, and to argue over custody of the children, to say nothing of things monetary. I issue this small warning to those of you married less than 50 years: Be concerned with what is going on. Work as hard to learn your marriage as you do to learn your job. Marriage is not easy. For everything you get, you give up something else.

Happiness is not guaranteed because you stay together, not if you avoid each other on important issues, and one or the other has to tiptoe around the mine fields. Now is the time to look at where you are, to seek honesty together, or to find someone experienced to guide you. Marriage has to be learned. Be honest, but loving. I got in trouble once when I spoke this way 20 years ago. A woman who heard me preach on freedom in marriage ended up filing for divorce, that following Monday

morning. She told her husband that the idea to leave came to her during my sermon. That was sad. Her parents were aghast. I felt awful I don't mean to say too much, but she has been happily married to another man for 22 years. Life is too short to squander it away idling at the side of some dead end road. Life is too short to delay happiness if happiness is there to find.

I know some of you are thinking that there is not much happiness on the other side either. I agree. Most people who get divorced end up worse off than they were when they started. With some, things do get a little better, but not usually. My ulterior motive in asking you to explore and settle the issues of your marriage early on is to have you find more happiness where you are.

I say it might be easier to stay together than to leave . . . but the easiest of all is to run away too soon when you do not get everything you want, or when you think you can find better love with someone else, someone more attractive, no doubt, someone who tickles your fancy in a more avid and energetic way. It is easiest of all to abandon your marriage, to leap the fences around the property, and run off through the fields. But there is a problem Do you know what it is?

When you duck out the side door in your need to be free, or to be with someone else, the problem is that "yourself," as the Irish say, goes along with you. You follow you around wherever you go. I warn you, as one who has dealt with marriage personally and professionally for 35 years, if you cannot solve your problem where you are, you will probably not solve it

somewhere else. You will take it with you and carry it on to someone else -- "Yourself is the problem."

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That said, let's turn the page. I want to speak to those who have been married for 50 years and more: "In Honor Of A Golden Anniversary."

The first thing you need to be grateful for is that you have been fortunate. **"Thank God for all the things that never happened."** So many couples who might have been happily married for fifty years are not given the privilege of being together for that long. I think about my youngest years in Pittsburgh when World War II was on. One after another of my friends' fathers or uncles, or brothers, as the years rolled on, were called up for military service and shuttled off to battle areas across the seas. Some did not return. Some who did had changed. War is hell.

In other cases illness or accidents come thundering in. Life which was vibrant and exciting and pleasurable in one instant is gone in the next. Something goes haywire inside one or the other, and the whole world turns upside down. It can be caused by unresolved conflicts in the psyche and the soul. Maybe it is some inherent weakness of character. Maybe it is genetically predetermined, some need within the body calls us to move off course, like Jack London's Buck in Call of the Wild.

I often think of a woman who years ago fell to pieces, but now is happily married a second time. Her first husband was brilliant, a good man, a Christian, and quite successful. They had three wonderful children. Then, I watched it happen. He went downhill. He could not live with himself. First drink, then drugs, then both. Off again, on again. What a poor tormented soul. He sought every treatment anyone recommended. He was in endless inner pain. Too bad. What great torment and terror he caused his wife and children. Two years later he was gone. Their marriage lasted 14 years. She set out to marry for life.

Our prayers of thanks for long marriages must include good fortune, dumb luck, and the blessings of the Lord. Praise God that both remained stable and healthy, tolerant, forgiving, that both were spared accidents and other exigencies of life. That is no small matter, friends. I congratulated a couple once in 1968 at their Fiftieth Wedding Anniversary Party. He said crisply: "All it means is that we have had good health, and she didn't leave me." Thank God for the things that never happened.

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Secondly, in praise of golden wedding anniversaries, Thank God for the things that did happen. You were lucky, but you worked at it, too. Words like commitment and growing together, and a good sense of humor . . . like she said, "If I didn't laugh at him, I probably would have killed him!" Marriage forces changes through the years. Unhappy is the couple who does not change with it.

Needs in a marriage at age 25 are not the same as 35, and not at all like 75. If you have been together for 50 years or more, it is an important and impressive accomplishment. At the least, you have managed change. With all the options available these days, you are part of a tremendous achievement. In those years you have had laughter and tears. You have both swallowed words you wanted to say, or asked and received forgiveness when you did. Both of you should pat yourselves and each other on the back. Golden wedding anniversaries are twice as plentiful these days as 40 years ago -- but our increasing longevity is surely one of the main reasons.

(Are you listening?) Both of you, God bless you, remained committed to the marriage, against obstacles and other choices. You remained true to the promise you made on your wedding day in the presence of the Lord. That is no small thing. One way to describe the craziness of the moral ineptitude of our times is to say there has been an immense decline in our willingness to remain committed to anyone, anything, anywhere. Go as the wind blows. Chase the pleasure of the moment.

When Malachi says, "Be kind to the bride of your youth," he spoke the word of the Lord. Husbands can be so unkind. When God gives you the gift of a woman to love you, He gives you a wonderful gift. Husbands and wives, be faithful, in refraining from touching other men and woman, to be sure, but be faithful in all the other ways as well.

Men blame their wives too much (Women sometimes also do). Husbands blame their wives for almost everything, even for

the decreasing intimacy as the years go on. It is the wife's fault, they say. "She never initiates anything!" is a repeated phrase I hear. "But the funny thing," she said, "is that when I do, he gets scared. He wants to be in control." Husbands, be kind to the bride of your youth. No matter how I say it, almost all couples who stay together through the good and bad years are happy they did.

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Third, for those married fifty years and more, as you savor your success in the past, and pray for the future . . . determine to live in the present. Enjoy the remaining time you have together. I read a book last week called Late Love, by a Psychotherapist/author Eileen Simpson. She traveled around the country to interview hundreds of couples who have been long married, or who have married again in their latter years. For generations, she notes, women who were widowed, however young they felt, were consigned to widowhood. People used to say, "The Widow Jones," or "The Widow Smith," did that. Nowadays, there is a wider range of choices to find happiness, even though the years roll on. Happiness comes in new relationships, in service, in intimacies, in laughter. One can fall in love at any age. Wow!

Feelings of ecstasy and excitement do not go away because another decade passes. One's need to be embraced and appreciated does not diminish through the years. We get tired, of course. But don't shelve yourself and your pleasures because

someone tells you to act your age. Be young, even foolish, in defense of your right to be in love.

One of the most popular sermons I ever preached, years ago, was titled "The Problem With Growing Older: Nobody Hugs Me Anymore." So, go hug an old lady this week, will you? Hug your wife or husband. You who have been married many years, even though love and loving changes, hug each other every chance you get. There is a lot to be forgiven: harsh words spoken, dumb things done. But there is also a lot of fun memories to share, and laughs. Relax and fool around a little.

Live the present. With increasing age anything can happen, and does. Life is too short to waste it away, to harbor grudges, to spend your energy on anger. There is only time enough for love. Your longevity will catch up with you some day. Hold hands, as I see with couples from our Westminster Manor as they walk around our church, and sneak a little kiss, and smile and enjoy. The years too swiftly fly. Live the present.

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And last, Fourth, that is where Love comes in (Capital "L"). That is what it is all about. I can shorthand this whole beautiful and lovely 13th Chapter of I Corinthians. Paul's poetry and balance is perfect in his opening paragraph: "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels," etc. What he means is that if you have love, you do not need anything else, not to make you happy, not to keep a marriage going. Two people have to honor it and remember it. The love of God that comes first to you, then

you keep it going into the life of someone else. If you have love, you don't need anything else, not for happiness.

But, oppositely, Paul says (Listen), if you do not have love, if you lose it, if it goes away, it does not matter what else you have. Things like success, money, houses, cars, boats, jewelry. If you lose love, you have lost it all. Happiness is gone.

Now if agape love is all that important to you and to your marriage, linger a minute with me and listen to what Paul says love is. Love is "patient and kind." I often say it takes a lot of patience to be a good wife . . . because husbands never grow up Love is kind. I don't need to tell you how unkind the world can be, do I? But in your home let kindness rule

"Love is not jealous." Most people would avoid that in a treatise on love, but not Paul. One kind of possessive jealousy is soul destroying. It has no place at all. Jealousy in marriage is one of the most critical problems I see. Wives are jealous of their husband's ability to move around, being with exciting people, while the wife-mother tends the home fires. And, husbands can be jealous of wives when the wife begins to say, "I want to have a life of my own. I can't live in your shadow forever. Turn me loose to be myself." To a husband who had controlled a marriage for decades that is anathema.

In recent years there is another kind of jealousy where the wife is more successful and competent than the husband, and his ego cannot stand it. Men are funny creatures. She begins to move freely with her fellow workers and friends, men and

women, and he becomes jealous and accuses her of having wild affairs and of depending on others for the support he is supposed to give, but does not. Paul was onto something critical. Of all the words he could have used, love is not "Jealous," is perfect. Never be jealous of the success of your spouse. Share it. Install yourself as president of your wife's fan club.

Paul adds: "Love is not arrogant or rude; it never insists on its own way." Isn't that a caution? My dad used to say "The Bible says that in marriage the two become one. The problem is which one will they be?" Do not insist on your own way. Find some way to make it "our way." Compromise and give, and grow together.

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Then, finally he writes, "Love never ends." Love never ends. Did you hear that? Do you believe it? It is complicated, but Paul says that once God gives you the gift of love, He will never take it back. That is powerful Love is fragile. If you shout at it, it will run away and hide. Love demands attention. The debris of the years of two fast-moving lives can cover it all over But love never ends. Be careful.

A man asked me once in the first year of my ministry, "Can you love two different women?" His wife had died, and he was falling in love with another. I did not know then, but I know now. During the lives of many marriages, wives and husbands die or disappear. You can love the one who is gone, and you can

also love the one who is there. It is kind of spiritual bigamy I am talking about, but a justifiable one. Smile and enjoy.

At the end, Paul says there are three things that last forever: Faith and Hope are two -- do not belittle them. He means faith to believe that God will always be with you. And hope that things will get better as you go. Those are great, but the greatest of all, as if you did not know it, is love.

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So my golden friends, I pray that God will continue to bless you with His happiness and peace, that He will open new vistas for you, and reveal the wonders of this mortal life, and so touch your soul with the Living Christ that when your life on earth is through, God will grant you eternal grace and peace. Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be . . . for now and evermore. Amen.

**We are grateful to Susan Swanson for typing
and preparing this sermon for publication.**