

THE CHURCH'S REHEARSAL DINNER

Sermon, October 7, 2018

World Communion Sunday

Texts: Genesis 2:18-25; Mark 10:2-12

I thought of using this little illustration for the Time With The Children, but decided it would go right over their heads, but I'll use it now: I remember the most expensive glass of champagne I ever held in my hand ... the one I used to toast my daughter and her new husband at their wedding reception. I figure that glass of champagne cost me as father of the bride (*and host of the reception*) a little over \$10,000! Well, the Cup to be raised at the ultimate Wedding Reception will be infinitely more "costly" than mine; it cost Jesus His life! It is appropriate these lectionary texts are assigned for World Communion Sunday. The relationship between God and His people is often spoken of in the pages of Scripture with marital imagery. The old **Book of Common Prayer** speaks of marriage as being "... *instituted of God, signifying unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his church.*" The Bible begins with a marriage, and the Bible ends with a marriage ... with the whole redeemed Family coming together in the marriage feast of the Lamb. That's when the Bride (*the Church*) and the Groom (*Jesus Christ*) fully come together, united for all eternity, of which this Table is a sign and promise. Seen in this light, the Lord's Supper can be likened to a rehearsal dinner, a symbol of that grand Head Table at the ultimate Wedding Reception, where, together with all the redeemed of all time in the communion of saints, God the Father will raise the Cup to toast the Bride and the Groom, who will be together forever and ever! (*I know I am mixing metaphors a bit, as Jesus instituted this sacrament by raising the Cup of the new covenant in His blood and saying "Do this in remembrance of Me" ... but I could go on all morning about all that. Another sermon.*)

With that said, I know this morning's Gospel reading is understandably difficult for some. It has Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage. Actually, to be more precise, it has Jesus' teaching on *marriage* ... and marriage is one of those areas of late where too often the Christian church has decided to shut up while the culture has preached to us (*but not here*¹). I know that here on any given Sunday are people who have known the pain of a broken marriage ... who have been divorced, or separated, or have remarried after divorce; we have parents of children who have been through divorce and children of parents who have been through divorce. Too many here have known the pain of marriages that were absolutely caustic; spouses who were abusive, destructive, dangerous, unfaithful, and/or relationships that were completely toxic. I want to reiterate in no uncertain terms the Gospel of Jesus Christ is about grace ... it's about forgiveness for the past and direction for the present and future. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin. The Presbyterian Church does marry divorced persons who can acknowledge and confess what went wrong in a previous marriage, accept God's forgiveness and seek the grace of God to live a new life. After all, those who most need God's grace fall into one of two categories ... men and women! *All* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The cost of righting all our wrongs, in all things including our love lives, is accepting God's grace through Jesus Christ, and making Him Lord of our lives as we leave our past behind ... it is about new beginnings, new life, and power to live into that new life. Failure in marriage, regardless of the circumstances, is a tragedy for everyone involved. But failure need not be the end of the story.

The context of this reading is that the Pharisees are out to entrap Jesus. A wrong answer on this subject of divorce will not only potentially bring him into disfavor with the crowd, it could cost Him His life. You have to remember King Herod had just beheaded John the Baptist, and John was jailed precisely because he publicly criticized Herod for divorcing his wife and marrying his brother's divorced wife. And it's in this volatile context that the Pharisees "ask" Jesus if it is lawful for a man to divorce his wife. Jesus takes the opportunity to draw attention to God's intention for marriage from the beginning; He goes beyond Moses, beyond what we can "get away with," and reiterates God's good plan and intention for marriage from the beginning.

In that Genesis reading to which Jesus refers there is this final verse, verse 25, which seems sort of tacked on, almost like a postscript: "*The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.*" In fact, this verse is often dropped when read at weddings, as if people don't know what to make of it. However, it's an important verse, especially in its context! The very next chapter is the story of Adam and Eve's fall. In Chapter Three we see this couple, who ended Chapter Two "*naked and unashamed*", now experiencing an *intense* awareness of nakedness and shame which they try to cover up with fig leaves and bushes. It seems obvious that so much more than mere physical nakedness is implied by the text; the Bible uses the word "naked" to capture the emotional, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of an acute sense of exposure and shame and failure. Before the Fall, in their innocence, the man and woman were naked and unashamed before God and each other; translated literally, the text reads, "*They knew not what shame was.*" In their innocence, they were calm, confident, open and comfortable before God and with each other, with nothing at all to "hide." However, after they lost their innocence, something felt wrong ... there was an uneasiness, a disorder and even a confusion they had never experienced before, a physical, emotional,

¹ See https://qccp.org/we_believe

psychological and spiritual sense of shame and exposure. They were not just **undressed**, but they were **distressed** ...and they tried to hide from God, and they tried to “cover up” from each other.

Just as an aside, some have speculated this account in Genesis explains why there is an almost instinctive urge in the core of every human being to be physically covered; that covering our nakedness is much more than simply learned behavior; that it goes back to our very roots in Creation. Have you ever wondered how strange it is that of all the creatures in the world, only one species uses artificial means of clothing? Have you ever seen a penguin wearing a real tuxedo? I've seen dogs with sweaters, horses with straw hats, chimpanzees in monkey suits. But they didn't put those clothes on; some person or persons did that for them. Of all the creatures, humans are the only one who make clothes and wear them in public. On one hand, we have a natural attraction to nakedness, almost a fascination for it, but at the same time we also have a built-in revulsion toward it. We instinctively suspect something is wrong with a person who publicly flaunts nudity. Built into human nature is a desire to remain *covered*. We don't like the thought of being reduced to nakedness. Sensitive medical personnel know that, which is why we're given these flimsy little johnnies during examination ... they really don't fulfill the function of clothing very well, but they accommodate that innate human need to be somehow “covered.” Prisoners tell us one of the most humiliating forms of intimidation is the strip search. Soldiers in the ancient world would strip their prisoners naked because the POW's would become more docile as they felt so vulnerable. Stripping away a person's clothing has been a punishing act of public humiliation throughout the centuries; our Lord Himself was in all likelihood naked upon the cross. Something instinctive in us recoils from the thought of being publicly reduced to nakedness, of being publicly “exposed.” This is true physically, psychological and spiritually.

However, built into our human nature is a contradictory desire to be fully revealed. We want both ... to remain hidden *and* to be known. There is a sense in which deep down we seek a return to Eden, to be in a place where we may be “*naked and unashamed*..” We long for a place where we don't have to hide anything, where we don't have to put on a front, where we can expose ourselves fully without fear of intimidation, ridicule, embarrassment, rejection or abandonment. On the human level, God designed marriage with this in mind. At its best, one of the functions of God-ordained marriage is the opportunity to return to the Garden of Eden. Genesis 4:1 uses the sexual euphemism “*Adam knew his wife, and she conceived*.” Biblically, nakedness, being “exposed,” is linked to being known; this is what God designed marriage to be...a sense of a safe “place” where we may be thoroughly, totally known, loved, protected. A place where we have nothing to hide, nothing to fear; a place where we may once again be emotionally, spiritually, physically exposed, vulnerable and still be loved. One of the things I still miss in the loss of my wife, even after almost twenty years since her passing, is that sense of both knowing her and being known by her. She *knew* me, there was little hidden between us, and she loved me both because of and (*probably most often*) in spite of that knowledge. That's one reason marriage is so risky. If my marriage had broken up, if my wife had left me, I would have had to live with the fact that the person who knew me best rejected me ... and I'm told that hurts like no other hurt. There's an awful lot at stake when two people enter this vulnerable relationship; that's why we should prepare to enter this “institution,” with caution and reverence and care and wisdom with our eyes wide open, and why we should seek to protect that relationship with vows made before God and witnesses, backing it up with the blessing of the church and the authority of the state, all prior to taking the huge risk of intimate exposure. We need to take our stand with Jesus and publicly affirm God's good intention in Creation!

In my nearly thirty-four years of ordained ministry, I've frequently heard the age-old question, “*Why wait for marriage?*” In reply, I usually try to patiently point out that God wants nothing but the best for us, and in light of that God lovingly but firmly says “No” to the intimate exposure of sexual activity outside of marriage. I would then try to impress upon them the reasons *why* God says no, that they are taking a terrific risk involving the state of their heart, mind and body by intimacy outside of God's good plan. What I *really* want to do is grab the person by the shoulders and say, “**Don't be an idiot!**” Like all revolutions, the so-called sexual revolution has littered the landscape with casualties and walking wounded. We colloquially speak about lovers “breaking up”... but *rocks* break up; people *tear*. Why wait for marriage? I could talk all morning about this; there are hundreds of reasons, but the one reason I'll address now is that marriage makes this union public and official. It puts this vulnerable, fragile relationship of exposure between two imperfect human beings under the protection of the family, the church and state. Marriage as God ordained it is a holy estate, a fortress, a home. It is not a temporary tent. It is not a shack. Within the safe walls of the institution we are freed to be “*naked and unashamed*.” The walls of this holy estate are then shored up (*or, they are supposed to be shored up*) by the flying buttresses of the church, state, community and the extended family. In this safe, fortified, protected, holy institution, two people are able to dare to risk baring their hearts, their bodies, their very souls to one another without fear of ridicule or rejection or abandonment ... in sickness and in health, for richer for poorer, till death they do part. THAT is God's good intention in marriage.

God's grace addresses our sense of nakedness and shame on a higher level as well. What the human soul needs more than anything else is to be naked before God without shame. Many people don't want God looking at them, they want God to **over**look them. Shame can do one of two things, one destructive to the human soul, the other productive: it can drive us *away* from God, or it can drive us to our knees *back* to God. When we do the latter, our “nakedness” is covered with the robe of Christ's righteousness, so that clothed in Him, we can approach God without fear, without shame, and have a seat here at the Family Table ... now and forever.