

Year C Epiphany 3  
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10  
Psalm 19  
1 Corinthians 12:12-31a  
Luke 4:14-21

The Rev. Christine Fair Beebe  
St. Francis Episcopal Church  
Rutherfordton, NC  
January 24, 2016  
The Wedding of Linda Bailey and Michael DeLorenzo

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. *Amen.*

What an extraordinary, wonderful day and what a blessing this occasion is for this community of faith and friends! Weddings during the principal worship service are rare in the Episcopal Church, but appropriate for so many reasons, especially in this case, because Linda and Mike met at St. Francis and have given us the privilege of watching their love for each other grow.

There are other reasons why Sunday morning is a good time for this. Marriage is a sacrament, an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace. The couple being married is creating a new family, a new community, as they make their vows before God and the Church to love each other in a lifelong union. In this celebration today, they receive the grace and blessing of God to help them fulfill their vows. All of us here today are not only witnessing their promises but are making our own promises, to them and to God, to do all in our power to uphold them in their life together.

As a congregation, we make the same promise when someone is baptized into the Body of Christ or confirmed into membership in the church that we've just made concerning Linda and Mike and their new life together. The question asked of us, in all three circumstances, is basically the same: will you who witness these vows do all in your power to support these persons? None of us will say no, of course, but we should consider that saying yes is more than just the correct answer. As we will pray for Mike and Linda to live together in the unity and love of Christ, we should pray regularly for the same unity and love within our church, and for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to make that happen. Too often, whether we are being married or joining a church, we are looking for someone who can make us whole and happy. But that is not something we can do for each other, only for ourselves, and only with God's help. Being in relationship, in a good and healthy relationship, doesn't just happen. It requires prayer, attention, patience, forgiveness, tolerance, acceptance, and many other acts and attitudes that sometimes call us to put others' needs and happiness ahead of our own. That is how we live in community.

This new community Mike and Linda are creating today will become part of other communities to which they belong, communities of family, friends and church. What we may not think about is that Christian marriage is an example to all of us about how to live together, whether it's in a community of two or a community of more than a hundred. In their vows, the couple being married promise each other love, honor and faithfulness, in the good times as well as the not-so-good times. Those are big promises that aren't always easy for human beings to keep. We have to admit that whether it's within marriage or family or the Body of Christ, there *are* those not-so-good times. The truth, and we all know it, is that whenever two or three are gathered there will not always be unity and peace; sometimes there will be disagreements and sometimes our human and selfish desires won't reflect what is best for the entire community. Thankfully, Jesus reminded us that whenever two or three are gathered in his name, he will be in the midst of them. Communities grounded in Christ, whether in marriage or the church, can and should look to him for guidance, and as an example of reconciliation, forgiveness, and most of all, unselfish, unconditional love.

In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, he's teaching this new community of faith about what we are called to do and be as Christians who live and worship together. You'll remember that the Corinthians had let themselves be divided by their disagreements. At the center of their quarrels was the issue of whether some spiritual gifts were superior to others. "My gifts are better than yours, so I'm better than you." That may seem childish, but remember the early Christians didn't have Paul's letters to instruct them as we do. In today's passage, Paul uses the example of the body to emphasize the importance of every part to the whole. What good would be the gift of teaching if

there were no students; or the gift of hospitality if there was no one to welcome? As Paul reminds us, “God has so arranged the body that there may be no dissension within it, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.” That is the ideal for marriage and for the church. Without each other, without the sharing of experiences and beliefs, sadness and gladness, life that is sometimes exciting and other times boring, there cannot be real community.

In the Episcopal Church, each couple who is to be married is not only expected, but required to participate in pre-marital conversations with the priest. The subjects of these conversations range from the obvious—such as money and intimacy—to things we take for granted, like our perspectives about family and faith, and the roles and responsibilities of each person within the marriage. The common theme that runs through these conversations is not that it’s necessary or even good to agree about everything all the time. What is important is the ability, or at least the effort, to disagree without wounding one another, to honor and respect the differences, and to communicate with love and intention. Of course these are good things for all of us to practice, and practice is the key. My prayer, not only for Linda and Mike, but for all of us who are in relationship with each other, is that we may remember Paul’s words, “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose.” We are not here together by accident.

Now, to the two of you, Linda and Mike, I’ll reiterate that message. God has brought you together to love and honor each other. That doesn’t mean every moment will be wonderful. There *will* be adjustments for both of you as you learn to live together. Mike, your argument about what you’ve both gained from your collective hundred years of marriage experience is not the only reason I agreed to an abbreviated pre-marital conversation with you. I’m confident in your ability to work together to make your marriage everything you want it to be. Your love for each other is obvious and joyful to watch; and it’s obvious in your stewardship of your time, talent and treasure, that your faith is important, and an important part of your life together. The light of Christ shines through each of you and we who know and love you are blessed by your example. On a personal note, I want to thank you, not only for the honor of being part of your wedding celebration, but also for being a reminder that we never know how or when God will heal our hurts and bless our lives.

Now what you may not know about this sacrament of marriage is that within it the two of you are the ministers. I’m here today to officiate, to pronounce God’s blessing on your marriage, and to celebrate the Eucharist; but that is the extent of my ministerial authority over your marriage. That’s because the vows you’re making today are to each other and to God. They are holy and sacred, and meant for a lifetime. Keep your faith in one another and in the power and grace of God, and know that Christ’s love for you and your love for each other will bless your marriage and guide you through each day. You are much loved by everyone here, and our prayer is that together you will always know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. For ever and ever. *Amen.*