

Blessing of a Lifelong Commitment  
Sept. 8, 2013  
All Saints Episcopal Church

*This is my commandment, that you love one another.*

In the name of God, who first loved us. Amen.

When I was a senior in high school, the two people who were our EYC advisors at church - St. David's, Nashville - got engaged. They asked my father, who was on staff, to preside at the wedding, and they asked a choir friend and me to sing a song during the service. I was thrilled.

Even more thrilling was the morning of the wedding. Oh, wait - did I say morning? Yes, I sure did. The wedding was part and parcel of the 10:00 Sunday morning service and it was the most exciting thing I had ever seen! When the processional hymn started, the crucifer and torchbearers led the way. They were followed by the choir, then by the groomsmen and bridesmaids, the groom and best man, and the bride and her dad. Behind them came the chalice bearers and the clergy. The whole congregation was there, singing away, big smiles on their faces.

The service began as usual with the collect for the day, then the readings, and then a homily. The wedding party participated as part of the congregation - because that's what they were - sitting when it was time to sit, standing when it was time to stand, picking up prayer books and hymnals at the right time to pray or to sing.

Then it was time for the wedding. All the right people stood up to take their places. The bride and groom declared their intent, they said their vows, and exchanged rings. They were declared married. We said the Peace. It was time to move into Communion. The wedding party became congregation members again. They came up to the altar rail when it was time - not separately from the rest of the crowd, but alongside everyone else.

After Communion, we said the prayer, received the blessing, and the last hymn began. Everyone went out the same way we had come in - joined together in love through the Spirit of God.

There were a lot of things done that day that had never been done before at St. David's. Some people had questioned why this was happening on a Sunday morning. The bride and groom were faithful members of the parish and they wanted to invite everyone in the church family to be present. The love that was evident between Margaret and Tom was contagious, and I'm going to guess that if we had taken a poll to ask everyone who was there that day what they thought had happened during the service, they would all have said that it was, indeed, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. A sacrament. Love shared. Bread shared. Respect and dignity shared. Family shared. Grace shared.

Today, we are doing something at All Saints, Mobile that hasn't been done before, either.

In a few minutes, we will bless the lifelong commitment of Emily and Marlana Kelley. Let me tell you a little bit of how this came to be. They had met each other a number of years ago, became friends, fell in love, and eventually knew that they wanted to commit themselves to each other in a lifelong relationship. Of course, they could not be legally married in Alabama or many other states at the time; but in 2008, the state of California made same-sex marriage legal there. So they decided to go to California to get married. Family members on both sides went with them and they were married five years ago this week in a beautiful outdoor setting.

Before they went to California, Marlana and Emily had started attending church at All Saints. They had not been welcome in their own churches, and they chose All Saints deliberately because of its hospitality and its inclusiveness. They found it to be a church where they want to be, where they want to raise a family (which they are doing), and where the sacraments are integral to meaningful worship. Emily was confirmed and Marlana was received from the Roman church by the bishop in 2009. Now, between the two of them, they are lectors, chalice bearers, acolytes and Vestry members. Olivia even played the role of baby Jesus in the Christmas Pageant one year! They are obviously fully committed to serving God and this church.

So last year, after the General Convention of the Episcopal Church approved the blessing of lifelong covenants, and after Bishop Duncan approved the use of these blessings in our Diocese of the Central Gulf Coast, Emily and Marlana decided that

they would like to receive the sacrament of blessing for their union - in this church, in front of this, their church family and their own families.

Marlena and Emily chose today's lessons from a suggested list of readings for this occasion. The lesson from the Gospel of John is a very familiar one, but we are used to hearing it during the Easter season, when we read from John almost exclusively for the Great Fifty Days of Easter. In that context, having recalled once again the sacrifice made by Jesus on the cross, it makes sense to hear Jesus' words, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." But today we hear it in a different context, in a service in which all of us will recall our relationship with God through the renewal of the promises made at our baptisms: to seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves and to strive for justice and peace among all people, respecting the dignity of every human being.

Does this reading mean that we need to be prepared to give up our lives for those we love? Chances are highly unlikely - at least in this country - that we will ever be asked to give up our lives for someone else. But when we love someone else, we will need to give up ourselves for the other. Giving up ourselves means letting go of petty fights about who is wrong and who is right. It means putting the other's wants and desires and happiness ahead of your own. And the other will be putting your wants and desires and happiness ahead of their own.

Love one another. It's the only commandment Jesus gave to his disciples. Add it to the first and great commandment and you have 'Love God' and 'Love one another.' Everything we think or do or say must start here. That is what Jesus taught. That is the way we should live. This love that binds us all together is the love that sets us free, the love that is even stronger than death; it is the love of a God who loved us enough to become one of us in order to show us how to love one another. It is the strongest force in the world, the greatest of the three things that abide into eternity along with faith and hope, the only thing with the power to heal, to forgive, to persevere, and to transform this beautiful but broken world from the human race into the human family.

So thank you, Emily and Marlena. You have blessed us by including us today in this sacrament shared. In this love shared. In this family shared. And in this grace shared. Amen.