



**Christ Episcopal Church - Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida**

**19 Pentecost - Proper 22 - Year C - October 7, 2007**

**Habakkuk 1:1-6(7-11)12-13; 2:1-14; 2 Timothy 1:(1-5)6-14; Luke 17:5-10**

**Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes**

*The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!"*

Good morning. It is a great privilege to be with you at Christ Church this morning...I am grateful to Fr. Westbury for allowing me the opportunity to preach and to my friend Malinda Harris with whom I have been a colleague in the area of Christian education and formation for many years and who instigated my being with you this morning.....

Susan, my wife is with me. We have worshipped at Christ Church several times over the years. Our daughter and husband and our three year old granddaughter live in Jacksonville. Christ Church is my church of choice when I am in the area on a Sunday morning. Truth be told, Christ Church has become the model and benchmark for the strategic planning goals of St. Paul's, Delray Beach where I am rector and I will confess that over the years I have been pleased to steal lots of good ideas from you. So thank you for all your good work....

When Malinda called me about the possibility of preaching, she told me about the Bridge Institute event this weekend with Dr. Frank Pittman. My schedule precluded my being here for the event, but as I understand from the promotional material, Dr. Pittman focused on the life cycle of relationships. I know from reading his book *Grow Up!*<sup>1</sup> and also from additional material on the web, that Dr. Pittman places great emphasis on the individual person critically examining his or her own role in relationships and modifying behaviors that are regressive and destructive in what he, rightly, describes is a "post-patriarchal" age.

I also know that he understands the word "love" as a verb and insists that if we wish to be happy and loved we need to do more loving. I agree with that too, and note well, I said "do" more loving, not be more loving, again, to emphasize the verbal quality of love. Love is an action. I will return to that.

Malinda suggested that I might cover the "spiritual" quality of relationships as a kind of closing piece to the Bridge Institute event and I am happy to try to do that...She suggested that I include all types of relationships and not just marriage....I will try to do that too, but I am going to do it by way of an exploration of my experience as a married person because it is the relationship that I have experienced most intimately and about which I feel I can speak somewhat capably....I will apply some of my thoughts more broadly to other relationships, and especially committed relationships, but I do want to acknowledge that marriage is in crisis in our culture, not because gay and lesbian persons seek to be married, but because heterosexual couples have been eroding the institution of marriage for decades and in the process doing great harm, and especially to our society's children. We need to be challenged by that.

As Church, I believe we have a particular and holy responsibility to lift up marriage and to encourage and strengthen those who live within its sacred bonds even as we recognize and celebrate the many and diverse ways and relationships by which God's love is made manifest and so, I am making that a part of my task today as well. I hope that's okay....

The timing of my speaking to you about the spiritual side of relationships is somewhat striking to me. You see, this past Tuesday, Susan, who has been my wife, best friend and partner for 31 years, underwent an “incisional biopsy and sectional mastectomy” - what in popular parlance is known as a “lumpectomy.” She has given me permission to share this with you and to speak of our experience.

A little over a month ago, she had a routine mammogram which revealed “an area of concern.” At the outset, it did not appear very significant...Susan’s oncological surgeon assured us that he didn’t think it was anything. But the radiologist who performed the mammogram was persistent and the surgeon ordered a needle biopsy. This was done about five weeks ago, but it proved inconclusive. The radiologist remained persistent. A second biopsy was performed three weeks ago and this revealed a one centimeter “lobular mass” that had to be removed. This was done this past Tuesday....The pathology report came back on Friday. It was benign. We are both relieved and deeply thankful...

As you can imagine, and as some of you who have been through anything similar know, the whole experience was frightening - frightening and very threatening....We had been through a similar experience five years before when Susan had a non-cancerous phylloides tumor removed. It didn’t become any easier the second time around....

The week before Susan’s surgery, I had read Joan Didion’s book *The Year of Magical Thinking*.<sup>2</sup> It’s a very powerful and poignant first person account of Didion’s experiences in the year following her husband’s sudden death. He had a massive coronary at the dinner table one night. Didion’s book is a remarkable exploration of grief and I highly recommend it. Anyway, I had read *The Year of Magical Thinking* just the week before Susan’s surgery. In the opening lines of her book, Didion writes:

*Life changes fast  
Life changes in the instant  
You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.  
The question of self-pity.*<sup>3</sup>

Those opening lines overpowered me when I read them the week before Susan’s surgery, the week before her “incisional biopsy and sectional mastectomy.” Like so many others, most of us I presume, I tend to expect that each day will be more or less routine....

I generally assume I will wake up, have my coffee, read the paper, take a shower, go to the office and handle the challenges that come my way. Of course, as a priest, life crises are a part of my routine, but these are the life crises of others.....It is a part of my job and my vocation to be involved in these, to walk with people through them....The past few weeks, the crisis was ours, Susan’s and mine...Others had to walk with us....

Crises like these do put things into sharp relief....I can tell you that over the past several weeks Susan and I have been profoundly aware of how much we love each other, of how much we have been through together and how vitally important and life-giving our relationship to one another has been and continues to be for us...

For the past month, I have been especially cognizant of our relationship as husband and wife...I can also state with some confidence, that I appreciate this role of husband and our relationship as husband and wife now much more deeply than I did more than 31 years ago, when, 19 years old, I stood in front of Susan on a Saturday afternoon in early April, in St. Luke’s Church in Forest Hills, New York and promised to “have and to hold her for better or for worse,

for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death..." (Book of Common Prayer – p. 427).

I have been ordained for more than 17 years. I have lost count of the number of marriages I have performed in those 17 years.....But early on in my priesthood, I discovered something....I discovered that when a couple stands in front of me, and when they take each others' right hands and look each other in the eye and say those words, "I take you to be my wife, my husband, to have and to hold her from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death".... I have discovered that when couples say those words, they have no idea what they are talking about!

When a couple stands in church and says those words and makes those promises, they are an abstraction, they are a vague hope and a nebulous dream. Making those promises is a monumental act of faith, the magnitude of which is often lost on the couple....If anything is to become of that act of faith, however, the couple making the promises cannot be passive about them...They will have to act....They will have to fill those promises with content.....They will have to not merely "make love" but "do love."

To be sure love is both a mystery and a gift from God, but love, whether it is love for a spouse, love for a significant other, love for a child, love for a parent, love for a friend, love of Christ or love, love of Christ's Church, or even love of one's enemies, takes work. Love is hard work. It requires incredible personal investment if our relationships are to be meaningful and sustainable. If our relationships are to be rich and filled with content and meaning, then we must do love - love as a verb, love as an action....

The wonderful 14<sup>th</sup> century English mystic Richard Rolle once wrote, "Loyal and true love acts in this way...as an act of human will."<sup>4</sup> I don't think our culture too often thinks of love in this way, as "an act of human will," but Christian theology supports this understanding....

We say "God is love." This statement from the First Letter of John "God is love," (1 John 4:16), is an ontological statement about God, about the nature of God's being....The full statement says, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them...." (1 John 4:16).

Now this is a pretty astounding claim: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." But it is not enough to say "God is love..." Making the ontological statement "God is love" does not give full expression to the love of God....We must say more...We must say God *does* love: "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son to the end that all that believe in him will not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16). That's God doing love...

In fact, the primary thrust of the Scriptural witness is about God "doing love." There is nothing passive about it...God's love is active, persistent, even sometimes nagging. Often it is frustrating work for God, as God's active love often goes without response from his human creation....Nonetheless, God keeps at it....God keeps at it, because promises have been made, a covenant established, as in marriage....Sometimes it's all about the promise....

One of the readings appointed for today which we didn't hear this morning is from 2 Timothy.....It's actually one of my favorite passages of Scripture. Paul is writing to Timothy and he recalls Timothy's sincere faith, faith which Paul recognizes came first from Timothy's grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. It's a great passage on relationships, and a very clear recognition that Timothy's faith was formed through close personal relationships in his own home.

The verse comes after Paul recognizes that Lois and Eunice have performed their sacred responsibility and passed on their faith to Timothy....My favorite verse comes when Paul writes to Timothy, "*For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you...*" (2 Timothy 1:6). The Jerusalem Bible translates that verse, "*I urge you to fan into a flame the gift of God that is within you.*" Don't you like that?

The gift of God, the gift of love is within us, each one of us....It is an extraordinary gift.....It is the most precious gift we have.....It is also why we are always to see in one another, every person we meet, the *imago Dei* – the "image of God" (see Genesis 1:26-27). Too often, however, we take it for granted, like our cup of morning coffee or the newspaper, or the routines of each day....

If that ember of love is to ignite, however, we cannot be passive, waiting for something magical to happen....We must act with great intentionality....We must show great self-discipline....

The gift of love has been given to us by the God, who is Love, as grace....It resides within us, each one of us, but we must nurture the gift with self-discipline and use it generously, in all of our relationships....We are called to be love's active agents...We are commanded to do love... "Love," as the great Danish existential philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard once stated, "is our duty."<sup>5</sup> That is the spirituality of love. Love as duty. Love as work. Love as an act of the human will...working intentionally to see the image of God in the other.

Love in all relationships - spouse, life partner, parent, child, grandparent, aunt, uncle, friend, confidant, employer, employee, student, teacher - requires commitment, fidelity, responsibility, sacrifice, patience and a host of other qualities that are not held in very high premium in today's contemporary world.....In our individualistic, materialistic, consumerist society, doing love - real love, divine love - building and strengthening lasting relationships by working at them, is very counter-cultural. It requires a great deal of faith.....Is it worth it? Is it worth the commitment? Is it worth the patience? Is it worth the sacrifice? Is it worth the fidelity? Is it worth the hard work?

*In the name of God, I Chip, take you Susan to be my wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death. This is my solemn vow...*(See Book of Common Prayer p. 427).

These words, which I said so long ago in faith, but with little understanding, have, after 31 years, been filled with content, incredible content.....They have been filled with the content of a shared story, the content of shared love in a marriage, the most intimate and most demanding of relationships...These words now have vibrant experiences and images attached to them, some joyous, some painful, some are filled with laughter, others with hurtful anger...There has been hope...There has been fear....There has been dull routine and wondrous surprises....There are children and now grandchildren....These words of the marriage vow, which I stumbled through so long ago, are filled with us, Susan and Chip, with our lives and our love and our commitment to one another....

It is gift and grace of God for which I am deeply, deeply thankful. But it needs to be said, we have also done our part....We have been surrounded with a lot of love and support from others, but we have done our part....We are doing our duty...our duty which is also our joy...We have tended to and fanned the flames and I am thankful that we are still fanning them, the flames of God's love that lives within us.....

It is my prayer that you too, are fanning God's gift that lives within you into a flame so that all of your relationships may burn with the fire of God's love...There is nothing more

important, not one single thing. There is nothing more precious or more valuable. It is what makes relationships spiritual and marks them as holy....

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<sup>1</sup> Pittman, Frank *Grow Up! How taking responsibility can make you a happy adult* (New York: Golden Books, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> Didion, Joan *The Year of Magical Thinking* ( New York: Vintage Books – A Division of Random House, 2007)

<sup>3</sup> *The Year of Magical Thinking* p. 3

<sup>4</sup> Rolle, Richard “The Commandment” from The Classics of Western Spirituality - Richard Rolle: The English Writings (New York, New York, Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1988) p. 144

<sup>5</sup> Kierkegaard, Søren *Works of Love* New York, etc: Harper Torch Books, 1962) p. 40.