

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

October 8, 2018

Series B, Proper Set 22

Lutheran Service Book Lectionary

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;

she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

“Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment. But from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

In the beginning the Lord God bestowed on mankind the good and wondrous estate of Holy Matrimony, which we read about in Genesis 2. When God looks down and sees Adam standing alone, he knows the solution does reside in the variety of beasts surrounding him. Neither does God perform what we might have thought the most obvious fix: he does not give to Adam another man. Instead, God takes a part of man’s very body, builds it into something that Adam has never seen before, either walking around or in his own reflection. God makes woman and then presents her to Adam, just so he may hear Adam exclaim:

“This one, now, is bone from my bone and flesh from my flesh!”

As soon as he gazes upon her, he begins joyfully to consider all the goodness that his Maker stands ready to bestow upon them both. Scripture confirms what all people know intuitively – that by creating us male & female, God designed us to be complementary to each other, in such a way that each needs the other for mankind to obtain the blessed destiny that God has in mind for us all. At the heart of human sexuality lies the paradox: Human society grows out of how men and women are so “profoundly alike and yet profoundly not so.”

When a man grows up and starts applying this to himself, the force of his discovery

runs through his mind with such convincing force, says Scripture, that he leaves even his parental home, the company of the two people who brought him into the world, to experience their experience for himself. In the woman he finds a quite similar yearning has awakened, and God's Word clearly refutes any suggestion that their desire for each other is unholy, some kind of turning away from Him. On the contrary, in approaching each other with delight Adam and Eve are simply opening the present God has given them.

Ah, you say, but at this point people were still uncorrupted by sin. What about us today, and our condition in this fallen world? Since our wills have now been corrupted, have we lost all the opportunity join ourselves together without ruining it and displeasing God in the process? Not only does God allow Adam and Eve to live on and raise their family; but consider Christ when he comes among us, sharing our human flesh and blood. For the first sign that he gives of his glory, the first act he performs to declare he has come to redeem humanity, is to bless a wedding reception with an abundance of wine. Thus also the Apostle Paul teaches us that God still offers marriage to sinners as a remedy against sin, in other words, to help us avoid fornication. And when Gentile men become Christian, Simon Peter urges them not to abandon marriage but to treasure their wives as *fellow heirs of the grace of life*.

But the danger is there: How often do self-centered sinners greedily grab what God offers, and proceed to engineer evil out of good? From today's debate between our Lord and the Pharisees, race ahead some fifteen centuries. At the age of 18, King Henry of England enters into an arranged marriage with Catharine of Aragon; it lasts 24 years. But after she fails to give him a son, in 1533 he uses his power to have the marriage annulled and forthwith marries Anne Boleyn. Their marriage lasts until her beheading in 1536, in which year he then marries Jane Seymour. She dies after giving birth to a son. In the years that follow Henry VIII, driven by political desperation and his own unrestrained libido, takes three more wives in succession before dying in 1547.

Not only does the king repeatedly disgrace himself, but often complicit in his

maneuvers is his chaplain, a clergyman whose conscience is tormented, but who still violates his office to help Henry acquire sanction for his marital fiascoes. This priest is Thomas Cranmer, whose career really takes off when he becomes Henry's royal chaplain. His career shall end when Cranmer and hundreds of other Protestants are burned at the stake by the queen forever known by as "Bloody Mary."

But in the meantime, Cranmer is serving his king when death comes to Henry VIII, and the throne passes to that boy whose mother, Jane Seymour, died following his birth. His name is Edward VI, he is still three months away from his tenth birthday, and in chronic poor health he shall only live to the age of 15. But Edward is now King of England, and the hour has come for church leaders to do what King Henry always opposed: to define and consolidate, doctrinally and liturgically, a Church of England that is fully catholic and at the same time independent and separate from Rome and the papacy.

What is to be the centerpiece for this moment, the greatest symbol of the Protestant Reformation in England? On March 14, in the third year of Edward's short reign, he is presented with a prayer book. It contains orders of service for Matins and Vespers, a revised Communion liturgy, all the appointed Epistles and Gospels for the year, and much more – all in English instead of Latin. It also includes something rather new, a full-sized rite for the solemnization of matrimony. The man who presents the book is the Archbishop of Canterbury, and he himself composed the opening words of the marriage rite, "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here..." He is also Thomas Cranmer, who witnessed and oft participated in the marital travesties of Edward's father. The book explains to the young man that what we call "*this holy estate*" ...

...is not to be enterprised, nor taken in hand unadvisedlye, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men's carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding.

and also that:

...such persons as be married, might live chastely in matrimony, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ's body.

In our generation, in this present era, the whole Western world has increasingly denied that marriage is given and governed by God; even many who attend church insist on a Church that will not try intruding on the private business of what people do with their bodies. Christ and his Apostles warn the unrepentant shall burn forever in hell, but how judgmental is that?

Meanwhile, we are also discovering what happens here and now when we all define marriage however we will, enter and leave marriage as we will. What happens when couples see this happening and declare, “Vows, schmows” – who needs them? What happens when young men and women simply give up on the whole idea, and discover how much easier it is to live alone, feeding and tending a beloved dog, than to find a pious spouse with whom you raise a human child in the faith and fear of God? Here is what happens: Society unravels, and civilization begins to crumble and vanish.

Ah, but living under lifelong vows with a member of the opposite sex – doesn’t that spell disaster? What are the chances that two self-occupied sinners, a son of Adam and a daughter of Eve, will find it in themselves to have and hold, love and cherish each other? To How many have in themselves the strength, each to honor and keep the other, so long as both are still living? The odds, I’d say, are quite low – zero, we might say!

But infuse into man and woman the power of God’s love, his willingness to die for us on the cross and even to forgive his killers – and there is hope. There is now the possibility of that moment when a wife says to her husband, “Well, if God can forgive king Henry VIII, I suppose...”

To what shall compare the power of forgiveness in marriage, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like ...hmmm... the axe-head in 2 Kings 6. A community of prophets is clearing trees beside the River Jordan, just when Elisha happens to be there. One of the prophets has no axe and so has borrowed one from somebody else. As he swings it the head flies off and plops into the river. Well, as husbands and wives may sometimes say, “There’s no chance now.” Up steps Elisha, who cuts a twig from the tree, tosses it on the water, and up floats that sharpened chunk of iron. And so, in regard to their vows and their

happiness may all husbands and wives declare with St. Paul that with faith in him we also come to know *the power of his resurrection*. ☩