

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from March 22, 2009

Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“Unlimited Partnership”

Scriptures:

Numbers 21:4-9

John 3:14-21



I have not yet had the opportunity to counsel many couples on their way down the aisle but, for the few that I have, I try to move through the discussion of the wedding to the discussion of the marriage. After the flowers and the bridesmaids and their favorite music, to the checkbook and the dishes and the day care—How will you live out your marriage, your lifelong partnership? If one cooks, does the other clean up? Does one do the laundry and the other the vacuuming? Separate checkbooks or joint? If or when children come, will one or the other stay home and care for them or will they both continue to work and make other arrangements?

At this stage in my own life, I have known many married couples, some who found life-long longevity in their relationships, some who had to move on, but all of whom had various structures and arrangements for their daily living together. She may have been inside baking while he was outside mowing the lawn. Or he picked up the kids while his partner was at work. Or maybe they both worked out in the yard together and then came in and made dinner together. Their roles and relationships moved and morphed and were maintained, hopefully, as best fit the two individuals involved. Probably what matters most is that both individuals are committed to their relationship and are willing to make the adjustments when necessary to make it work.

Perhaps our best known passage in Scripture, John 3:16, just read and heard by us, brings to the front of our attention this morning how we make it work with God. Dissected and examined and interpreted by theologians over the centuries and held up by some as the justification as to why some are saved and some not, John 3:16 and the verses which follow, give us pause. Certainly, we will not be able to engage in an exhaustive examination here this morning, but we can lift up the partnership between grace given as a gift by God through Jesus Christ and faith engaged in by humans, and revisit how they and we are in relationship.

The questions are many, but one important and central one is: Well, which is it? Grace or faith? Paul writes in a companion passage this morning in his letter to the Ephesians: *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works.* John 3:16: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Joseph Small writes that ... *if we focus on God’s grace, we may be in danger of making salvation an arbitrary*

act, with no essential place for human response. If we focus on human faith, we may be in danger of making salvation a human accomplishment, restricting God's initiative to [simply] the provision of a universal possibility....If salvation comes by grace alone, is faith redundant? ... If salvation comes through faith alone, is grace superfluous? One is reminded of the cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz repeating desperately: I do believe, I do believe, I do, I do, I do believe...

We are reminded of those who put strict boundaries on their roles in their relationships. God's the one giving out the grace. We're the ones who have to believe to get it. He cooks, I clean up. The kitchen is my domain. His is the garage. She won't touch the laundry. I do the trash. Until something happens to melt those boundaries—someone gets sick; someone has to work overtime. And, suddenly, not only to keep the household going, but to preserve the harmony in our very precious, all-important relationships, we do slide into those other realms and give of ourselves out of love.

And maybe that's the way we can think about grace and faith and our relationship with God. Certainly, it starts with God and God's gift of grace. God so loved the world, but is not God's grace still present to us, and maybe even increasingly so when our faith falters? And is it not our faith in God that gets us through when we wonder what happened to God's grace? When it's a challenge to even recognize God's grace anywhere in our lives, when events are crashing down and tearing up our lives, and somehow we cling to our faith in the face of God's silence? Or is that God's grace shoring up our faith?

The point is it's impossible for us to see where God leaves off, if ever, and where we begin and how. That's a mutual relationship. That's being created in God's image with free will. That's a true loving committed relationship—one of mutual interaction. God's grace and our faith—giving and responding, leading to our giving and then our growing. Growing and deepening and strengthening in a relationship with God, opening us to unlimited possibilities. We humans have been called co-creators with God—such is an unlimited partnership.

Much like the sacred covenant of marriage, you and I, pastor and congregation, will enter a sacred covenant this afternoon. I've been telling people that we became engaged in October and have been living together, and this afternoon is the wedding. Today we say "I do". And we have been working out our relationship with each other over these past few months—when I am to be in the office, what times we can meet with each other, who prays at meetings, who calls for repairs on the building, who initiates change. I will continue to examine my role as servant leader, serving God and this church and at the same time leading us on our spiritual paths, and realizing that one can't really tell where one starts and the other leaves off. And we will continue to mutually interact with each other, adjusting here and there, both giving and drawing from each other, and hopefully for a long time, resulting in mutual growth and a deepening of our relationship.

And here we are truly doing it for the love of God and the love of God's church. We are intentionally engaged in ministry together as partners in Christ's service. We know that it was God's grace that brought us together *and* we know that it was our faith in God that led us out of our once dark places and brought us into this light in this place in this time.

A friend recently shared a poem by 14th-century Sufi mystic, Hafiz. Listen to the words:

*Even after all this time
The sun never says to the earth
"You owe me."
Look what happens to a love like that,
It lights up the whole sky.*

Friends, God has brought light to our world through Jesus Christ. May we magnify that light through our faith. And may we go forward in ministry in love committed together to light up the whole sky. Amen.

