

The 13th Sunday after Pentecost
August 22, 2021
Proper 16

The Lessons: Isaiah 29:11-19
 Psalm 14
 Ephesians 5:22-33
 Mark 7:1-13

The Hymns: # 912 *Christ Is Our Cornerstone*
 # 862 *Oh, Blest the House*
 # 860 *Gracious Savior, Grant Your Blessing*

The Collect: Almighty and merciful God, defend Your Church from all false teaching and error that Your faithful people may confess You to be the only true God and rejoice in Your good gifts of life and salvation; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:
 Profound Mysteries and Perfect Marriages
 Ephesians 5:22-33

The Word of the Lord from Ephesians 5: “31’Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ 32This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”

I. Profound Mystery #1: Marriage

Today we speak of profound mysteries and perfect marriages. The first begins like this: “Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.”

“Wives, submit to your husbands.” Those are fighting words these days; and more than once at a wedding, it’s gotten a scornful reaction from someone in the wedding party. Haven’t we moved beyond this archaic idea of the wife’s submission? Isn’t this the kind of thinking used by the Taliban? “What nonsense”, the modern world denounces. But the contempt is misplaced: it comes from looking for reasons to reject the Word, not hearing it. “Wives, submit to your husbands,” it says, “**as the Church submits to Christ.**” And how does the Church submit to Christ? One example would be the Lord’s Prayer. Gathered here in the presence of God every Sunday, we pray the Lord’s Prayer; and as part of that prayer, we pray, “Thy will be done.” Not “Our will,” but “Thy will be done.” In other words: as the people of God, we don’t say, “O Lord, we have gathered here to direct You what to do in order for us to get our way.”

Rather, we pray, “O Lord, we are not here to get our way; but trusting that You work all things for our good, we pray that Your will be done, and that we might work to serve you.” According to Ephesians 5, wives submit to their husbands as the Church submits to Christ. In other words, the wife approaches

marriage saying, “Husband, I’m not here to order you around to get what I want. Rather, I am here to help you—to love and to cherish you, trusting that you are here to care for me.”

That doesn’t sound particularly demeaning or degrading: after all, don’t people want to care for those whom they love? Shouldn’t wives want to care for their husbands?

Furthermore, the text goes on: “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, 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.” Husbands are commanded to love their wives, but don’t reduce that to some sappy poetry-and-chocolates thing. The text says, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church.” And how did Christ love the Church? He gave Himself up for her. He died for her, so that He might cleanse His people of their sin. Consider that carefully: Jesus is the Son of God, the 2nd person of the Holy Trinity. He deserves all glory, honor, and praise. It is our duty to thank and praise, serve and obey Him.

Now, if He had come to earth, sat on a golden throne and said, “People, I deserve that you should all be serving Me right now,” He would only be telling the truth. But He didn’t come to sit on a throne and be served. He came to be raised on a cross and to serve us by giving His life as a ransom for many.

Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loved the Church. In other words, a husband doesn’t approach marriage saying, “How much work can I dump on my bride?” Rather, he says, “Wife, I’m not here to order you around to get what I want. Rather, I am here to serve you—to love and to cherish you, trusting that you are here to care for me.”

So there you go, in a nutshell. That’s the Christian view of marriage: a man and a woman promise to work hard at serving each other, then labor daily to do so for the rest of their lives. Two people working hard to love each other...that doesn’t sound particularly oppressive or demeaning to me. It is, in fact, the only way that a marriage can work.

This is God’s design from the beginning: in fact, our text includes a quote from Genesis 2:24, when God first instituted marriage: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” It’s worth pondering that verse for a moment, because that was back before the Fall into sin. God created Adam and Eve in His image. Like Him, they were sinless and holy. Like Him, they were, by nature, servants who desired to serve others. They were the perfect couple. They were, quite literally, made for each other. Because there was no sin, there was no selfish desire: therefore, the two of them would naturally spend their days living in service to one another. The only disagreement they might have had was, “No honey, I insist that this time we do things your way.”

Adam and Eve were naturally servants, and serving is what makes a marriage work. It didn’t last, though: they fell into sin. Note what happened when sin came into the world: rather than man up and admit he’d sinned, Adam threw Eve under the bus and said to God, “It was the woman whom You gave me.” Rather than serve Eve, he selfishly blamed her for the fall into sin. Eve tried similarly to pass the buck, and the Lord announced the consequences: because of sin, selfishness was born in the world. Their days of naturally wanting to serve were over. Instead, the Lord proclaimed, Eve would desire to

control her husband for her own wellbeing. And rather than looking to care for Eve, Adam would seek to rule over her instead.

You can see the effects of this selfishness everywhere. Put a plate of cupcakes amongst a group of toddlers, and everyone wants the one with the most icing. It's human nature—the sinful human nature. And it's especially destructive and malicious when it comes to relationships, to courtship and marriage. Trust has got to be earned. Suspicion is sadly a necessity. On the dating scene, it can't be taken for granted that everyone had honorable intentions. A girl needs to ask, "Is he being nice to me because he's a nice guy, or because he wants to take something from me?" A guy needs to ask, "Does she like me for me, or because I'm a tool for her to get what she really wants?"

Marriage is based on mutual service, not on selfishness. Selfishness wants to control the money and activities. It wants to get its way. It wants to take the crummy chores and push them off on the other. It wants to talk when the other doesn't feel like listening, and it doesn't want to listen when the other needs to talk. It expects the other to do things its way. It refuses to admit wrong. Selfishness looks to protect its turf, not build up the mutual bonds of marriage: that may mean blustering to get one's way, or holding onto secret sins that will devastate the marriage when discovered.

Since we're talking about marriage, we'd better talk about sex. In God's plan, the two go together, and physical intimacy is a way for husband and wife to care for one another—perhaps with the result of a new little one to care for, too. The two-becoming-one is an ongoing affirmation of the mystery of marriage. Outside of that, sex is sinful; and sexual sin is selfish. It's using another for gratification, or allowing oneself to be used for selfish gain. It's certainly saying, "I want to do things my way, not according to the will of God." This is powerful stuff, and don't be deceived: many who misuse such a powerful gift of God will not repent. Instead, they will decide that they'd rather give up their soul in order to be slaves to selfish desire.

I've kept it pretty generic thus far, but here's the truth: that selfishness is inside of you because the same original sin is inside of you. If you want to deny it, that's just one more example of your Old Adam indulging in self-preservation and self-justification. Married or single, old or young, your first instinct is to look after yourself, to place blame elsewhere, to fight back when someone points out your sins. This is true for everybody, married or not: we're just talking a lot about marriage today because it's the topic of our text, and because marriage presents such a showcase for selfish sins. See, when you're living on your own, selfishness is highly disguised because you need to look after yourself. But when you're living with a spouse, pledged to serve them 24/7 for life, you really start to discover how terribly selfish you are.

But married or not, acutely aware of it or not, you are sinful and selfish before God. That's what the Scriptures declare. Or, to use the language of our text, you're stained. Spotted. Wrinkled. Blemished. Before God, you're far from pure and undefiled. Your sinful nature will be quick to deny it, because selfishness doesn't like to admit fault. That's why, whoever you are, it is good daily to examine yourself for sin and repent. It's also good to be quick to say, "I was wrong;" and even quicker to say, "I forgive you, and I will not selfishly hold this against you." But more than that, you rejoice in this: in our text, St. Paul is talking about more than just marriage. There is, in fact, a better, more profound mystery here.

2. Profound Mystery #2: Christ and His Bride

Marriage is more than the union of husband and wife, and it is more than the place wherein children are to be conceived, born and raised. It is also an illustration of Christ and His bride, the Church.

It is an illustration of the Gospel. It is also for this that God gives marriage such blessings and protection, commanding that it be honored by all, last for life and be kept pure. It is especially for this reason that the devil, the world and our sinful flesh work so hard to trample marriage underfoot: for in attacking marriage as an outdated and meaningless custom, these enemies seek to portray Christ's cross as outdated and meaningless, too.

But this is the illustration. The Son of God seeks a bride, and only the best will do. Kings' sons do not pick up some commoner off the street or the slave of another ruler—they seek brides of character, purity intact. Jesus is, after all, the Son of God—holy, righteous, sinless, ever-faithful. He deserves a bride who is the same—holy, righteous, sinless, faithful, pure. But there is none to be found. There is no one who seeks God. All have sinned and fall short of His glory. You and I are among that "all": spotted with sin. Stained. Blemished. Defiled. Unfaithful. Selfish. Enslaved. Unworthy.

Only the bride accompanies Christ, the Bridegroom, to heaven—to the marriage feast of the Lamb. All others are left outside in the outer darkness, with the weeping, the gnashing of teeth, the what-might-have-been regret and no more chance of being redeemed.

But that is not the Lord's will for you. By His grace, He has made you His own. He has brought you into His Church: and together, you are the Bride of Christ.

It is for you that Jesus took on flesh. It is for you that He gave Himself up to die on the cross. There, He bore the spots, the stains, the blemish and guilt of sin. There, He endured the mockery and scorn that the world heaps on those defiled. There, He died in your place, in selfless sacrificial service to you. Now, He is risen from the dead. Having given Himself up for you and then been raised again, He sanctifies you. He makes you holy. How? He has cleansed you by the washing of water with the Word: in Holy Baptism, He washed every stain and blemish of sin from you. He clothed you in His own righteousness: before Christ, your Bridegroom, you wear a white gown of holiness, and there are no snickers or objections to be heard. Your Bridegroom is the Judge of evil and the Sacrifice who endured the judgment to save you: when **HE** declares that you are righteous and undefiled, there is no one left to speak against you.

The devil says that you belong to him for your sins, but Jesus says you have no sins left and the devil has nothing left to say. The grave lays claim to you, because the wages of sin is death; but Jesus says that He has paid those wages in full on your behalf, and He has broken the gates of death and hell. Because of His grace and faithfulness to you, there is nothing that can keep you from the wedding feast of heaven.

You'll be tempted, though. Daily, the devil, the world and your own sinful, selfish flesh will tempt you to be unfaithful to your Bridegroom. They want to stop the impending marriage. Daily, because that selfish, sinful nature still clings to you, you'll go back to selfish ways rather than serve Christ, your Bridegroom. But by His mercy, you are quick to confess your sins. You are quick to say, "I was wrong."

And you rejoice, because your Bridegroom is not far away. Until death parts you from this world, Christ visits you in His Word and His Supper to keep you forgiven, unstained, undefiled.

Marriage is to be an estate of love and faithfulness; though while love and faithfulness remain by the mercy of God, marriage is often a demonstration of selfishness and even infidelity. But it is also an illustration of Christ's love for you: so that you might be part of His bride, the Church, He has given Himself up on the cross for you. Because of His sacrifice, you are holy and blameless. Because of His cross, you are the bride of Christ, for you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.