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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
2/16/2013, The First Sunday in Lent
Valentine's Sunday

Deuteronomy 26:1-11, Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16, Romans 10:8b-13, Luke 4:1-13

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹And Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan, and was led by the Spirit ²for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil. (Luke 4:1-2, RSV)

The devil has no sense of propriety, does he? He dares to tempt even the very Son of God! If so, he is probably not going to shy away from tempting you and me too. So, let's not be surprised or undone if we should feel some temptation along the ways of life.

What would you say is the *fundamental* temptation within the three temptations? What is the devil trying to get Jesus to do, by hook or by crook, by this temptation or that temptation? What is the devil after? I mean to return to this question toward the end of this sermon.

A HAPPY SUBJECT

For now, let's turn to a happy subject. Let's speak of love, sweet love. This is today's great subject. I have been eager to speak with you about love, including speaking to some of the couples I have married over the years and who have journeyed back to Immanuel for this Valentine's Sunday. Also, I am eager to speak of love, sweet love to you young people in the congregation, including you Master Singers of the Mattawan High School Chorale. Our subject is love. It is a good manner of life.

Garrison Keillor has a wonderful line about America. It goes this way:

America is a great land, and it was not made so by angry people.

Indeed, this is very true. America is made a great land, not by anger, but by love above all else. It is made a great land, nor by shows of power or eloquence, but by neighborly love, by love within families, by grandmothers and grandfathers loving each other for half-a-century together or more, by young husbands and wives promising to love and cherish each other henceforth, and then going out to enjoy life doing that. America is made a great land by doing what you and I are capable of doing: of being true in the matter of love. That is theme that is

most important to me in this sermon: you and I, ordinary people that we are, are capable of doing something extraordinary: we are capable to being true-blue people of love.

A lovely thing about being a pastor is that I get to observe so many great marriages. Long will I remember, for example, two passing phone conversations in my Pastor's Study. In each case, a guest preacher, at the end of the liturgy, requested that I take him back to the study so that he could call his wife.

First I am thinking of Pastor Raymond Schulze, of blessed memory. He phoned Margaret. I do believe that life was better for him when he could check in with Margaret. So, he phones her, has a brief conversation, hangs up the phone, looks up at me and says, "God! I love that woman!"

Likewise with Pastor Raymond Shaheen, also of blessed memory now. I lead him back to the study, he dials the number, and when Winifred picks up, he greets her this way: "This is someone who loves you very much." Winifred knew that all her married life to Raymond. His love provided protection for her, and within that protection, she flourished. And the same was true in the other direction: Her love provided protection for Raymond, and within that protection, she flourished.

I venture to mention a few more marriages we have admired here at Immanuel. To name just few, let me lift up Chris and Celia Cabrera. I still remember Ann Siemer telling me about the time Chris came to the church office to apply for the position of church sexton. She said she could hardly believe her eyes, to see this handsome, well-dressed young couple, Chris and Celia, standing there applying to work at our church. We have been touched all these years to behold the love of Chris and Celia. Likewise with the marriages of my teachers Robert and Blanche Jenson, also Leonard and Christa Klein, Christine and Max Petschek, Al and Vi Quirong, and many other couples in our congregation. Our world needs good examples of holy marriage, and we have been blessed to see them here at Immanuel.

JON AND GLORIA GRONDAHL

In the Coffee Hour I intend to tell something of the love story of Martin and Katie Luther. But here I want linger with a great love story of our own generation. It is the story of Jon and Gloria Grondahl. They lived up there at The Wartburg, where my wife, Carol, is Chaplain. Jon has since died, but Gloria lives and she has given me permission to share something of their story with you. As I tell the story, be pleased to think that you can do this too. You do not need to be a saint or a genius in order to be a great person of love. Our world is made wonderful by ordinary people setting out on the path of love and following faithfully. So, here goes the story of Jon and Gloria

Jon was a Norwegian ship captain. When he was a boy in Norway, he became an orphan at age five. He was the youngest of four brothers. Relatives took in the older brothers, but Jon was too young to be useful, so no one took him in. Instead, he lived in foster homes from age five to about age fourteen. Then an uncle took him into his home.

This uncle noticed that Jon had aptitude for business and sent him to school. As a young man, Jon drove a delivery truck. One day, Jon noticed something he had never seen before. He was driving his truck along the Norwegian seacoast and saw his first ship. It was docked on the shore. Jon had grown up in the hills and farmlands of Norway. This ship was new to him and fascinating to him. So he parked his truck and went to say hello to the sailors. They invited him onboard, showed him around, told him that the ship needed a cabin boy, and invited him to take the job. Jon said he had to talk it over with his uncle, but he didn't really do much talking. He simply went home, left his uncle a note, and went off to sea.

It so happened that the ship set sail and the next day, the Germans invaded Norway. Instantly, Jon became part of the Norwegian navy. The Nazi government summoned the Norwegian ships back to port, but they refused and instead became part of the Allied navy. The Norwegian ships were supply ships, not combat ships, but they were in danger in any case, and many times Jon narrowly escaped death.

Jon met Gloria while he was still serving in the Norwegian navy. He was on shore leave in Brooklyn. Gloria lived on Staten Island. She and two of her girlfriends were in the ferry terminal in Brooklyn, waiting for the ride back to Staten Island. Jon and some of his shipmates come along, talking and joking in Norwegian. Gloria and her friends knew Norwegian, so Gloria said hello to Jon in that language. Jon sat and talked with them while they waited for the ferry, and then he asked permission to write to Gloria. She agreed.

The next day, German submarines sank a large number of ships off the New York Harbor, and Gloria feared that Jon was lost. Four weeks passed, and then Gloria's mother phoned her and said that she was to come directly home because she had a letter waiting for her from someone down in South America.

Gloria went home and found a letter from Jon. Norwegian custom required that a relative write a formal letter of introduction on behalf of the young man, seeking permission for the young man to court the young woman. Jon had no one to write the letter for him, so he wrote it himself, introducing himself to Gloria.

They were married for sixty-five years. During many of those years, Jon was a ship captain along the St. Lawrence Seaway, heading out into the Great Lakes. Jon and Gloria had two children. They lived on Staten Island and were members of Zion Lutheran Church there. Once a month for years, Gloria would gather the two children and drive from Staten Island to the port of

Ogdensburg, New York to see Jon. That is a long drive. And when Jon had time off and could come home, then there was nothing but joy in that household.

Carol said that Jon had white hair, startling blue eyes, and a wonderful smile. Carol has always loved elderly people, and she loved Jon.

Now, here is the story of the end of Jon's life: Jon and Gloria called each other "Daddy" and "Mommy." One day toward the end of Jon's life, in fact, the day before he died, Gloria came to his room at The Wartburg and found him crying. "Daddy," she said, "why are you crying? You never cry." And Jon answered, "I am crying because I have to leave you. And we've had such a good life." Then he added this, "And I have loved you with all my heart. With *all* my heart." He said that a second time, "With all my heart," and Gloria has treasured that memory ever since.

Garrison Keillor is right. America is a great land, not because of angry people, but because of a million stories like this — of good, plain people like Gloria and Jon, you and me practicing love and faithfulness day by day.

COFFEE AND COURTESY

That dear preacher Rev. Billy Graham has a nice saying about marriage:

The key to a good marriage is two good forgivers.¹

Now, I am one who is very, very reluctant to disagree with Billy Graham. Still, it seems to me that this saying is almost *too* spiritual. I would say that the key to a good marriage is not forgiveness, but more simple things, like putting on a pot of coffee and talking things out. It is about an abiding gentleness and courtesy so that do not have so many miserable things to forgive.

Putting on the coffee pot is great part of the story of Gloria and Jon: They never went to bed angry. If there was a disagreement between them, Gloria would put on a pot of coffee and they would sit and talk it out. If one pot wasn't enough she'd make another. Also, when Gloria was mad at Jon for some reason, he would flash his beautiful smile and twinkling eyes and say, "You are so beautiful!" or something like that and she would melt and laugh and that would be it. So, remember the pot of coffee and stand willing to talk things out. Do not put off till tomorrow what you can do today.

And second, remember courtesy toward one another. I mean more than common courtesy, but even that is part of it. Say "please" and "thank you." Hold the door for one another. Teach the children to honor your beloved. Say to them, "Remember to always take good care of Mom, remember to take good

¹ <http://www.mtio.com/articles/bissar44.htm>

care of Dad.” Do not cut each other off or clip each other’s sentences. Be more polite to one another. Try to be fair in dividing up the chores. Such things are part of what I mean by courtesy.

Yes, forgiveness is an important part of marriage, but it is not the chief part. The chief part is that “the two should become one.” That is, if marriage should call upon you to give up some things — ambitions, other lovers, whatever — the key thing is to understand that it is no longer *you* who give them up, for you have chosen a path along which you *and* your beloved walk. You are part of holy marriage. You give and receive, accept and surrender, not as a solitary person making your way in this world, but as something wonderful on earth: a married couple. That deep abiding courtesy that marks so many great marriages is simply the habit of taking into account that you are not one, but two who have become one. It is a beautiful thing when two people can agree on something, and marriage asks us to develop the habit of seeking agreement with our spouse.

And *this* is within your ability. Whether you are young or old, you are capable of beginning, renewing, and continuing with courtesy toward your beloved.

That’s the thing that so forcefully strikes me about great marriages: They do not seem all that hard to pull off. Husband and wife are kind to one another and true to one another, and the years quietly pass—good years, both for them and for others around them.

If we must seek forgiveness along the way, or must grant it, then so be it. But true forgiveness is not a mere matter of words, but rather a return to the path of cling to one another and becoming one.

THE FUNDAMENTAL TEMPTATION

Now, let me return to the question I posed at the start of this sermon: What was the fundamental temptation of the devil? What was the temptation within the three temptations of our Lord? I believe the answer is this: The devil tempted Jesus to walk away from love for a while. He tempted Jesus to break faith with his heavenly Father and with you and me. He tempted Jesus, as it were, to take a fling away from holy marriage. For Jesus loves the Church as a Bridegroom loves his bride. And Jesus loves our whole world and each person in it as a faithful husband loves his bride. And the trick of the devil was to call Jesus to walk away from that and to pursue more normal things instead—things like food and fame and power and glory.

Never shame your spouse, for Jesus Christ never did such a thing! And to him belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.