**WHAT’S IN YOUR RING?**

On June 17, 1977 Benita and I stood before Julian Snell in Louisville, Kentucky before a large gathering of family, friends and guests and exchanged our vows, pledging to each other to be faithful to one another “until death do us part.” Included in that ceremony was the traditional covenant rings we placed on each other’s finger to seal the pledge. When we bought the rings we were asked if we would like to have anything special scripted inside which would be like a motto for our marriage. We gave thought to that and decided that we would like to have engraved the words: *faith, hope, love* *6-17-77*.

For the past 43 years we have tried to live by those words. Have we had any testing, any trials, any setbacks to those words? Anyone who has lived under the same roof for over four decades would be lying if they said they had perfectly lived up to those Biblical ideals. But I can honestly say those three lofty words have made a difference, an eternal difference, in our marriage. They are our True North compass. They have helped us many times to find our way back to the purpose for marriage, and to find true joy as we grow old together.

So let me ask you, what’s in your ring? Capital One Visa has a commercial slogan that asks, “What’s in your wallet?” By that they want you to imply that if you don’t have their charge card in your wallet then you are missing out on so many perks in life (expensive vacations, a new car, steak dinners at fancy restaurants, 5x perk miles for every flight --- and all for a low, low interest rate of 21.9% APR if you fail to pay it off in 30 days!).

While you might not have actually inscribed any special words inside your ring, you really did put some thought into what goals you would base your marriage upon, right? I remember the first wedding I ever performed. It was in 1976 in Arkansas. I was a very mature 23 years old and had been preaching full time all of one year. I asked Mikell what he wanted to make as a pledge to his bride that I could include in the vows. He said something like, “I want to be faithful to her like God has been faithful to me.” *Faithful*. From what I’ve heard, and from what I know of Mikell, he remains “*Faithful*” to this day. It might not have been engraved on his ring, but it was on his heart.

That said, “What’s in your ring?” In other words, what’s in your vows? Let me tell you what’s in mine. *Faith. Hope. Love*.

***FAITH***.
When Paul said, “*For we walk by faith, not by sight*,” he said a mouthful (2 Cor. 5:7). So much of what we commit ourselves to for the future is by faith, not sight. I invest in the stock market, not able to see the future but believing in it. I drive by faith, not sight (well, ok, I do keep my eyes open and looking where I’m going… most of the time). I eat by faith, not sight, not knowing if my food has been spiked by arsenic (I do get suspicious when Benita keeps asking me if my life insurance is still valid ☺ ). When I committed the rest of my life to “love, honor and cherish” one person “until death” it was by faith, not sight. The Disney dream of riding off into the sunset “happily ever after” is make-believe fairy tales fit for movies, not for real life. Life happens. Stress happens. Differences happen. Babies happen. Debts happen. Jobs happen. Maintenance happens (which is a bummer when you have 10 thumbs, no fingers and made a D in high school shop class). That’s where FAITH comes in. Faith allows you to see the unseeable down the road. You can “see” where your marriage ends if you believe “*what God has joined together let no man separate*” (Matt. 19:6). While I made a D in shop class, the “D” word (divorce) is never mentioned in my marriage, even in the most stressful times in our life. You are in this forever and ever, Amen! God is your pilot (not co-pilot) and He will land you safely in the grave, and to the judgment seat, with your vows still intact and your souls still saved.

***HOPE***.
Desire + Expectation. On June 17, 1977 the Desire and Expectation was certainly there as we said our vows and drove off to honeymoon at romantic Niagara Falls. The honey-moon was wonderful. Hope soared. When I drove my bride back in my 1972 Gremlin to the cotton-pickin’ town of Marvell, Arkansas (pop. 1,908 – so said the sign on Hwy 49 outside my parsonage house), I’m quite sure Benita’s hopes began to fade. She had just graduated with a BA degree in Interior Design. Looking at the farmer’s houses across the soybean and cotton fields did not offer much prospect for using that degree. She was now confined to being a new preacher’s wife with a ugly 60’s style harvest gold and avocado green kitchen and a donated couch with huge Cardinals imprinted on it. Welcome to our Love Pad, babe! But as Paul put it, “*hope saves*” (Rom. 8:24). We jumped right in to try to become an Aquila and Priscilla partnership to those dear country folks who were the salt of the earth. Through Arkansas (2), Texas (7) and Minnesota (34) we have lived by hope for God’s promises both for the here and the hereafter. *“Now* ***hope*** *does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us”* (Rom. 5:5).

***LOVE.***Storge. Eros. Phileo. Agape. If you’ve never read C. S. Lewis’ book *The Four Loves* you need to beg, borrow or steal a copy and read it soon. He explores empathy (storge), friendship (phileo), romance (eros), and unconditional (agape) love. All are needed in a good marriage. Outside the bedroom your love continues to grow into a deep friendship and a two-become-one empathy that blossoms into a “I’ll die for you” bond. Going through life together becomes an adventure greater than any other experience on earth, save a discipleship journey with Jesus Christ. Love is something that grows in all four areas of your life. They override the gray hair (or lack thereof), the slowing metabolism, the fading eyesight, the visits of Mr. Arthur Itis, and the bothersome noise of the crickets at night. The hymn *Sweeter As The Years Go By* applies almost as much to my marriage as to my love for Jesus. It is my way of saying, and shouting, “Babe, I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat!” I now know for certain after 56 years as a Christian, and 43 years as a husband, that “*Love bears…believes…hopes…endures all things. Love never fails*” (I Cor. 13:7-8).

What do we have in our ring? Faith. Hope. Love. Because of it I have received a hundred-fold in this life, and in the next life, eternal life. Thank you sweetheart. I love you Benita Carol Walker Lanning. What a ride!

What’s in your ring?

Rick