

Trinity Church  
September 27, 2008

Marriage of Samantha Poffel & James Buhl  
Tobit 8:5b-8, Colossians 3:12-17, John 15:9-12

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*Grace to you and peace from God, our Father, and the Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.*

You can tell a lot about those who come to marriage by looking at the passages from Holy Scripture that they pick to have read at their wedding. Jamie and Samantha have had a long time to think about and plan for what we are about tonight; they came to see me about their engagement well over a year ago. So, the Scripture we have heard was not picked unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with what they desire to pledge to each other in marriage.

The care with which they have selected Scripture readings is, I believe, the same care that they have taken to pick each other. Over plenty of time they have reached beyond attraction and infatuation to discover and experience the deeper joys of love that are the fruit of faithfulness and constancy, of sacrifice and patience, of self-giving and receiving, of discovering in one another the image of God in which each of us is made, and embracing the divine beauty that resides in the human soul. It is in the arms of this love that marriage is possible — not unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently, deliberately, and in accordance with the purposes for which it was instituted by God. That's Jamie and Samantha.

Tobias and Sarah are the principle characters in a very old tale of pious Jews living in exile and subject to all the slings and arrows of the outrageous fortune that befall subjugated peoples. Tobias and Sarah fell in love early in life, but one mishap after another comes between them, and Tobias is sent forth on perilous adventures that threaten his life and keep them apart. Quite unknown to Tobias, God has commissioned the archangel Raphael to befriend and guard Tobias, but his hidden identity offers Tobias little spiritual comfort. He is tempted time and again to give up his faith in God, who has treated him so very cruelly. But Tobias perseveres, and after many years, is united again with Sarah, whose love for him is undiminished, and they are married. The passage we read is from near the end of the story. The wedding feast is over, and they have entered Tobias' house and are preparing to go to bed. They kneel down to pray before they come together. They thank God that throughout every difficulty, they have maintained their love for one another and for God. Now, in each other's arms they know that love — theirs and God's — is real and exquisite. They ask only for God's mercy and the chance to grow old together.

Samantha, we read this passage for you now as an expression of our hope for you and Jamie. There are adventures ahead for you that will try your relationship and your faith. But if this story is true, God has already sent his angel to travel with you. So, this is a passage to be read again, at your 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, when you can kneel down together in your 80s beside each other and give thanks that you have in each other found God's mercy, and grown old together.

There are couples here tonight, gathered to bless you, who have made the journey of Tobias and Sarah. They have grown old together. They have received mercy. We give thanks for their witness.

Now Paul's Letter to the Colossians reflects what some scholars today call the conservative Paul. This is a strain of Pauline writing that wants to instruct and uphold the infant Christians in the compassionate and virtuous ways of Christ. Not bad words for you, Jamie, since you and

Samantha are just this moment giving birth to your marriage, and are infants indeed in the relationship you are about to take up. Paul says, "Let your relationship be clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, patience, forbearance, and especially forgiveness." These are Spirit-filled gifts that can bind you together. They are like strands of a rope coiled together to make your relationship strong. The fruit, then, of marriage is love, abundant and amazing love that pours over you undeserved yet joyfully received. You can only give thanks and embrace the peace of being one body in each other and Christ.

Colossians 3 is a passage that you can look up each year on September 27 and read it like an old love letter you once sent to one another, and you can ask — how are we doing? Do these words uphold us still in our relationship as it matures? Have forgiveness, patience, humility, kindness and compassion grown so strong in us that we live in thanksgiving and peace as Paul hopes that we should? May you find, in the embrace of kind forgiveness, that the answer is each year, yes.

In John's Gospel, Jesus says to his disciples, "Abide in my love." The deep truth about the marriage that we celebrate tonight is that marriage is a gift, a doorway, a mechanism, for the two of you to abide in Christ's love for you. As you embrace one another in love, Christ embraces you and your love in his own. By his grace, your love is sanctified and in Christ it is glorified as you love one another as Christ has loved you; emptying himself in obedient service, even death on a cross, that in Christ your love may be glorified in his love for you. Abide in that love, for that is the blessing that you receive at Christ's altar tonight.

Tonight, we witness your vows, and we applaud your love. We set you on the roadway of marriage with Sarah and Tobias, uplifted by Paul, and consecrated in Christ's love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Amen.