

A communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Pentecost 18, World Communion Sunday, October 4, 2009, dedicated to our newest members, and always to the glory of God!

“Tough and Tender Love”

Job 1:1, 2:1-10; Mark 10:2-16

My sermon today reflects on marriage. I understand marriage to include those who are same sex partners in covenanted relationships. While Ohio will not recognize same-sex marriages at this point in our history, I do. More important, I believe God recognizes and celebrates loving commitments and covenants beyond the divides that we create as human beings.

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Judith Wallerstein tells this story in her book, *The Good Marriage: How and Why Love Lasts*:

On a raw spring morning in 1991, I shared my earliest thoughts about this book with a group of some one hundred professional women-all friends and colleagues-who meet each month to discuss our works in progress.

“I'm interested in learning about good marriages-about what makes marriage succeed,” I said cheerfully. “As far as our knowledge is concerned, a happy marriage might as well be the dark side of the moon. And so I've decided to study a group of

long-lasting marriages that are genuinely satisfying for both husband and wife.” I looked around the room at these attractive, highly-educated women, who had achieved success in our high-tech, competitive society and who appeared to have it all. “Would any of you, along with your husbands, like to volunteer as participants in the study?” I asked. The room exploded with laughter.

I felt disturbed and puzzled by the group's reaction. Their laughter bore undertones of cynicism, nervousness, and disbelief, as if to say, “Surely you can't mean that happy marriage exists in the 1990s. How could you possibly believe that?”

Wallerstein continues:

When I pondered the meaning of their laughter later that night, I realized I had hit a raw nerve. For many, my innocent mention of a study of successful marriages seemed to strike below the well-defended surface, bringing to life buried images of love and intimacy. For a brief moment, I believe, the women had reconnected with passionate longings, only to confront again their disappointment that their wishes had not been fulfilled. And so they had laughed, dismissing their longings as illusory-vain hopes that could only lead to sorrow.

This duality of cynicism and hope is familiar to me, as it is to millions of men and women in America today. We share a profound sense of discomfort with the present state of marriage and family, even wondering sometimes if marriage as an institution can survive. At the same time, we share a deeply felt hope for our children that marriage will endure. I do not think this hope is misplaced.

Judith Wallerstein did not lose hope and she continued her study producing *The Good Marriage*. It is the clearest study written on marriage. Looking inside 50 marriages, Judith discovered each

marriage looks and feels different. Each couple figures out distinctive and meaningful ways to make their marriages work. To the outside world, some non-traditional marriages may not be seen as “good.” But, in all 50 couples, they both agree to one thing – they find delight in their relationships and significant meaning in their life together.

Not too long ago, Judith wrote this:

“We have been so preoccupied with divorce and crisis in the American family that we have failed to notice the good marriages that are all around us and from which we can learn. In today's world it's easy to become overwhelmed by problems that seem to have no solution. But we can shape our lives at home, including our relationships with our children and marriage itself. The home is the one place where we have the potential to create a world that is to our own liking; it is the last place where we should feel despair. As never before in history, men and women today are free to design the kind of marriage they want, with their own rules and expectations.”

Fortunately, many young people have not yet become cynical and are still able to speak directly from the heart. After spending some wonderful hours talking to college students about their views of marriage, Wallerstein received the next day a letter from Randolph Johnson, a 21-year-old senior at the University of California in Santa Cruz. He wrote:

“What I want in a wife is someone whom I know so well that she is a part of who I am and I of her. Someone to fill all that I am not but aspire to be. My wife is someone not just to share a life with but to build a life with. This is what marriage is to me, the sharing of two lives to complete each other. It is true that people change, but if people can change together then they need not grow apart.” (Drawn from Wallerstein's *Happy Marriages, Do They Exist*, Part I, found on the Web site, “You're Not Alone”)

Randolph Johnson speaks for a new generation that is still

capable of optimism about love and marriage and “the sharing of two lives to complete each other.” He also speaks for a society that is tired to death of the war on marriage, escalating divorce rates and the search for new partners in middle age. All of us want a different world for our children. When we're honest, we want it for ourselves. There is no doubt in my mind. We really do want it for ourselves.

So far this year, I have performed 14 weddings and four other pastors have performed 10 more weddings here in our sanctuary. At First Church, I have performed more than 200 weddings and covenant union services in the past 10 years. I continue to see a spirit of optimism about love and marriage in the young couples with whom I work in pre-martial preparation. Then, on their wedding day, standing close to couples when they exchange their vows, God grants me one of the greatest gifts in my work. I witness, up close, their eyes locked on one another and feel the sense of purpose and hope in their hearts. It is like being inches away from a miracle of transformation.

We all want and need love – sympathetic love, passionate love, tender, nurturing love all of our adult lives. We all desire friendship, compassion, encouragement, a sense of being understood and appreciated, not only for what we do but for what we try to do and fail at. We want a relationship in which we can test our half-baked ideas without shame or pretense and give voice to our deepest fears. We want a partner who sees us as unique, irreplaceable and fun.

A good marriage can offset the loneliness of life in crowded cities and provide a refuge from the hammering pressures of the competitive workplace. (*Ibid*). A good marriage can enrich our lives and the lives of our families and make a strong link in the chain of human history. Like a pebble dropped in a pond, a good marriage has a ripple effect that can spread outward for generations in which children feel connected with the past and have an interest in the future.

In the lesson from the Gospel of Mark today, Jesus’ detractors want to trap him on questions about divorce – after all allowable grounds for divorce was a hot topic in Jesus’ time. The Pharisees

want to know if Jesus will side with the stringent school of Shammai or the permissive school of Hillel when ruling on divorce as defined by Deuteronomy 24:1. Any response is bound to start a controversy. So, Jesus does a “redirect.” He turns the questions away from divorce and back to marriage. He points out that marriage is a gift of God’s good creation. Divorce happens. But divorce should not overshadow a good marriage. And divorce should not affect our willingness and openness to possibilities of love and delight in a future still unfolding.

Jesus wants us to live into these possibilities of love and delight unfolding. He goes on to speak of the children and their place in the kingdom of God. By changing the negative line of reasoning that the Pharisees pursue, Jesus points out what really matters. What really matters is how each of us receives the blessings God gives us. Do we receive God’s blessings like a child, with innocence and delight? Do we receive God’s blessings as forever? Or, hurt and saddened by life’s experiences, do we separate ourselves from God’s blessings, do we shut ourselves off emotionally and miss the beauty which is right before our eyes? How we answer these questions speak volumes about how we feel embraced by God’s love and grace?

As we come to the table of God’s grace today, let us lay aside our hurts and anguish for a time. Let us approach God’s blessings, “unhindered.” Like the children, let us come with innocence and delight to receive God’s blessings. Let us come in celebration! In the toughness of our lives, let us come in tenderness and hopeful anticipation of a future yet unfolding. Amen.