

About ~~a month~~ ago I heard of a couple who celebrated their anniversary in a unique way. Each year the wife puts on her wedding gown and the man gets into the suit he wore on his wedding day and they have someone take a picture of them in their living room. Now this isn't a custom that I would particularly advocate but I thought it might help us to understand the marriage commitment and the love between a man and his wife if we used our imaginations and pictured the circumstances of this couple over the years as they celebrate their anniversary.

Now I want you to imagine that it is this couple's fifth wedding anniversary. For the past five years they have faithfully gotten into their wedding garb and had their pictures taken on their anniversary. But this year has been a bad year. The man has been out of work for nearly the whole year. They have had a hard time paying the rent. They

have two little children, one of whom has needed a lot of medical attention. The doctors bills have piled up. Both husband and wife have been worried about the baby and how they are going to pay their bills. So these are the circumstances that surround their fifth wedding anniversary.

They can't afford a professional photographer but their next door neighbor has come over with his Kodak instamatic to take their picture. As they stand there to have their picture taken all sorts of thoughts are running through their heads. The wife sees the frayed rug and wishes she had the money to buy a new rug and some nice furniture. She gets depressed at times when she thinks of how little they have. The husband sees the stack of bills on his desk and a broken dolly lying on the floor. He feels guilty that he hasn't been able to buy any nice toys for his children in a long time.

Then their neighbor says to them, "Now, turn and face one another and repeat your marriage vows while I take the picture." So the husband begins, "I...take thee...to be my wedded wife; and I do promise and covenant; before God and these witnesses to be thy loving and faithful husband; In plenty and in want..." He stops abruptly. No sooner does he say these words then something flashes between his wife and himself as they look into one another's eyes. "In plenty and in want." That's what we promised. We promised.

Now I want you to imagine that it's their fifteenth wedding anniversary. ~~Ten years have passed and what a change has taken place in their circumstances.~~ They are now living in a nice-big house...beautiful furniture... a fire-place. For the last eight or nine years the husband has had a fantastic job which really pays well, although it keeps him terribly busy. He often spends three or four nights of the week in the office and as a

result hasn't had a lot of time to spend with his children who are now teen-agers. His wife managed to complete her college education and has also been working full time. Money is no longer a problem but their youngest son has been having real problems in school. He's been smoking pot and running with the wrong crowd. He failed eighth grade and now he has also gotten into some minor trouble with the law. They can't control him.

This has brought real tension into the marriage. It's their anniversary but they have been yelling and shouting at one another all morning. "If you had spent more time with him instead of working every night this wouldn't have happened," the wife accuses her husband. The husband blames his wife for working instead of staying home with the kids. "Sometimes I'm sorry we ever got married," he shouts to his wife. Tears and anger.

They don't want to go through the ritual of getting into their wedding clothes. But

they have hired a professional photographer whom they will have to pay anyway if they break the appointment so they belligerently get dressed. Now they are standing in the living room before the photographer. The photographer says, "Hey, now let's look happy. Face one another and repeat your wedding vows while I take this picture." They turn and scowl at one another. Then they begin to exchange their vows, "I...take thee...to be my wedded husband; And I do promise and covenant; Before God and these witnesses; To be thy loving and faithful wife; In plenty and in want; In joy and in sorrow..." Their voices soften. How the joy has gone out of their marriage. And they both think to themselves, "But we promised. We promised, In joy and in sorrow. We promised."

Now I want you to imagine that it is their 48th wedding anniversary. How the time has flown by. Their children have grown up and married. They have grand-

children and a few great grand-children. And they have grown old. In the past year the wife has suffered a stroke which has paralyzed her left arm and affected her speech. The husband gets around painfully with the help of a cane and cannot hear very well. They both know that this may be their last anniversary in this world. The whole family has gathered to celebrate this special occasion. One of the grand-daughters helps the old woman put on her wedding gown. It's now yellow with age, it has a few moth holes in it, and it fits a bit more snugly than it used to. The old husband can't even fit into his wedding pant's anymore but he does wear the old faded shirt and bow tie he wore so long ago.

And now the grand-children have steered them to the center of the room for the picture. Everyone is smiling and happy. Then the photographer says loudly so the old man can hear,

"Will you face your bride and take her hand and repeat your wedding vows?" The old man slowly and tenderly takes his wife's hand and looks deeply and with great love into the eyes of his beloved and begins, "I...take thee...to be my wedded wife; And I do promise and covenant; Before God and these witnesses; To be thy loving and faithful husband; In plenty and in want; In joy and in sorrow; In sickness and in health; As long as we both shall live." And in their hearts they both know, "We have kept our promise. We have kept our promise."

Now hear once more the Word of God. "Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful. It is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful....Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." AMEN