Today we begin a new preaching series on Love, Sex and Marriage.
Let me mention to you that if you have little children and you’re wondering if you should have them present with you during the sermon, let me assure you that if I think anything would be inappropriate for little ears that I will give you a heads up prior to the Sunday. I do know that 2 weeks from now the 3rd sermon will deal with Sexual intimacy.
And although, I will be sensitive and respectful about how we talk about things, you may still wish to take your children to the Nursery.
Otherwise, I think you will find the sermons appropriate for children and adults.
During the next 6 weeks, I will be drawing upon information gleaned from important books recommended by marriage therapists;
And a huge survey taken by United Methodists Christians;
And we’ll look at the Scriptures too to see how it both informs and shapes our most important relationships that we have;
And what they teach us about love, sex and marriage.
My attempt each week will be to include some humor, some inspiration and how scripture relates to our daily lives and if you are listening –
Whether you are single, married or whether you never ever anticipate being in a romantic relationship again, there will be something for you in every one of these messages.

So, I want to begin with a joke.

There was an elderly couple getting ready for bed.
The woman had already snuggled into bed and her husband finally came to bed and she said:
Honey, do you remember when we were younger,
You used to snuggle with me when we went to bed.
So, he sighed and wiggled his way over next to her.
Then she said:
Do you remember when we were younger, you used to put your arm around me and hold my hand when we came to bed.
And he sighed a little louder and says:
Okay.
And he reaches over and puts his arm around her and takes her hand.
She says:
Honey, do you remember when we were younger, you used to nibble on my ear.
Now with this, he threw the covers off the bed, jumped out of bed and stormed out of the room.
And she said:
Wait, where are you going?

He came back into the room…I’m going to get my teeth!
That story in some ways illustrates the point we’re going to make in today’s message. And that point is:
What does marital love look like?
Yes, the kind of love that lasts a lifetime is not a feeling. It’s a willingness to get out of a warm bed and walk into a cold bathroom to get your teeth out of a cup of Fixodent and come back and nibble on her ear.
Because that’s what she’s wanting and needing at the moment. That’s what Agape love is all about. It’s a sacrificing unconditional kind of love that seeks to bless the other.

Now as we think about love, I want us to understand that there’s something in all of us that longs to be loved and longs to give love to another human being. We feel this from the time we’re little.
In grade school, I remember I had a crush on my Third grade teacher. In Middle school, I learned that a girl liked me when her friends and my friends each past notes to me about it. We dated for a while until she got tired of waiting for me to kiss her. I was too shy and I surely didn’t know how to go about it.
But, in high school a girl from the Methodist Church Youth Group showed me how it was done one night at a church party on New Year’s Eve. When I got to college my freshman year, I was in a drama-singing group called Lampost and I met this girl who was asked by the director to mentor me regarding staying on key. I remember one night sitting next to her on the piano bench while she was going over the chords to a song we were learning. She let me sneak a kiss and I was starry-eyed for the next 6 years when she would later become my wife.

Here’s our engagement picture…

When we got married I thought we would live in perpetual bliss and that we would never have any disagreements and that we’d always see eye to eye. I have discovered over the past 33 years that you are madly in love with each other and times when you’re so frustrated that you want to pull your hair out… Which is why I have no hair anymore. There are seasons that are harder and seasons that are easier to love. There are challenges, difficulties and frustrations and yet, if you hang in there and you don’t give up and each do what marriage is each calling you to do which we’re going to talk about today, you find out that there are blessings that you never imagined. It’s not what you thought it would be, but it is certainly filled with riches if you figure out what’s supposed to happen when you are married.

But, how do you figure that out? Typically, you don’t take classes in High School or College on how to be married. Let’s face it - we have to take a course of Driver’s Ed before you can get your driver’s license.
But, you don’t have to do anything, but pay $50 to get a marriage license in order to live together for the rest of your life and perhaps even to raise children.

Doesn’t that seem strange and potentially dangerous?

We get no training in advance and even if you do receive pre-marital counseling, are you really paying attention?

Our pre-marital counseling consisted of about an hour which most of that was spent in planning the service itself.

During the wedding service, the pastor gave a 5 minute sermon and many of the things he talked about, I still remember to this day, but it was only 5 minutes worth.

It hardly prepared me for a lifetime of marriage.

But, the place we learned how to be married was by watching our parents.

But, many of us are from a generation of people whose parents got a divorce.

So, we look at our parents and we figure out that there’s something that wasn’t right there because their marriages ended.

So, what are we to do?

When it comes time to get married to somebody;

We feel in love with that person and we’re all excited.

We think to ourselves that perhaps we ought to get married. But often, we don’t know what the mission or purpose is of this union.

So, we fumble along and we can if we want to, get some help or coaching along the way.

We call these people counselors.

But, many men say, if I go and see a counselor,

It must mean I am defective in some way.

So, I can’t do that.

That would be like buying a new car and saying that you should never take it back for an oil change.

What kind of logic is that to never ask for help?

There’s nothing wrong with taking your car in for an oil change, but bring up the idea that we may need some minor tweaks and adjustments in our relationships…

We hear all the time:

We don’t need any help.

Everything’s fine.

We can do it ourselves, like our children used to say to us.

So, it’s no surprise that there’re struggles when it comes to marriage.

For couples who get married today, statistics indicate that 40 – 50% of them will end in divorce.

This is actually better than the stats were back in 1980 when Debbie and I were married.

Back then the odds were over 50% of marriages would end in divorce.

Debbie and I discovered this to be true with our wonderful couples Sunday School Class that we were a part of at FUMC Santa Monica.

We had 25 couples in that class and to our knowledge, only 1 other couple besides ourselves are still married to the original person today.
So, even though the divorce rates have come down, they’re still very high. And even those couples who seem to be making it work are not certain they’re making it work, but are only tolerating each other.

This is partly why the marriage rate in America has gone down significantly. In 1960, of all the adults 18 and over in America, 72% were married. Last year it was 51% and all indicators are that it will continue to go down. So basically half the people in the USA are single and the other half are married. There are two primary reasons for this:

One, is people that start out being married, but then get a divorce and are single again. And the other is that many young adults today are saying: Why should I get married? Or I surely don’t want to get married this young because I saw what happened to my parents; And I don’t want that to happen to me. So, they are postponing marriage. You see, in 1960, the average age of a woman at her first marriage was 20 years of age and for men, it was 22.

In 2011, the age was almost 27 for women and for men it was almost 29. Young people today are also choosing to live together before they get married as a way of having a trial marriage to test the waters. The challenge however is that it may feel like a marriage, but it lacks a sense of mission and calling. You get all the goodies, but you lack the commitment. So, although the divorce rate has dropped down to 40%, The ratio of couples who move into together and then break up within 5 years has gone up and is over 50%. So, I think this tells us that whether you’re married or just co-habiting, living together is hard work. And it requires more than what most of us have, to make it work.

In 2011, there was a survey done by the University of Virginia. They asked the same series of questions to both married couples between the ages of 18-46 and people who were single between the ages of 18-46. What they found was that when they asked the question: Are you very happy with your life to the married people: Married couples scored between 11% -28% higher than those who were single. Now, this doesn’t mean that single people can’t be happy. There were many who were. But what it says is maybe we shouldn’t give up on marriage yet because there’re many people who do get married and are very happy in their life. The research shows that 40% of Americans think marriage is obsolete.
That statistic has been affirmed every time I hear a couple justify why they live together by saying – marriage is just a piece of paper. I can understand the logic of living together even though I don’t approve of it. But, it will be hard to convince me that marriage is just a piece of paper.

Let me explain what I think marriage means and why I think it matters. I asked Debbie this week if she knew where our marriage license was. She wasn’t sure. Is it in the wedding album, she asked? No, maybe it’s where we keep all of our important papers? Neither one of us were sure. But, you see, we’re not married after 33 years because of a piece of paper. We’re married because we entered into a covenant with God and with each other about the mission and calling of our lives. A piece of paper means nothing to us. It’s just a keepsake that we rarely look at. Marriage is so much more than a piece of paper.

Now, in the Christian and Jewish tradition, marriage is so important that it shows up in the first three chapters of the Bible. It’s a foundational story. In Genesis, Chapter 1 – 3, we have the Creation story. Some people read the Creation story as either ancient history or as science. But, there are many of us who read the Creation Story and we don’t see it as ancient history or as science. We see it as archetypal truth. We see it as figurative and poetic language to describe the most important truths in life. Those stories are trying to answer the primal questions like:

Who are we as human beings?
Why do we exist?
What’s the purpose of life?
Is there a God?
What is God like?

And out of all the archetypal questions; This one – What is the meaning and mission of marriage is answered in Genesis 1-3. You see, that tells you how important the idea and bond of marriage is in scripture. It’s right there in the beginning with all those other lofty questions. It’s here that we begin to find our answers. As we do that, let me remind you that in Genesis 1 and 2, there are actually two Creation Stories that are brought together by two different traditions.

In Genesis 1, we read that God created on the first day this…and God said it was good. And on the second day this…and God said it was good and so on.
And when you get to the last day, God looks at everything God had made and says:
It was very good.

In Genesis 2.5, we find the second Creation Story and here for the first time we find God seeing something and saying:
This is not good.
You see, God creates everything and then God creates the human being and places him in the Garden of Eden and then we read these words as God is looking at the man:
It is not good that the man should be alone;
I will make him a helper as his partner. (Genesis 2.15-18)

Then the story goes on and says that God went about creating a partner for man and then there’s a long list of animals that are created.
But a suitable helper and companion is not found.
So, then God says – I’ve an idea.
And it’s a great idea.
God causes the man to fall into a deep sleep and God takes from the man’s side a rib and closes up the hole with flesh.

Then the Lord God forms a new and improved model of the man…and forms a woman!

And God brings the woman to the man and he rubs the sleep from his eyes;
And his heart begins to beat faster and faster.
And he says:
At last, this is what I have been waiting for, 
Yearning for, 
Longing for.
She is bone of my bones;
And flesh of my flesh;
She is like me, but mysteriously different from me.

And the scripture writer goes on to say:
Therefore a man shall leave his mother and father and today we would say:
And a woman shall leave her mother and father and the two shall become one flesh.
(Genesis 2.21-24)

Which is a euphemism for sexual intimacy.

So, in this story, we find love, sex and marriage wrapped up into one and we find the mission of marriage.
In our text this morning, we hear two words over and over again:
I will make him a helper as his companion
God doesn’t say, I will make him a romantic partner.
God says, I’ll make him a helper.
Not that romance is bad.
It’s just that this story is more of a nuts and bolts earthy story.
God says: I’ll make him a helper.
I don’t know about you, but I think many people read this story and think:
Oh, God is making the man a little helper to wait on his every demand and whim.
That’s not what’s meant by the word helper.

The Hebrew word for helper is:
Ezer.

Ezer is a powerful word that is almost always used of God, but sometimes in reference to
human beings.
But, in every instance in scripture, when the word Ezer is used;
It’s always used to signify someone who is stronger, helping out someone who is weaker.
I will make for him an Ezer who will help him and who will be his companion.
I will make for him one who is stronger who is going to help him.
This is the picture we have when God is creating the woman who would come and help
the man.
But, it wasn’t just the woman helping the man.
The implication in the story is that the man would also be the ezer for the woman.
That they would help each other and be companions for one another.

The Hebrew word for companion is: Kenegdo.

And it means to stand in front of or walk along with.

So, the significance of the word is comparable to things that are meant to go together like
two puzzle pieces or a left shoe and a right shoe.
You don’t have the one without the other.
There’s this need for companionship.
And those two shoes, the left and the right sometimes walk through the manure pile
together.
And sometimes they march up to the mountaintop.
And when they get to the end, the implication is that they have been in both places
together.
The helper isn’t expected to solve all the problems of the other.

Research shows that people who are in relationships dislike it when their partner tries to
solve all of their problems.
The aim is not to solve all of the problems, but to be a helper in the process along the
journey.
The idea of being a helper here in the text is to bless the other.
You see:
I am to bless my mate.
I am to encourage them.
I am to lift them up.
I am to help them be what God wants them to be.
I am to supply what they are in need of when they are in trouble.
I am to come alongside them and help them.
I am to help them grow in their faith.
I am to help them physically, emotionally and spiritually.
And they are to do the same.
And together – we make this thing we call marriage work.
I am to bless and to work for the best for the other person.

For those of you who are married, I wonder how many of you think about that on a daily basis?
You see, your mission, my mission is to bless my spouse and to work for the best for them.
If you don’t remember anything else today,
Write this down:

The mission of marriage…the reason why you would marry…the purpose of this entity we call marriage is to be able to bless, minister to and help the other and to be their companion on life’s journey.

Now, this isn’t an easy thing to do.
It’s not easy because – women are frustrating….
Men are irritating…
We don’t see the world the same way.
And it’s downright hard to love somebody who doesn’t see the world the way you see it;
Or act the way you act;
Or respond the way you would respond.

Can you imagine Adam and Eve?
Do you think they really got along all the time?
We may think they were perfect, but by Genesis 3 they had managed to mess up in a big way;
And then they started blaming each other.
They had the same problems we have in getting along with each other.

Is it possible that God made us different initially?
Can it be that those differences are important in helping each other?
Despite the fact that these differences frustrate us;
We need those differences.
That is part of the implication in our story today.
If you’re serious about this idea of helping each other,
Then there’s a Greek word for this.

And the Greek word is:
Agape!
Agape is a word for love, but it doesn’t have anything to do with how you feel.

It’s not feeling warm fuzzies for the other person. 
It’s acting with love toward the other person. 
And to act with love toward the other person means you help them in their time of need. 
It means that you bless them; 
You encourage them; 
You lift them up; 
You pray for them; 
You stand by them. 
This is what it means to love.

Our romantic relationships start off with a different kind of love. 
The Greeks called it Eros!

This is where we get our word erotic. 
Eros was the God of love according to the Greeks. 
He was also called Cupid. 
When he shot his arrow into your heart, you found yourself passionately in love with someone. 
Your heart beats faster; 
You can’t wait to be around them. 
It is a Wow and exciting kind of feeling. 
It’s a good starting point for marriage. 
But, it’s not a foundation for marriage. 
Eros is meant to mature into Agape. 
So, the passion and excitement is supposed to lead us to love each other even when we don’t feel like Eros. 
It’s to bless you and encourage you even when I don’t feel like it. 
I am to love you even when you’re irritating and frustrating me. 
I am to seek what’s best for you even when I don’t feel like giving it to you.

That’s Agape! 
Jesus demonstrates Agape to us. 
He says this is what life is all about. 
This is the connection of a strong faith and a really good healthy marriage. 
You see, inside of us, we really find it hard to live out Agape. 
It doesn’t come naturally to us. 
Agape is selfless love. 
And by nature, we’re selfish. 
We’re wired to protect ourselves. 
Often times I’m not thinking first about what Debbie needs. 
I’m thinking first about what she isn’t doing that I need. 
This is why our relationships can be frustrating at times. 
And what the Christian faith does is turn us inside out. 
And it says:
In the beginning, God made you to be people who practice Agape toward everybody. We’re to think of others before we think of ourselves. We’re to do unto others what you want others to do to you. You love God and your neighbor as you love yourself. This is all part of our Christian faith. Jesus says: Come and follow me. I want to show you what it means to be human. It means to love selflessly and sacrificially. And if two people do that together, it’s magic! If only one person does it, it’s disaster.

So, since this is difficult for us naturally, we need help from Jesus. As His disciple, I want to be the person He wants me to be. So, now I’ve named Agape as something I want to practice in my life, if I want to be the person Jesus wants me to become. But, I can’t do this all on my own. I need help from Jesus. So, I ask him to come into my life through the Holy Spirit and change me from the inside out. And over time the Holy Spirit works on us and the scriptures pour into our lives as we go to church and worship. All of these things are meant to change our heart from the inside out. So that over time, we become more and more Agape-like.

In the end, Jesus showed us what Agape looked like. I mean, He washed the disciple’s feet. He said Agape looks like serving one another and the Greatest among you would be the servant. Then He hung on a cross and He said: This is what Agape looks like. It’s laying down your life for another.

The Apostle Paul says: Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. (Ephesians 5.2)

So, we love with the love of Christ as we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us. As we grow in our Christian faith, we find that we become more loving people. The goal of the Christian life John Wesley tells us is Sanctification. Which means we’re to be made holy and grow and be perfected in love. So that 20 years from now, if I am living what I’m preaching to you today, I should be more loving towards Debbie than I am today. And here’s what I know after 33 years of marriage. When I am in worship and I am truly worshipping;
When I am praying;
When I am reading scripture;
When I am growing in my faith;
When I am connecting with God;
When I am closer to God, the better husband I am.
I think less of myself and more of Debbie when I stay connected to God.

Because it becomes second nature in thinking:
How can I bless and encourage her.
And those times when I drift away from God.
And believe me, even pastors drift away from God sometimes.
During those times I’m more selfish, and less interested in how I can help her.
There’s a connection between our faith and our capacity to demonstrate Agape to each other.

The Apostle Paul says if we are really living out Agape with our mate, this is what it looks like.
We hear this read at so many weddings where Paul says:
Agape is patient;
Agape is kind;
Agape is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.
It does not insist on its own way;
It is not irritable or resentful;
It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.
It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.
Love never ends. (I Corinthians 13.4-8a)

If we want to be a blessing and helpful to our mate,
Then it’s important for us to know:
What is a blessing for them?
You see, the challenge is:
What’s a blessing for me may not be a blessing to Debbie.

I mean, I’ve done some stupid things in my marriage where I thought it was going to bless her, but it wasn’t the kind of thing that blessed her.
It didn’t constitute a deposit in her love bank.
I was one of those guys who bought Debbie for Christmas some gadgets for the kitchen including a waffle-maker which she still has not used for the past 20 years.
That was a huge mistake.
Don’t buy your wife a waffle-maker for Christmas unless she asks for one.
But, I liked it and I thought she’d like it too, but it was clearly something that did not connect with her.
If I don’t know what constitutes a blessing and I don’t know her needs, then I am not going to be what the mission of marriage calls me to be in seeking to bless her.

That’s why next Sunday may be the most important weekend in this Sermon series.
I’m going to share with you what 3,000 United Methodist Women said that constitutes a blessing to them.  
3,000 women took a survey and said:  
This is what I wish men in my life would do more of and this is what I wish they would do less of.  
And 1,700 men who said:  
This is what I wish the women in my life would do more of and what they wish they would do less of.  
And the final question on the survey was this:  
What would you wish for your pastor to say to your mate in a sermon from both the women’s perspective as well as the men’s perspective?

That’s all next Sunday so you don’t want to miss that one,  
So, we can live out this calling and mission from God.  
To wrap up, we have learned that marriage is not perpetual bliss.  
It requires hard work, courage and sacrifice in order to make it happen.  
We have also learned that marriage is more than a piece of paper.  
It’s a sacred covenant with God where we pledge to love our spouse.  
And we have learned that the mission of marriage is to bless, to help and to be companions along this journey.

So, the last thing I want to share with you is once you know what the mission is, you want to know what it looks like if you accomplish it and we call that a vision.

So, if we actually do marriage well, what will it look like 20 years down the road…50 years down the road?  
For me, I have learned so much from members of my congregations over the years who have been married for many years.  
And I have especially learned about marriage when I have sat next to you who have lost spouses and I listened as you described the 50 or 60 years of your marriage.  
And how your life partner has made you a better person.  
That has helped me.  
Because I can tell you that after 33 years –  
Debbie has brought out the best in me.

My vision,  
My hope and prayer is that I will be the kind of husband that 40 years from now when Debbie is 96 and I’ve died…that she could say:  
He helped to bring out the best in me.

For the past 13 years Debbie and I have always considered it a blessing to have wonderful next door neighbors like Kel and Jane Friesen.  
Many of you know that Jane’s cancer came back in the form of a brain tumor that eventually took her life.
During last year we had Kel and Jane over for dinner and during the last days, we watched Kel take care of Jane 24/7 as her ability to care for herself diminished. We were there the day Kel placed Jane’s cremated remains into the ground and tenderly tucked them in as a loving father would tuck in the bed sheets around their young child. And I remember thinking to myself:
That’s what marriage looks like.

It wasn’t about a stupid piece of paper.
It was no longer about sex or romance.
It wasn’t even about friendship or fun.
It was about two people who had made a commitment to God and to each other.
That for better or for worst;
For richer or for poorer;
In sickness and in health;
To love and to cherish;
Until we are parted by death.

That’s what marriage looks like.
It is a beautiful and holy thing!

In the weeks ahead, we will be talking about how we might live into that ideal.
But, let me close as we began.
Love doesn’t always look so dramatic as a spouse who is dying and you are carrying them to the bathroom in the middle of the night.
It usually looks like an older man whose wife says:
You used to nibble on my ears.
And even though he’s a little irritated over it,
He throws off the covers, gets up and stomps into the bathroom to get his dentures out of the cup of Fixodent.
He puts them in and gets back in bed and he nibbles on his wife’s ear because it will bless her.

And that too, is what marriage looks like.

Let us pray.