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Manchester United Methodist Church  
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"Happily Ever After"  
John 15: 12-17

In this season when we find ourselves thinking about and reflecting on relationships more than we do at other times of the year, I thought we would turn to the experts to hear about what these children have to say about love and marriage and relationships. Concerning why love happens between two particular people, nine-year-old Jan says, "No one is sure why it happens, but I heard that it has something to do with how you smell. That's why perfume and deodorant are so popular." Concerning why we should fall in love, ten-year-old Regina says, "I'm not rushing into being in love. I'm finding fourth grade hard enough." And how can you tell if two adults eating dinner in a restaurant are in love? Brad, age 9, "It's love if they order one of those desserts that are on fire. They like to order those because that's just how their hearts are - on fire!" Concerning that age old question, whether it's better to be single or married, seven-year-old Kenny says, "It gives me a headache to think about that stuff. I'm just a kid. I don't need that kind of trouble." And finally, that enduring question "How do you make love endure?" In his age and wisdom, eight year old Roger says, "Just don't forget your wife's name. That will mess up the love."

There are lots of ideas out there about what relationships should look like and how relationships should work. And our faith has a lot to say to us about the significance of all of our relationships and the potential that they have to help us experience the love relationship that God seeks with us in Jesus Christ.

But, specifically this morning, I want us to focus on the relationship of marriage and why talking about and thinking about and teaching about marriage is important to all of us. Not just those of us who are married, but to all of us.

If you think about it, when it comes to the church and our faith and marriage, we usually think about the church being active at two points of time. First of all, that time when the church is more a word and a place than a community – that time of the wedding – when the couple comes down the aisle and meets the pastor, gathered and surrounded by friends. When that social event seems to trump any experiences of spiritual ones, a time when the church is there to help bless and make sacred a covenant of promise, a journey between a husband and a wife. Then we see the church also, equally as active, in the important work, the extremely important work, of caring for and working with and ministering to the fragile and broken marriages. This is when the church becomes much less a place and very much more of a community, and when it takes on the awesome job of offering ministries to help them heal in their brokenness, to help them deal with their woundedness and to help them know the hope and the resurrection of our faith promises. These are two vital places in our life journeys where the church needs to be at work.

But our faith, friends, and the Church have a lot more to say about marriage after the wedding and, hopefully, long before couples come to that fragile and broken place. So you see, the Church, the community of faith needs to be talking about marriage. We, as that community of faith, need to be learning about and teaching about marriage. For we are in ministry, perhaps not in our own lives, but we are in ministry to brothers and sisters, to children, to parents, to friends and co-workers. We are in a ministry of caring and supporting and nurturing all relationships, even the relationship of marriage.

Let me this morning introduce you to a couple named Peggy and Steve. Peggy and Steve are very much like many of the over fifty couples we marry every year at Manchester United Methodist Church. As soon as Peggy and Steve were engaged, the wedding frenzy began. You know what that

frenzy looks like. The church was secured, the dresses were picked out, the limo was reserved and paid for, the reception hall was chosen, and friends and family for a whole year of preparation surrounded Peggy and Steve with energy and enthusiasm; with receptions and showers, with a dedication to this relationship that they were beginning. Well, Peggy and Steve's wedding was beautiful. The service went without a hitch, the flower girl made it down the aisle, the band wasn't too loud, the cake was just moist enough . . . it was a great day. A day that many told Peggy and Steve would be one of the most important days of their lives. The honeymoon went great. A trip to Cancun went off without a hitch and then Peggy and Steve found themselves coming home to a quiet apartment. They wrote their thank-you notes, they unwrapped their gifts and life went on. After a few months, Peggy and Steve noticed that something was happening. They noticed that the questions from those family members and friends who had surrounded them for that year of preparation now shifted from "how is your relationship going" to "did you see the Super Bowl?" They were wanting to know more about how things were going at work than they were about how Peggy and Steve were adjusting to a lifestyle of sharing toothpaste and sharing their lives. Peggy and Steve knew that something sacred had happened at their wedding, after all, the preacher said so anyway. They heard that they were being blessed by all who were present in that room with them that day. But people stopped checking in. People stopped asking the questions. It wasn't quite proper any more for those family and friends to be asking them how they were adjusting to this new experience, what challenges were before them and what questions they had. Peggy and Steve finally found themselves moving from an incredibly social experience, surrounded by so many, to feeling like they were on a solitary journey, a journey with just him and her.

Peggy and Steve's experience is not unique, but I believe it is the experience of many married couples. They are surrounded early on but then, as they encounter new stressors, new situations, new experiences, things get pretty quiet and lonely.

Jesus in his words this morning from John's Gospel reminds us, "that the community of the faith called Christians is to look very differently" from Steve and Peggy's experience. For you see, when it comes to talking and teaching about relationships, even marriage needs to be guided and affirmed and nurtured by the community of faith. Even marriage. . . even those who are part of that very special relationship and covenant, they too need to learn that behavior, those skills, the practice of loving another as Christ loves us. You see, that's why this is a conversation and a sermon for all of us because Peggy and Steve need us to do our work as a church. Peggy and Steve need you and I to teach them how to love one another as Christ loves us. They need us to model for them and to teach them Christ's love. A love that is important in any relationship – a love of equal regard, of kindness and forgiveness and care.

Peggy and Steve need the church to be a church committed to their relationship, not just committed to being a wedding chapel. They need us to teach them how to love.

There are many ways, I'm happy to report, that Manchester United Methodist Church is doing that good work. We're doing that good work by offering couple's groups, marriage enrichment weekends that you can learn more about, celebration days like today when we will be honoring those who have been married for over fifty years – one couple sixty-five years.

But I want to share with you a new ministry that we believe is going to help to nurture and affirm and guide and teach people in their marriage relationships as well. It's a ministry called Marriage University. Four times a year for a four-week class, we'll be offering a class of practicing the skills of marriage. Skills that could be also shared in all of the relationships that we live in. But, I marvel at how when those couples come down the aisle, and we marry them in this place, we don't have a manual to give them. We don't have a book, an instruction guide to hand them. But what we do promise is a community of faith that will surround them and bless them and guide them and this course, this class opportunity, is a way that we will do this.

You have an opportunity to sign up for this class today, in the bulletin, if you have an interest. It's open for people who are engaged and those who have been married for a long time. And what's significant about this class and different from many others is that it simply helps us to practice the skills of being in a marriage. Think about it. If you get good at a golf game, you've been practicing your skills for that game. If you get good at work at what you do, you've been practicing skills required to do that work. I was reminded last week about the importance of practicing when, on Monday morning, after the Super Bowl, I woke up my daughter who had gone to bed during halftime, and I was explaining to my six-year-old daughter, Hannah, "Well honey, the Rams lost." She wasn't quite as sad as her Mom was, but then she went on to ask, "Well, who won then?" I told her about a team called the Patriots and her quick response was "Well Mom, they must have practiced more!" Practice is important. Skills are important to live out that covenant love, a love that Jesus has for us and a love that we are called and invited to share with each other.

Marriage University will help us to do this and one of the most exciting parts of this ministry is that we will very soon ask and require that every couple married in this church go through this journey of learning these skills, so that we, as a community of faith, can feel like we have nurtured and begun the process of guiding a marriage into a healthy future.

Subone Fusoma who is an African writer, tells about how she learned so much about the gift of the covenant relationship and the community experience of marriage by watching how marriages were done and lived out in the tiny West African village where she grew up. She said when a couple was challenged or really distressed, something amazing would happen. The wife would be taken by the women of the village and she would learn new skills and she would be comforted and nurtured and cared for in an amazing way by all of the village. The husband, similarly, would be taken off by the men and he too would be nurtured and comforted and able to deal with the issues that were facing that marriage and learning new skills and practicing new behaviors. As the couple was able to realize the possibility of reconciliation, a possibility which we lament is not always there, but one that is worked toward; as that couple realized that possibility of reconciliation, they entered a ritual of recommitment. They would go down to the river in that West African village and there the women would escort the wife and the men would escort the husband and together, they would be plunged under the water together, in the river. And together, under the water, they would join hands and come up out of that water to the applause and rejoicing of that village, who had nurtured them and helped them.

You know, happily ever after is not a blissful separation or isolation from all of the realities of life around us. Happily ever after, in a Christian sense, is when two people in a relationship, who are struggling, who are growing, who are learning together, can rise out of the waters that surround them and many times, overwhelm them, with the cheering and the applause and the rejoicing of a community that helped them learn how to grow and forgive and love. May we be that kind of community. May we be that kind of Christians in the way we nurture and affirm all relationships . . . even marriage. Amen