

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost – 2024

Genesis 2:18-25

Hebrews 2:1-18

Mark 10:2-16

“And the two shall become one flesh” is a pretty awesome phrase. Some of the reasons for that are obvious. Some are not. Marriage is in view this morning. Selfishness and hardness of heart and divorce are in view as well. There is nothing that God has given to man that man has not soiled. There is nothing that man has soiled that God has not restored. Remember that.

We have two different bulletin covers this morning, which is a first. Half of you have a cover with Michelangelo’s painting “The Creation of Adam.” Half of you have a picture of one of our statues, Jesus with Children. The statue is positioned perfectly in our breezeway where parents and their children enter the courtyard, on their way to their children’s classrooms. Our school is a direct product of Jesus’ words: “Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:14). Children are a blessing from God. “Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them!” (Psalm 127:4-5). To be sure, Christ takes children in His arms and blesses them in this place. The Gospel molds children’s hearts with truth and love and faith. Baptism gives children the bounty of Christ’s kingdom. It is a joy to see little ones, happy and full of life, in this place.

“It is not good that the man should be alone” (Genesis 2:18). That’s a pretty awesome phrase as well. Again, there’s more than one layer to this biblical delicacy. God made Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed into him the breath of life and Adam became a living being. He was perfect but he was alone. It was the sixth day of creation, Adam’s birthday, a Friday. An alone man was not God’s plan. Michelangelo brilliantly depicts the dramatic moment when God gives life to Adam. Adam’s body is reclining in a relaxed position as God extends Himself to the one whom He created from the dust of the earth. The eye of the viewer is naturally drawn to the life-giving finger of God and the receptive nature of man’s creation. Truly, it is beautiful. But there’s more. Hidden in the crook of God’s left arm is the woman, the sublime Eve. She is already alive, already awaiting her husband, her eyes are locked on him and an expression of eagerness, appreciation lights her face. Eve was not an afterthought. Adam’s birthday is Adam’s wedding day. At last! This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. The words drip with delight. Eve was Adam’s neighbor. Adam was Eve’s. Love was perfect that 6th day.

Some Pharisees approach Jesus with a petty question, a “lowest-common-denominator” question. Divorce; they want to know if God thinks that it’s a great day when people break their pledge, specifically, if a man can justly tell his wife to hit the road. They could’ve just asked, “How much of a toad will God allow us to be?” The Pharisees wanted to impale Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. At the time, some were saying that divorce was only permitted in the case of adultery. Others were advocating “no fault divorce” whereby the man could justify sending his wife away for any reason under the sun. Jesus wasn’t having any of it. The whole idea was foreign to Him. Why do you suppose that is? What do you suppose the common perception of marriage is in 2024? Love is in there somewhere, but what kind of love? Most folks view marriage in a functional kind of way. I’m enamored with this person and I would like to spend

my life with him or her. And then obstacles come. How many of y'all have ever encountered marital "obstacles"?

Adam and Eve encountered one. The serpent was breathing His lies and Eve took the bait. Eve-The-Magnificent ate the fruit that she was commanded not to eat and Adam did the same. God comes patrolling the Garden and asks Adam to account for himself. Adam, where are you? Yeah, um, I'm hiding beneath this bush because I heard you and I'm not 100% presentable at the moment. "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:11). Do you know what the man said in reply? "The man said, 'The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate'" (Genesis 3:12). *That* is the origin of divorce. Adam managed to blame God and throw Eve under the bus at the same time. The woman certainly isn't guiltless, but the man failed to protect her, failed to defend the truth, failed to honor God. Sin leapt into their hearts and divorce came with it.

How many of y'all could recite from memory the traditional marriage vow? I, Adam, take you, Eve, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy will; and I pledge you my faithfulness. That is beautiful... and *intense*. That is a radical vow. That's a "no-matter-what" kind of vow. It's glorious, that vow. When God created Adam and Eve He had more in mind than the biology of the human race. When God created male and female He had more in mind the functional propagation of humanity. God caused Adam to fall into a deep sleep, and God took Adam's bride from His side. Why? It seems pretty involved to go to all that trouble. Couldn't there have been an easier way? The Bible says that marriage is based on something larger than one man and one woman, larger than Romeo and Juliette, larger than Ruth and Boaz, larger than Bogart and Bacall. The quintessential union is between Christ and His bride, the church. That is the "no-matter-what" union that informs marriage.

Jesus came in search of a bride and yet no holy bone of His bones could be found. He partook of our flesh, becoming one with us by being incarnate, conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary (Hebrews 2:14). But we were so soiled in our sin there could be no union. God does not unite Himself to the profane. We must be cleansed (Ephesians 5:25-27). By blood, we must be cleansed. Only Christ's blood; only God's blood; only sacrificial blood could cleanse you, cleanse me. God so loved the world that He gave us a divine groom. Jesus laid down His life; no one took it from Him (John 10:18). On a Friday, the Son of God was very alone. It was good for this singular Man to be deeply alone (John 12:28). It was Jesus' death day. Jesus' death day is His wedding day. Love was perfect on Good Friday. Jesus' cross is His marriage vow. Wearing a cross around your neck is very similar to wearing a wedding band on your ring finger.

God the Father caused His only-begotten Son to fall into a deep sleep, the sleep of death on the cross. And God, by way of a Roman soldier, opened up a place in Jesus' side and from the side of the second, greater Adam came a flow of blood and water (John 19:34). *That* is the church. Blood has washed us of our filthy rags and clothed us in Christ's righteousness (Isaiah 64:6; Galatians 3:27 NIV). The water of baptism is the tide that flowed from the riven side of the

crucified Savior. Having been washed in Jesus' blood, we have union with Him, communion with Him as we receive His body and blood and become one flesh with the Lord of Creation. Our eyes, the eyes of Christ's bride, are fixed on Him (Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV).

I see that love, that commitment in your marriages. Christ's love has had its way with you. You love because Christ first loved you (1 John 4:19). I see it. I see God at work among us and it is marvelous to see. That love is often manifest in deeply troubling situations. Sickness; it's one of the most troubling things that we face. Marital love, marital support, marital camaraderie showing itself in the midst of the most troubling circumstances – it is poetically beautiful. Hardness of heart is a real problem. Selfishness, pride, cruelty – it is anathema to Christ, an abomination to marriage, and an exceedingly grievous infection in our hearts. We repent of such behaviors, such attitudes.

Ultimately, we can't fix ourselves. Ultimately, God gives us a new heart. "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes" (Ezekiel 36:25-27). We have been transformed by the love of Christ. He baptized us with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11). His vow is this: "I have laid claim to you by my death and resurrection. My love is a bulwark against anything that would harm you. I will never leave you, never forsake you." Our response is simple: "My beloved is mine and I am his" (Song of Solomon 2:16a).