

Renewal of Marriage Vows Service
for Charlie and Jeanne Hannum
July 1, 2018
The Rev. Emily Richards

*What greater thing is there for two human souls,
than to feel that they are joined for life:
to strengthen each other in all labor,
to rest on each other in all sorrow,
to minister to each other in all pain,
to be one with each other
in the beautiful, unspeakable memories,
~British novelist and poet George Elliot*

On this particular Sunday morning we gather to immerse ourselves in thanksgiving and praise as God's beloved people, and also to celebrate two human souls and the life they have built over the past four decades. Jeanne and Charlie met in 1976 when they were both stationed in Memphis serving in the Navy. Charlie had his work cut out for him because he not only had to woo Jeanne but had to convince her eight-year old daughter Kristin that he was good enough for her mother and for her. This was certainly Charlie's greatest and most successful mission. For he and Jeanne were engaged in March 1978 and two months later on May 13 were married at Jeanne's home parish with Kristin looking on in approval. Their engagement was an unusually short one because Charlie was shipped off to Japan only a month after their wedding. Jeanne and Kristin joined him later that November. Joseph was welcomed into their family and then Mary and to the surprise of all Michael came along over a decade after they tied the knot. Forty years into this lifelong endeavor they have extended the love they first felt for each other to include not only their four children, but adored grandchildren, and many other beloved family and friends along the way.

When Charlie and Jeanne and I sat down to begin planning their renewal of vows it was clear that they wanted to mark this occasion within a Sunday liturgy surrounded by all their loved ones including their church family. I was excited that they wanted to do it this way, because this is one sacramental experience we don't often all get to participate in. Every Sunday we are gifted with sharing communion around the holy table and throughout the seasons we witness beloved children of God being welcomed into God's household as the waters of baptism are poured over them. But more often than not weddings and the renewal of marriage vows are performed outside the context of the worshipping community. So, thank you Jeanne and Charlie for inviting us into this sacred moment with you and your family.

Rachel Held Evans believes that “marriage is not an inherently holy institution. And it cannot magically be made so by the government, by a priest, or even by the church. Rather, marriage is a relationship that is made holy, or sacramental, when it reflects the life-giving, self-sacrificing love of Jesus. All relationships and vocations — marriage, friendship, singleness, parenthood, partnership, ministry, monastic vows, adoption, neighborhoods, families, churches—give Christians the opportunity to reflect the grace and peace of the kingdom of God, however clumsily, however imperfectly. For two people to commit themselves not simply to marriage, but to a lifetime of mutual love is so astounding, so mysterious, it comes close to looking like Jesus’ stubborn love for the church.”

This mutual love that Evans talks about is the same kind of love that St. Paul refers to in his words to the church in Corinth. This passage is by far the most popular piece of scripture read at weddings. And what’s so ironic is that in it Paul is not talking about two individuals and their devotion to one another. He’s actually talking to a very divided church that can’t find a way to get along. He is urging them to support, encourage and care for one another – to reflect that life-giving, self-sacrificing love of Jesus. Paul eloquently shares with them the truth about this unsentimental, stubborn love. It bears *all things*. Believes *all things*. Hopes *all things*. It never ends. Everything else—*everything else*—will end. Not this kind of love, Paul says. For it is the love that God has had for us since the beginning of creation, flowing out of the very essence of God and causing God to send his only son to live among us and to die for us. The same love which led to the power of the resurrection overcoming death and the grave. It knits us to God and knits us to each other in the Body of Christ. It’s this love we are all called to seek, to give away, and ultimately to know as the deepest truth within ourselves.

Charlie and Jeanne, over the past four decades you have journeyed with each other in all of the ordinary and spectacular moments of your lives, supporting each other in raising your family, in your vocations and in your ministry to the church and to the world, resting on each other in all sorrow, ministering to each other in all pain, forgiving each other when you have hurt one another, sharing in every beautiful and unspeakable memory together. "Marriage is not a lifelong attraction of two individuals to each other, but a call for two people to witness together to God's love," writes Henri Nouwen. "[The] intimacy of marriage itself is an intimacy that is based on the common participation in a love greater than the love two people can offer each other. The real mystery of marriage is not that the couple love each other so much that they can find God in each other's lives, but that God loves them so much that they can discover each other more and more as living reminders of God's divine presence. They are brought

together, indeed, as two prayerful hands extended toward God and forming in this way a home for God in this world.”

Forty years ago, you stepped out in faith side by side to risk this holy endeavor of love. The journey you began is the very same one you are on today. You just now find yourselves a little greyer, a little wiser and certainly a lot more enriched by the experience and those who have shared it with you. My prayer for you on this special day is that you continue to discover in each other, in your precious children and grandchildren and in every soul you encounter, a living reflection of God’s loving and gracious presence. As we all witness this couple renewing the promises they made to each other, may we too be reminded that in our relationships, in the stubborn, unsentimental and selfless love we share with one another, a home for God is made in our world. *Amen.*