Weddings and Marriages

First Corinthians 13:4-13

Sunday, March 17, 2019  Lawrence Park Community Church, Toronto

*Prior to Opening Hymn:* Mindful of our freedom to gather and worship in peace and safety this morning, and in solidarity with our fifty Muslim sisters and brothers who were slaughtered as they worshipped in Christchurch, New Zealand on Friday, as well as the many others injured, traumatized, and called upon to provide emergency services and political leadership, if you are comfortable doing so, I invite us to stand and observe

a moment of silence…

As ever, it is a privilege to stand in this pulpit and provide supply for my colleague John Suk, and to anticipate returning on Sunday March 31st when Eric Bacon will be recognized as the Minister Emeritus here; as well as attending ‘Sundays @ 5’ that evening.

From the purple of Lent to the green of St. Patrick’s Day, “top o’ the mornin’ to ya!” We’ve all got a ‘bit of Irish in us’, and actually I’ve got *quite* a bit! Lougheed is an Irish name, and Dad’s people emigrated to Canada in the 1840s from County Cork. My cousin Sue Thompson has *been* to the Registry Office there, to see records of Lougheed weddings … And we celebrated Sue and Tom’s wedding, *here* – with lots of Northern Irelanders in attendance! - thirty years ago this Summer!

Among the privileges of being an *ordered* Minister in the United Church of Canada is to have a wedding licence issued by the Province of Ontario, with approval from our denomination. In the 23 years I have been ordained, I have conducted over 100 weddings.  *One* of them was for my brother Jamie and his wife, twenty years ago this August, when the Sanctuary here was *still* in its *original* configuration, as pictured beside the ’new’ main entrance.

*This* chancel was *then* the main entrance, and where the narthex/fireplace is now, *was* the Chancel! Lawrence Park Community Church has come a long way, in many ways!

To quote one of my mentors – the late *Fr*. Bernie – “though *I’ve* never been married” – which usually gets a laugh, *particularly* from a Catholic Priest - “I hear marriage is hard work!”  *As* a single person, *I’ve* also learned a few things about weddings *and* marriages along the way, including from our Epistle text this morning in 1st Corinthians, chapter 13.

Written almost 2000 years ago to a ‘house church’ that the St. Paul was encouraging, it was a socially mixed community - like most modern day congregations, including Lawrence Park – and this letter was part of an ongoing conversation; a bit like a *marriage*!

The part of the letter we read begins by describing some of the qualities of romantic love associated with a *wedding ceremony* … like patience and kindness, and how it ‘bears all things, hopes all things , endures all things.’

It goes on to describe the maturing of love, in a *marriage* *relationship.*

The wedding service that I invite couples to shape ‘as their own’ was created *with* a couple in one of the *first* weddings I conducted. The bride’s background was Anglican, and the groom’s was Jewish and they knew they were blending traditions, let alone their families. It included the ‘big four’ things that are required of a wedding in the Province of Ontario. A statement of free intent; as in: “do you freely choose to be joined in marriage?”

(Rather that what might be called ‘the crazy uncle question’: “Does anyone have cause that these two people should *not* be joined in marriage?” In case a ‘crazy uncle’ thinks it is funny to say “Yes!” In which case, the ceremony has to be stopped and the claim examined.) There *was* a time when weddings were arranged and the bride or groom was already *still* married to someone else, or there under duress. Now, we ask the couple!

The other aspects of the ‘big four’ include: exchanging vows (and rings), the signing of a licence (from the Province) and a Register (like the one here at LPCC) and finally, that the people conducting the wedding have a licence to do so, and that the couple and their two witnesses are both over the age of 18, *and* sober!

As long as the ‘big four’ are covered, the rest of the ceremony can reflect the beliefs and tastes of the couple in terms of readings, music, as well as other symbols and prayers. And when the couple are introduced, the choice of names reflects the new legal names they have chosen, if there is going to be any change. I have had a groom take the family name of his wife. Several women have kept their family name for professional reasons, but plan to raise a family together with one family name or a hyphenated one.

But *before* couples exchange vows and rings, and *after* the ‘statement of free intent’, I encourage them to invite their families and other guests to make a pledge of support to *them*. Afterall, a wedding is not a ‘spectator sport’, and the guests are there because they will be supportive of the *marriage* too. And when that chorus of “we do” echoes to answer the question I pose about supporting the couple in their *marriage*, I think it is one of the best parts of any *wedding*!

The wording for vows and exchanging rings can be written *by* the couple, as ‘reasonable and identical’, and they can *also* write and offer individual pledges to each other, as well as exchanging pledges with children present from a previous marriage. When Prince Edward and Duchess Sophie were married, unfortunately, *she* agreed to obey *him*, but *he* made no such promise of *her*! Equality in marriage is essential! Afterall, couples are making both a civil *and* spiritual covenant before God. And *not* as often as some people assume, a marriage fails - for many different reasons – and when it does, it can be helpful to remember that the wedding established a covenant between a couple *and* God. And sometimes we mortals can’t keep the covenant, and we have to forgive *ourselves* for that, because God *already* has. Remember what Fr. Bernie said about a marriage being hard work!

That is *worth* it!

And part of the reason for that, is a wedding blends not just two lives, but (at least) two families. And the qualities of love that St. Paul describes to the Corinthians *reflects* this, in more ways than one! Ancient Corinth was a city where *mirrors* were made – using polished bronze or silver – which made for a rather *distorted* image. Hence his description of “for now we see in a mirror dimly, but [eventually] we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; [eventually] I will be fully known…” And to paraphrase St. Paul’s intent, *until we are*, “faith, hope and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.” Until – *and after* – we are fully known.

Some couples may come down an aisle with a family member, and then stand on either side of the aisle, with their immediate family seated behind them. Then after their documents have been signed and as the couple is about to be introduced, I suggest that they ‘switch sides’ to symbolize that they are also joining each others’ families. And as other members of the wedding party depart from the front, I ask them to ‘switch sides’ too. Use words – and a ‘high five’ or ‘dosey doe’ - if necessary!

That is why when the couple *first* arrive at the front, I invite them to greet *both* immediate families. No one is being ‘given away’ at a wedding; a couple is being married, and two families are being blended.

That is *also* reflected in the prayers I offer right after the exchange of rings, including phrases like “may their trust each other, and you O God, and never be afraid”; and “today we recall the example and support of their families, including some who are fondly *remembered* …” Because weddings are evocative for *many* people, including the *absence* of a loved one, for reason of death or estrangement.  *So* common to *many* families.

When it was announced that Prince Charles and Camilla Parker-Bowles were to be married, one of the first questions that then twentysomething Princes William and Harry were asked by one of the Paparazzi (rather maliciously I would say): “And what would your mother think of this engagement?” To which the older brother answered fondly: “We’re happy our father is happy.” Would that every so-called ‘second marriage’ was blessed by such support.

The first same sex wedding I conducted was for two *women* from the States, fifteen years ago, who contacted the Affirming Congregation I attend in Waterloo, because it was near Stratford where they wanted to spend their honeymoon, going to the Festival! Their own Minister (in the States) was *very* supportive, but in a denomination that - at the time – wouldn’t allow their Ministers to *attend* let alone *conduct* a same-sex wedding! Part of our planning included finding them a hotel room in Waterloo for the rehearsal and wedding nights, before travelling to Stratford for the honeymoon. I figured it would be hospitable to drop off some maps and other tourist information before they arrived in town. And I went early in the morning, and was greeted by the *overnight* staff member who was getting ready to go home. She was a delightful *Older* Order Mennonite, who also offered to check the hotel reservation … and then looked very concerned: “Oh there must be some mistake. There is only *one* Queen size bed in a room for *two* women!” “Oh there is no mistake” I said gently. “ They are getting married!” The couple *later* told me that when they arrived that evening, they were warmly greeted by the *same* overnight staff member who said “So you must be the happy couple!” Though a bit of a stretch for the staff member to say so, it was a *much* warmer reception than the couple’s home denomination could provide at that time!

When that Anglican/Jewish couple were ready to be introduced by t*heir* married names, they wanted to weave in the Jewish tradition of smashing a glass wrapped in linen and cheering “Mazal Tof!”. In what was a very intimate wedding of only their immediate families, they asked me smash the glass, lead the cheer, and announce their names. What they *didn’t* tell me that more recent Jewish practice is to put a large *lightbulb* in the linen, because it makes a louder sound! So when I smashed it, I was *so* startled, I introduced them as Mark and Anne Mazal Tov! (Which *technically* is now their *legal* name!) A sense of humour is *another* quality of love that

St. Paul *didn’t* expressly mention, but I’m sure *intended* to include!

It is *always* timely *to recall* the qualities of love in a wedding – *and* a marriage – that St. Paul described in his Letter to the Corinthians. As we transition from the Season of Epiphany *recalling* how the Magi were transformed by their encounter with the Christ Child, and ‘went home by another way’ *rather than* back to King Herod (who has some *current* contemporaries!) As we continue our journey through Lent to Easter, *leaning* closer to God, with our spiritual disciplines, let’s *recall* the wisdom of Minnie Haskins from her poem “God Knows” (alt.), that was invoked by King George the Sixth, in his Christmas Message in 1939 amidst the outbreak of World War 2. Seemingly timeless in this current era of tumult:

I said to the [One] who stood at the Gate …,

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And [they] replied, "Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light, and safer than a known way."

And as the King concluded: “May that Almighty Hand guide and uphold us all”.

(Rev.) John Lougheed