

Church & the Mystery of Marriage (1)

During a Papal visit to Assisi, Pope Francis shared with the youth “Two Christians who marry have recognized in their history of love the call of the Lord, the vocation of two, male and female, to become only one flesh, only one life. And the Sacrament of Matrimony envelops this love with the grace of God; it roots it in God Himself. With this gift, with the certainty of this call, one can begin with certainty, there is no fear of anything; everything can be faced together. “Opening oneself up to a lifetime commitment is another challenge among young people today. Pope Francis provided an example with typical humor and candor as well: “How many times I’ve heard mothers say to me: ‘But, Father, I have a 30-year-old son who isn’t married: I don’t know what to do! He has a beautiful girlfriend, but he doesn’t decide.’ But, Madam I counter, don’t iron his shirts anymore!”

Church & the Mystery of Marriage (One Flesh – Ephesians 5:31 = Genesis 2:24)

I want to spend some time with you today and over the next few weeks reflecting with you on the church and the mystery of marriage; I’m going to be spending some time with you in Ephesians 5 in particular and the Old Testament as well. And reflecting with you on how both the church and the marriage are related to one other.

In our second lesson today, which is obviously a long lesson, we read today one part of that text from Ephesians 5, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and the two will become one flesh.’ This is a great mystery and I am talking about Christ and the Church. And the reality that is spoken of here in **Ephesians 5**, particularly these two verses, is actually taken from **Genesis 2**. In that creation narrative you and I have read before, that **God created Adam and put him in that garden**. And as we read the creation narrative, we found out that **Adam was the caretaker of God’s garden** and he was enjoying pristine fellowship with God in the Garden of Eden. What an amazing relationship that must have been. What an amazing place that must have been. Talk about organic food. Talk about Fresh Market! That just puts it way over the top. You’d have to call it Paradise Market at that point. And yet it says something very interesting in that reality. It’s not good for man to be alone. And then the creation narrative goes on; God has created animals. And the animals comes before Adam, and God has called Adam to name the animals which Adam does and I’m sure he enjoys a relationship with the animals which we enjoy to this day. Yet even then as **Adam named the animals** and his relationship to them and God in the garden, even then, it says, **‘Yet animals were not a suitable helper.’** And so it’s interesting very early on in the creation narrative as we read it, as we hear what it is saying to us, as we hear what it is revealing to us, we’re hearing that Adam is alone; that it’s not good, and that even though there’s a degree of relationship with the animals, it’s not a suitable relationship with Adam.

And so we come to the third part. **God causes a deep sleep to come upon Adam. He takes a rib out of him and he forms Eve**. By the way, this is God performing the first surgery ever done. So as Adam is coming out of that Godly anesthesia, and he sees Eve for the first time, let me just say Adam is excited. He says, **“This is at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called woman because she was taken out of man.”** And so we see for the first time of this narrative an excitement on the part of Adam in relationship to another human being who is in his own words ‘bone of my bones

and flesh of my flesh” I can really identify with this woman because she very much a part of me. Now I find it interesting that God could have easily picked up dirt from the ground like he did with Adam and breathed life into it and fashioned a woman. God could have easily done that, and yet God did not do that. And I believe God was intentional in not doing that. What God intended to do from the very beginning of creation was to make the relationship between a man and a woman uniquely special and it would be forever so. And that is the reason why God fashioned a woman (that’s why she is called woman; from man) from his rib that there might be a unique and special relationship between women and men that would span the course of all eternity, and how beautiful and wonderful that is.

So we see at the beginning of this creation narrative that’s referred to by Paul in Ephesians 5 that the Creator of the universe made them male and female. ***The Creator’s first institution was marriage of a man and a woman: a heterosexual couple. Let it be noted that the man was happy to see the woman; he was overjoyed. “This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” and she was taken out of man. Could it be that as women and men have found each other throughout the history of time; found a love with one another, and become one flesh through marriage that they’re really coming back to Eden in every deep and powerful way? The man wondering if he will be courageous enough to make that loving choice of her; the woman wondering if she will be wanted.***

Echoes of Eden Deep in our Soul

Echoes of Eden deep in our souls that continue to this very day. Seed and egg. Quiet and verbal. Staid and emotional. Independent and relational. The Creator fashioning male and female to compliment and complete one another like nothing else can. And out of that completion; out of that joining; out of that marriage, a fruitfulness, a multiplying of love and of children and of families that you and I enjoy to this today. This is confirmed in Genesis 2:24 “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh”. A man leaves his family because God has given him a woman to experience in living fellowship what it means to be one united flesh relationally, pro-creatively and spiritually. I believe this is one of the ways marriage symbolizes Christ’s relationship with the church. That Christ is involved with us; that there is a relationship with us that is real, and deep, and powerful. I believe also this speaks to us of the reality of the Trinity if you will. That at the heart of the universe is not some benign force that you and I will never ever get to know personally. But rather at the heart of the universe is relationship: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and I rejoice in that. You know, we’re not just going to some “Ohmmm” in the sky! We’re going to be going to a reality. We’re going to be going to a relationship; a trinity of involvement and connection that has been in existence from the very beginnings of time; shall I say, even before the beginnings of time. And you see marriage is a symbol to us of that, and we are called in relationship to one another in very deep ways, in very loving and connected ways... ways that join us; ways that connect us; ways of covenant that matter to us and to God.

Marriage is a Sacrament

Let me say, here today that ***marriage is a sacrament***; it is holy to God. Whatever is going on in the world today; however the culture views it; whatever has happened with marriage in the past, or whatever will happen in the future; let me say before you here today that I believe the teaching of our God from the beginning of creation, the teaching in God’s word, and even the Catechism in our prayer books still affirms that marriage is a holy sacrament. It is a Godly thing. It is a symbol that can speak very powerfully to people of Christ’s relationship to the church and the beauty that can be between two

people who love one another and all that that means. ***In the Book of Common Prayer, in the back on page 861, it reads, “Holy Matrimony is Christian marriage, in which the woman and man enter into a life-long union, make their vows before God and the Church, and receive the grace and blessing of God to help them fulfill their vows.”*** When I see men and women that love one another enough that they want to get married, I get excited. I really do! ***Because what that is for me is an outward visible sign of something deeper going on. It says to me, here are two people who love each other enough that they are willing to make this incredible, wild, sometimes crazy step called marriage and make a commitment to each other for the rest of their lives... they don’t know what’s going to happen tomorrow!*** And yet they love one another enough to make that step, whatever may come. That kind of love is a very special love. It is promised in the sacrament that ***God uniquely blesses a husband and wife with grace to fulfill their vows; that is the inward and spiritual grace that God gives.*** A sacrament has an outward and visible sign, the love of a man and a woman for one another that want to get married. And the inward and spiritual grace is the grace of God to fulfill the vows that the husband and wife make at the altar before the Lord and His people on that day. (We hear some of the fruits of marriage today in our sanctuary. Thanks be to God!)

Life, joy, a future, a hope for us all. Let me also say that marriage defines every other relationship. Marriage is the relationship in which God has invited sexual intimacy. It is that relationship in which God invites that sexual expression in the love of a man and a woman that God ordained. Let me just say before us here today that God created sex, He’s that one that made it. And yet God says that our sexuality is so powerful, so beautiful, and so creative that it should happen within the confines of a committed and coveted relationship. That is why fornication is sex outside of marriage. That is why adultery is sex with anyone else other than your spouse while you are married. So again, I will submit before you according to the teaching of scripture and the historical teaching of the church, marriage defines a lot of other relationships for you and for I. And it is important that we hear that, and that we receive that and that we understand that.

I want to share a couple of final things today as we reflect on the church and the mystery of marriage. ***If you are a man or a woman who is in love with another person, and you care about that person very deeply, I want to say first of all I am excited for you. I think that kind of love you share with one another is a very special thing. And if you love one another enough that you are being intimate with one other and you want to spend your life together, I think that is a beautiful thing.*** But what I want to encourage you to do, especially as the beloved of God, is not to live together as so many people of the world are today. I cannot tell you how many young couples are coming to me in my office who are already living together and they want to get married... I’m happy for that, I’m grateful for that. I’m glad they want to enter into that sacrament. ***But what I want to say to you is that if you love one another enough that you are close to each other intimately, and you see yourself spending the rest of your life together, come before the altar of the Lord and be married.*** Honor the reality of the love that is already in your heart. Receive the sacramental blessing that uniquely comes in marriage as you come before the altar of God and God blesses you. And the people of God surround you as you make your vows before the Lord and his people and we support you in your journey called marriage.

You know I thought a while ago that living together; maybe it’s not such a big deal. It’s a nice way to get to know each other. You can really see if the relationship will work or not. It’s kind of a nice way to take a test drive and see if things will work out. But you know that stats don’t prove that. The facts don’t prove that. I’m sure you all know that stat that out of every two marriages, one ends in

divorce. But you probably don't know this stat: out of the number of people who live together before they get married, eight out of ten of those marriages will end in divorce. So you see it doesn't work. There is a truth in God's word that we need to honor. And what God's word is speaking to you and me is that relationships are incredibly important. And Christ's relationship with His church is so important to Him that He wants to enter into a covenant relationship with us. I WILL BE YOUR GOD AND YOU WILL BE MY PEOPLE. How many times have you heard that in the Old and the New Testament? I WILL LOVE YOU. I WILL PROVIDE FOR YOU. I WILL GIVE YOU EVERYTHING YOU NEED. I JUST WANT YOU TO DO ONE THING FOR ME; FOLLOW ME. OBEY MY LAWS. HONOR ME IN THIS RELATIONSHIP. That is a covenant relationship. And marriage is the same thing. Beloved of God, that is what God wants for his people in marriage. He wants married people to enter into a covenantal relationship with one another, a relationship of promises, a relationship of vows until death do us part. Because that's the kind of vowed life that Jesus lives with us. And that's the kind of relationship that God blesses. And I just want to say to you if you love one another enough to be with one another for the rest of your life, I want all the blessings of God for you in every way, shape and form.

The final thing I want to share with all of you today is I want to say to all of you here at St. John's what a blessing you have been to me. On Saturday, I had the honor of performing a marriage on the Gulf, which is one of my favorite places to marry people. I love being out in creation; I love being on the Gulf especially towards sunset which is when we were there; very romantic; very moving; very powerful. And one of the things I shared with this couple who were getting married there was a story of Jan and I and St. John's. I shared with them how Jan and I, this coming September, will be celebrating 34 years of marriage... and they all applauded at that moment! I didn't expect applause it was actually just the beginning of my story but they all applauded! It is kind of a long time for these days, right? And I appreciated that but then I told them the rest of the story. I said, "You know what, I'm a priest at St. John's and every month we recognize birthdays and anniversaries. And one particular day we recognized a couple who were celebrating an anniversary of being married 69 years." Oh my gosh! And what this couple shared with me at the end of the service, when I shared with them how long Jan and I were married at that point; I think it was 30 or 31 years, was, "Oh you're just getting started!" It doesn't feel like we're just getting started some times, does it? "Oh you're just getting started. You're just a beginner. You're just a young whippersnapper!" And that's a blessing to me. To be in a church in these times where being married 34 years is just a beginning. And I want to thank each of you in this church who have been married for 30, 40, 50, and 60 years and your faithfulness to one another in that marriage; through thick and through thin; through ups and through downs; through good times and through bad. I want to thank you for those who have been a witness to me; who have lost your spouse 3, 4, 5 years ago and it's just like yesterday for you. Thank you for teaching me about the power of love; about the power of marriage, and about how important it is, your relationship with each other and the witness you've been to me of Christ's love for His church and the power of a love between two people.

So today as we gather, I want to invite you along with me to celebrate the Church and the mystery of marriage. To celebrate together this great covenant of marriage that God has called forth in our midst to support it, to pray for it and as God guides and leads our lives, to be a part of it.

Fr. Joe Maiocco