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"Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be always acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer." (Psalm 19:14)

I came across an article in the news recently that included a picture of a very unhappy couple on their wedding day. They were dressed like royalty and seated right next to one another on what looked like a throne, but instead of the smiling faces I'm used to seeing in wedding photos, I saw straight-faced somber expressions that made it very clear – this was not a day to celebrate. The article revealed the fact that this marriage was arranged – perhaps even forced – by the parents of the bride and groom. To those of us here today and to the great majority of people in our western culture, where individual choices and freedom are praised, the thought of an arranged marriage – or far worse – a forced marriage sounds foreign and perhaps even appalling. Can you imagine being forced into marrying a person you don't know? Really, what are the odds you could find true happiness in a marriage arranged or forced by your parents? It's definitely a long shot, but I bring up this subject today with the suggestion that for many of us the most important

relationship in our lives began as one that was arranged – perhaps even forced – by our own parents.

Consider this: If you grew up in a Christian home, it's very likely that your parents had you baptized, brought you to church on Sunday, read you stories from the Bible, and made sure you said your prayers every night before you went to bed. You were a child and your parents arranged this relationship between you and God. They made the introduction and basically said to you, "This is God, you are to love and serve Him." Those of us that are parents may realize we have done likewise with our children. This possibility struck me as interesting so I did a little reading about arranged marriage and found some parallels between this type of forced human relationship and the relationship we share with God. It's important to recognize these similarities, for there is considerable danger in any arranged relationship.

One of the stories I read was about a couple from India. The bride and groom were allowed to see each other face to face only once before they were married. The husband shared the shocking story of how he lost sight of his new bride while they were shopping the day after their wedding and how he lamented to himself that he would never find her again, because he'd forgotten what she looked like! The thought of this happening to any of us is crazy, because we live in a society where people date – normally for years – before they get married. They've spent time together. They know one another. They've fallen in love and when the time comes that they decide to marry they

have this beautiful image of their future spouse planted firmly in their heart, soul, and mind.

There was a time in my life when I lost sight of God, and perhaps it took so many years for me to return to Him because I'd forgotten what He looked like. It's possible I never really knew Him at all, for I hadn't taken the time to get to know Him. Consider the example of the Prodigal Son. This young man grew up with the greatest Father, but he didn't really know Him and couldn't wait to leave His Father's house. He took his inheritance and headed for a "far country". It wasn't until he reached rock bottom and "came to his senses" that he began to see his Father in a different, more objective light. Instead of looking through the filter of his own selfishness, he looked back and saw his Father as kind, loving, generous, and merciful. Upon recognizing the truth about His father – truly seeing Him for the first time – the son's life was transformed and he couldn't wait to get back home to be in the presence of his Father. (Luke 15: 11-32)

We need to get to know what God our Father truly looks like. So, that in our darkest hour, in the midst of the storm, when we think we've lost sight of Him in this crowded world; we won't lament, we will recognize Him. (Matthew 14:22-33) We will never get to know Him through an introduction. The best way to get to know Him – the best way to fall in love with Him – is the best way to get to know or fall in love with anyone. It's by spending time with Him - time alone with Him simply being quiet and letting Him speak to us, time in daily prayer and Bible study. Psalm

119 tells us God's Word should be our delight (119:16,24) and St. Peter encourages us to act "like newborn babes," and "desire the sincere milk of the word, that we may grow thereby." (1 Peter 2:2). God gives us 24 hours every day, how much of that time are we using to get to know Him – to fall in love with Him?

In our Gospel reading this morning, when a scribe asked Jesus, "Master, which is the great commandment in the law? Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment." (Matthew 22:36-38) But can you command someone to love you? If your parents picked out a spouse for you – and you were a very obedient child – you could honor and obey your new spouse; but could you love that person because you were commanded to? No, because love must be freely given. The decision to love them would have to be your own. So, I would suggest in this passage that God is giving us more than a command – He is giving us freedom.

When Jesus uses these words to answer the scribe, He is quoting a Scripture found in the book: Deuteronomy (6:4-5). God told Moses to speak these words to the Israelites after He had set them free from slavery in Egypt. Through a series of miracles, God revealed Himself to His people, showed them how much He loved them, and

delivered them from the hands of the Egyptians so that they could be who He created them to be – “a kingdom of priests and a Holy Nation” (Exodus 19:6). He gave them freedom to love and serve Him.

Think about it this way: Let’s say that I caught a butterfly and put it in a jar – trapping it and stealing its ability to do what it was made to do. Until one day, someone comes along and sees this little trapped butterfly and has compassion on it and opens the jar. In that act, by opening the jar, by setting it free, they are in fact commanding that butterfly; to fly, to do what God made it to do, to be what it was created to be.

All of humanity, much like that butterfly, was trapped. The enemy came along with his plan “to steal, and to kill, and to destroy”; and we were deceived. (John 10:10) Our sin left us without the power to free ourselves. Like a butterfly trapped in a jar, no amount of desire or effort on our part could set us free (Romans 9:15-16), but “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love”. (Psalm 103:8) God loves us, and by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of His only Son our Savior; He set us free. He freed us to be who He created us to be. He has given us the freedom to love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; the freedom to no longer look at commandments as a list of rules and obligations, but as freedom. His “service is perfect freedom”. We are free to

love, so now everything we do must be done in love. God doesn't want your allegiance to a list of commands, unless He first has your heart! (John 14:15)

God wants you to love Him and He wants you to love those He loves, to love your neighbor as yourself. He gives us this command, and God – in the person of Jesus Christ – modeled it perfectly. As His disciples – by His grace – we must now strive to love as He loves; because our love for one another stands as our testimony in a difficult and dangerous world that His light continues to shine. Jesus said, “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.” (John 13:35) If you are here this morning because you love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind... If you are here this morning because Jesus Christ has set you free... Then do what you were created to do, be who you were created to be, and reach out with all your might to extend the love of God to the world.

"To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen." (Jude 1:25)