

January 14, 2024

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Texts: Ephesians 5:22-33; John 2:1-11

Why does the Christian Church care so much about marriage? Why don't we just "live and let live," ask the saying goes? It seems we'd be a lot more popular with the world around us if we'd just get with the times, find a compromise, like the pope did recently.

But there's a very big reason why the Church must faithfully proclaim what God's Word teaches about marriage, a reason found in God's Word itself. God the Holy Spirit, speaking through the pen of St. Paul, says, "This mystery (marriage) is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church."

The Church cares so much about marriage because marriage as God created it tells us about our relationship with our God and His love for us. Being in a right relationship with Christ is eternally significant, it has eternal consequences, so we dare not ignore what our Lord has to say on the matter. And better understanding God's love for us in Christ, and in the institution of marriage, is a blessing, one that increases our faith and gives us peace and comfort.

Before we get to speaking about marriage itself, it's important to note that marriage isn't the only instance of God establishing something whereby He reveals His nature and character to us. Consider the Ten Commandments. God didn't invent them out of thin air. No, with each Commandment God reveals something about Himself, and so when His people walk in that Commandment, they are blessed as they reflect His goodness.

Take, for example, the Eighth Commandment: "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor." God commands His people to speak the truth because He Himself is the truth. Or the Third Commandment: "Remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy." God desires us to find rest and peace in Him, because He is the only one who can give eternal rest and true peace. Or, especially pertaining to marriage, the Sixth Commandment: "You shall not commit adultery." God is the one who is perfectly loving and faithful, and in keeping this Commandment, God's people show forth God's love and faithfulness to the world.

God's institution of marriage functions in a similar way. He didn't establish it as some exercise of tyranny – He gets to make the rules because He's God and all you puny little humans have to fall in line or else. No, He establishes marriage so that His love for His people, and how they live in response, may be shown to the world.

God created humanity, and so He knows perfectly what is best for us, both individually and as a society. When people walk in His Commandments, when people honor and uphold marriage – even those who are themselves not married – then people are blessed, God's name is kept holy, and His light is shined forth into the world.

So the first thing that must be stated is that marriage is the life-long union of one man and one woman. As Paul quotes from Genesis 2, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." Not coincidentally, Jesus also quotes this same verse when teaching about marriage.

God declares in His Word that, to be a marriage, a man must be joined to a woman. Not a man to a man; not a woman to a woman. Marriage is one man and one woman. Period. Why is this?

One reason is the simple biological reality laid out in the quotation from Genesis. A man must leave his father and his mother. He cannot leave his two fathers or two mothers, because for him to exist in the first place, he must have a father and a mother. This is, from the most basic biological reality, how people come into existence. And since one of the chief reasons for God's establishment of marriage is the creation of new life, as we hear in Malachi, marriage must reflect that reality.

The existence of marriage as one man and one woman also reveals truth about Christ and His Church, as St. Paul writes. Just as with marriage, the relationship between Christ and the Church can exist only in one way.

The Son of God is the Christ, the anointed one, for the sake of His bride. Christ's love is not for Himself. Such self-love would be pride, which is found in Satan, not Christ. He didn't come to earth, endure the cross, and rise again for His own glory. No, He did all this for the sake of His bride, the Church.

And the Church cannot exist apart from Christ. To have the Church try to exclude Christ and love herself in His place leads to her no longer being the Church. We sadly see this when groups who claim to be the Church ignore Christ's words for the sake of pleasing other groups who claim to be the Church. To be the Church, to be Christ's bride, she must belong only to Christ, just a woman can only be married to a man, and a man can only be married to a woman.

How then does the Bible speak of man and woman in marriage, seeing as how they are unique and not interchangeable? Our Epistle reading begins with women – ladies first! “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.” This verse goes against modern thinking on marriage, especially in that word “submit.” How backward! How oppressive!

Sadly, this word and verse have been subjected to all sorts of slander, to the point where even Christians shy away from it. Typically, the slander is of the straw-man variety, where people will claim that this verse permits all sorts of abuse of women by wicked, tyrannical men. It's thought that only by liberating women from the oppressive patriarchy, making them equals to men in all things, can they live truly happy and fulfilling lives.

There are many problems with this approach. For one, it changes the definition of “submit” to “obey unquestioningly.” This is simply incorrect. For example, Christians are commanded by God to submit to the governing authorities, but should the government command us to sin, then we must obey God rather than men.

Likewise, submission in marriage doesn't mean absolute obedience when a husband would demand his wife do something sinful. She is to recognize her husband's authority and defer to it, but he cannot require her to sin, and should he wickedly do so, she cannot obey.

Aside from warping the definition of the word “submit,” this straw-man example of submission as abusive leads us to see our God in such a light. If we start thinking that God allows teaching in His

Word that is abusive, then maybe God Himself is abusive. We'll be tempted to see Him as sitting up in heaven, angry and uncaring, while His poor little Church on earth struggles to make Him happy. Flawed thinking on marriage will end up distorting our view of God Himself.

A right understanding of submission in marriage, on the other hand, gives a right view of our relationship to Christ. In a marriage, husband and wife should seek to work together, to find agreement as much as possible. Christians are called to live at peace with everyone – how much more so their own spouses!

And God has created this submission as part of seeking this peace. There come times when a decision must be made, where a family must have a head, and God has established the husband to have this role. The Bible says, "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the Church." God has put the responsibility of leading the family upon the husband. The wife, in turn, submits to her husband and seeks to help him in this.

When the wife submits to her husband, it is an act of trust, and of faith in God. She might think that what the husband is choosing isn't the best, or she might not understand why he's doing what he's doing, but in submitting, the wife is trusting that she is ultimately in God's hands. It's as if she is saying, "I don't know that this is the best choice, but even if it isn't, God will still watch over me and my family."

When a wife submits to her husband, she is submitting to God. Not that her husband is God – not at all! But she is trusting that the way God has ordered the family is best, and that her Lord will care for her.

This is an act of faith, and it shows us how we the Church are to submit ourselves to Christ. Do we always understand everything He tells us in His Word? No. Does the path of the Lord always seem to us to be the best one? No. But as Christ's bride, we trust that He is saying and doing what is eternally best for us.

The Church's bridegroom is not some angry tyrant in the sky, yelling down at His bride from on high. No, "Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her." You can trust that what He tells you, He says out of love, because He was willing to die for you. You can submit to Christ because you can look to the cross and see that, if He was willing to endure all that pain and wrath and shame for your sake, then what He sends you in this life can only be for your good.

The Church submits to her husband, Jesus Christ, because she knows that He loves her even more than His own life. A wife submits to her husband because she trusts in his love for her, and that God has given him to her for her good.

Mary provides an excellent example of this in our Gospel reading. When Jesus tells her that His time has not yet come, how does she respond? She tells the servants, "Do whatever He tells you." She doesn't know what Jesus will do, especially based on His reply. But she simply trusts that He will do what is best, and so she submits to His will.

We the Church need to remind our young women, or any women among us who would be looking for a husband, of this essential truth. If she can't say that she is willing to submit to a man

because she isn't sure if he possesses this divinely-given love for her, then she certainly shouldn't marry him.

This divine love is what is commanded of husbands in the Bible. We read, "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her." A husband is not to love his wife as a close second, or with what he has left over after himself or other priorities. His love for her is not based on how she is treating him at that moment. Christ's love for His Church is unconditional; a husband's love for his wife is to be unconditional.

As the Scriptures tell us, this love is also to be sacrificial. Christ gave Himself up for His bride. The cross is of course the highest and greatest example of this, but all that Christ has endured through the ages, even before being born in Bethlehem, it was all for His bride's sake. He watched as His people of old broke the Law He gave them for their blessing, as they chased after countless idols and false gods, causing His name to be profaned among the nations. He let Himself be insulted, mocked, spat upon, cursed, and struck for her sake. Still today, He allows Himself to be mocked and blasphemed by the world, so that no part of His bride might be left behind.

In the same way, husbands are to love their wives. A husband isn't commanded only to just take a bullet for his wife, should it ever come to that. He is called to put his wife's well-being above his own, her happiness above his own, her desires above his own. Obviously, a husband and wife should seek to have interests in common; such things help strengthen a marriage. But when it comes down to it, the husband must set aside himself for the sake of his wife.

And this isn't only when the husband sees it as absolutely essential. Look at how Jesus responds to his mother's concern in the Gospel text. She tells Him that the wedding party is out of wine, and He responds, "Woman, what does this have to do with me? My hour has not yet come."

Now, if you'd never heard this story before, and you had to guess what Jesus does next, you might figure that He doesn't do anything, just goes back to chatting with his disciples or whatever. After all, He said it wasn't yet His hour. And this is true.

But despite it not being His hour yet, and despite the fact that He's come from heaven to deal with much bigger problems than someone running out of wine, Jesus still fixes the problem. In love for His mother, and for the new husband and wife, He does first of His great signs and provides more wine. He loves them, and so even though a lack of wine is certainly not the most important problem He encounters as He walks the earth, He takes care of it all the same.

Those bigger, more important issues are in fact at the center of Christ's love for His Church, and thus a husband's love for his wife. The Bible tells us that Christ gave Himself up for the Church, "that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the Church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."

All that Christ does, He does so that His bride might be cleansed from sin and dwell with Him in heaven forever. All His words, all His actions, all He does as He rules over heaven and earth, it's all done for the eternal good of His Church. So then, a husband must have as a highest priority the eternal

good of his wife. He must do everything in his power, sacrifice whatever he must, to lead his wife into heaven.

Should the Lord bless their marriage with children, it is the father who is charged with teaching them the faith. A little later in Ephesians, we are told, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.” Fathers and husbands who think that “church stuff” is for women, or who teach by word or example that other things are more deserving of time than Christ and His Word, sin against their wives, their children, and Christ Himself.

Can and should mothers teach their children as well? Of course! St. Timothy was taught by his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois; his father was a pagan. When a man says “I do,” he pledges that he will exercise his authority not for his benefit, but for the eternal good of his wife and children.

This teaching on marriage is not an easy one for us to hear. The world decries it as foolish, backward, and oppressive. And we are strongly tempted to go along with the world, to compromise God’s truth with the world’s ideas.

We also struggle to teach on it because we look at our own sins, our own failures in marriage, and think “who am I to tell anyone about marriage?” Satan would try to use our guilt to keep us from speaking the truth, accusing us of being hypocrites.

Yet our Lord, Jesus Christ, has washed us of our sins, making us without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, taking away our guilt. When we speak on marriage as the Holy Scriptures do, we are not saying our own words or relying on our own wisdom or experience, but humbly repeating the words our Lord has given us to speak.

That Lord has laid down His very life for us, showing His great love for His bride upon the cross. Looking at that great display of love, we the Church can gladly submit to our divine bridegroom, trusting that all He does and says, including His words on marriage, are for our good. He will supply the faith necessary for wives to submit to their husbands. He will give the love with which husbands must love their wives.

Though it is despised by the world, and even a mystery to us, our Lord will sustain marriage among His Church until that day when He comes to bring His bride into the eternal wedding feast of paradise. May our Lord hasten that day!

In the name of Jesus, amen.