

There are many topics for sermons. The list is almost endless. What I have chosen tonight is the most important of all. I refer to the institution of marriage.

Not everyone here in the congregation tonight is married. But we are all affected by the marriages of parents, our children, or other close relatives. The topic has been on my mind since last winter when I received shocking news.

Elyce and I had made some tentative plans with our friends to spend time together during the winter. In October, the husband sent me a note to firm up our plans. When I called later, I reached his wife on the phone. You can imagine my astonishment when she told me that we should forget about the winter plans. They were getting a divorce. I could not believe it. I was in a complete state of shock. He was one of my closest friends. I had known him and his wife even before they were married. I had always viewed them as easy going and relaxed together. I knew their children. They were to celebrate their twelfth wedding anniversary this year. He said that they had grown apart; she was not a good wife for him anymore.

Unfortunately, what happened to my friend and his wife is more and more common place. We are now approaching the point where every other marriage is dissolved by divorce. We Jews used to be immensely proud of our very low divorce rate. But the gap between the Jewish divorce rate and that of the American population generally is becoming smaller and smaller. We are adapting to our environment.

We live in a so-called enlightened time. We have no-fault divorce as if no one were to blame. No one is responsible; no one is guilty; no moral questions are asked.

Not long ago a book appeared called *Your erroneous Zones*. The author advises people that we are here only once; we should stop living by others' rules and start functioning according to our own desires. He has a chapter which he calls "Guilt and Worry, the Useless Emotions." He states that complete freedom from guilt is one hallmark of a healthy individual. One should not lament the past or ask questions such as why didn't you do it differently, or aren't you ashamed of yourself? What is necessary only is that you approve of yourself. The approval of others is pleasant but beside the point. Another self-help manual puts it this way: "There are no standards to live up to – but your own. Go ahead; give yourself permission."

Since the beginning of civilization, humankind has struggled over the issue of guilt and forgiveness, sin, and atonement, evil and absolution. But now these questions are solved once and for all with the words, "give yourself permission."

This view is really not modern. It is pre-Jewish. It was the prevalent attitude of the decadent cultures of Babylon and Egypt and in the corrupt periods of Greek and Roman civilization. It expresses the powerful, popular appeal of paganism. Renounce morality, liberate yourself from ethical restraints and indulge your desires. The modern person thinks that he or she is accountable to no one, not to his parents, not to community, not to his spouse, not to his children, not to his God. He is in flight from responsibility.

Judaism has important news for us. The conscience is real, and a guilty conscience can be useful. I recognize the phenomena of guilt. It is true that some lives are hit with fits

of depression because of imaginary transgressions. There are individuals who suffer from a sense of guilt that is unfounded and unjustified. There is a difference between real guilt that rises out of particular moral choices and neurotic guilt. The whole outlook of Judaism asserts that we are responsible, and we ought to feel badly if we have fallen short of our capacity to do right.

Friends, I believe that anyone who is concerned exclusively with his own pleasures and goals, who just want to do his own thing, should not get married and should not think of having children. Marriage involves duty and sacrifice. Marriage requires the commitment to the long-term project of an enduring relationship in raising children. We live in a culture focused on pleasure, a culture of instant coffee and instant love. It is a pleasure-oriented culture. Marriage is a long-term project, the project of building a deepening relationship with one's mate over the course of a lifetime, and a project of helping children grow into mature adulthood.

The most important decision one makes in life is not his career; it is his mate. The most important goal that we should hold before us is not to succeed at work, but to succeed at home. Every good marriage depends on the capacity to accept the uniqueness of one another. At the basis of every constructive marriage there is, of course the common bond of shared values, goals, and experiences. But there are also in marriage divisive and antagonizing differences. What couple never quarrels? What partner would not do something differently if he or she were doing it? But marriage means learning to accept your mate as he or she is and being accepted yourself, in love, as you are.

In every good marriage, people must learn to communicate. They must reveal their feelings to each other in order that the partner can respond. None of us are mind readers. Thus, we must put our thoughts into words as best we can. And oh, how terribly important it is to express our thoughts of love. When was the last time we told our husbands or wives, partners or friends, how much we love them, how much we respect them, how much we enjoy being with them, how glad we are that we married them, how beautiful they are? Each of us needs words of love and reassurance. Where are they to be found if not from our mate?

Every good marriage is kiddushin – a state of holiness. Marriage is holy because two human beings joined to unite in joy as one – one physically, one emotionally, one spiritually. Marriage is holy because love is consummated in the joy of having children. Two human beings become one in sharing children's first sounds, their first steps, their days of school, their growth, and their achievements. And when the children are grown and have flown from the nest to find their own partners, then the couple has each other to themselves once again. Wiser and even deeper in their love and companionship. For the years can make love stronger. Common experiences are the bricks and mortar of every deepening affections. Marriage is holy because it completes one's character. Marriage requires sacrifice, maturity, sensitivity, and most of all loyalty. And these are the qualities of a whole human being.

We are swimmers in life. We must swim wisely and well toward a safe shore. Like a wave, love tumbles us unto the seashore. If we are fortunate and wise, we grasp another

human hand and look into another human face. Together we help our children to swim the ocean and to find their own shore and their own face to look into and another hand to hold.

The beauty of life is intertwined with the beauty of marriage. Its rewards are immense, its obligations are endless. On this Sabbath, let us look inside. And then, look to your partner. Pledge to take the greatest joy in life and to give the greatest joy to life, to the one you love. Amen.