

### 7.7.2019 Trinity 3: The bride and the Groom

Later this afternoon I'll be walking my oldest daughter down the aisle, giving her hand in marriage, and as we all know preparing for a wedding is challenging and costly. Over the past year, I've watched Ashley carefully and diligently prepare for this day that she's looked forward to with great hope and expectation, and this morning it appears everything is in place. The venue and the caterer, the music and the photographer, the flowers and the rings, everything and everybody is ready - perhaps most of all the bride. The bride has *made herself ready*.

As the father of the bride, I've watched this careful, diligent preparation take place. I've seen the hard work, the attention to detail, and yesterday at the rehearsal a person couldn't help but notice how much everyone was going all out to make this wedding a beautiful celebration of what Holy Scripture describes as the moment when two "*become one flesh*" (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:15). The biblical definition of marriage as a Divine ordinance, instituted by God, in which one man and one woman *become one flesh* reveals the intimate union of the husband and wife. As Adam said of Eve, she is "*bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh*" (Genesis 2:23).

In our quickly changing post-Christian culture, marriage has become something entirely different than what find in the Bible. God defines marriage as a sacramental union in which your spouse becomes your own flesh and bone, but the way God defines the Divine ordinance that He instituted is no longer the popular definition of marriage. So, before we go any further this morning, we need to agree on a definition. We need to agree that the word marriage, to God and to the Christian, means infinitely more than what we so often see in movies, on television, or in our society. The only way for us to recognize the importance of the passages we will consider today, the only way for us to find real comfort and assurance in these words, is to understand and agree that when the Bible refers to marriage, it is to be understood as two persons who are united so intimately it's as if they're one person, one soul, one flesh.

Now with that definition in mind, throughout the New Testament we find many vivid images of the intimate relationship that exists between our Savior

Christ and His Church. You may remember the way Jesus spoke of the intimate bond that He shares with those who follow Him by saying to His disciples, *“Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can you, except you abide in Me. I am the Vine, you are the branches”* (John 15:4-5a). St. Paul was inspired to describe our union with the Lord by speaking of the Church as the body and Christ as the Head (1 Corinthians 12:12, Colossians 1:18), an image which prompted Augustine to conclude, *“... if He is the head and we are the members; then He and we together are the whole man.”*

These are beautiful images which describe the intimacy of our relationship with the Lord, yet the image that is used time and again throughout the Bible is one of Christ as the Bridegroom and the Church as His holy, radiant, and spotless bride (Ephesians 5:25-32). This way of describing our relationship with Christ was prepared by Old Testament prophets and announced by John the Baptist, a man who referred to himself as *“the friend of the bridegroom,”* the friend who was, in his words, *“overjoyed to hear the bridegroom’s voice”* (John 3:29). In the Gospels we also hear Jesus refer to Himself as the Bridegroom. When the people ask Him why His disciples don’t fast the way others do, Jesus replies, *“How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while He is with them? As long as He is with them, they cannot fast. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast”* (Mark 2:19-20).

Christ is the Vine, we are the branches. Christ is the Head, we are the body. Christ is the Bridegroom, and we are called to be His holy, radiant, and spotless bride. These passages reveal the truth that the Church is truly and intimately one with our Lord and God (John 20:28). We do not simply gather around Him, we are united to Him, as branches on a vine, as members of one body, even as a bride is united to her groom - two who *“become one flesh”* (Genesis 2:24).

It’s in the book of Revelation that this image of the Church as a bride promised to her Groom (2 Corinthians 11:2) culminates in what St. John describes as a great wedding feast, a triumphant, glorious day when Christ, the Lamb of God, and His Church will rejoice in a heavenly celebration. John writes about that day, saying, *“Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him*

*glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready. She was given clothing of fine linen, bright and pure...*" (Revelation 19:7-8a).

As I've watched Ashley so carefully and diligently prepare for her wedding, I've often thought of those words and the importance of our role as the Church in making ourselves ready for the day that the Bible refers to as the "*marriage supper of the Lamb*" (Revelation 19:9). John's inspired words regarding that day, that tell us Christ's "*... bride has made herself ready. She was given clothing of fine linen, bright and pure...*" are a beautiful, clear description of the truth that we, as the Church, prepare for the marriage supper of the Lamb by clothing ourselves with that which the Lord has so graciously and generously given to us: His own righteousness. As the prophet Isaiah foretold, saying: "*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with jewels*" (Isaiah 61:10).

Our Lord clothes and covers us with the garments of salvation and the robe of righteousness to the end that we may be His holy, radiant, and spotless bride. These gracious gifts that come from God are truly ours - they belong to us, but we must remember that they never would have been ours if it were not for Him, for without Him we can do nothing (John 15:5). You can see how this relates to the image of Christ as the Vine and His people as the branches, or Christ as the Head and His Church as the body. Branches grow, bloom, and bear fruit, yet they depend completely on the Vine to do so. Hands reach out and feet move, but they only do so when they have a Head to guide them, and so it is in our union with Christ, we do what we can with the gifts and abilities that He gives us, and then we trust God to do what we cannot.

There is truly a Divine-human partnership to living as the people of God. We see this throughout the Bible. Consider these examples: Noah built the ark, and God sent the flood. Moses confronted Pharaoh, and God sent the plagues. David faced Goliath, and God delivered him into his hands. Daniel prayed in the lions' den, and God shut their mouths. Peter preached on Pentecost, and God saved 3,000 souls. We cried out for forgiveness, and God gave the life of

His only Son. By God's grace we do what we can, and God does what we cannot. This is what it's like to live in union with Christ, to be a branch on the one true Vine, a member of His mystical Body, to become *one flesh* with the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The God who loves us and saved us has called us to be His holy, radiant, and spotless bride, and when you contemplate the fact that God defines marriage as two who *become one flesh*, this miraculous truth becomes the foundation of a peace which passes all understanding. May we rest in this blessed assurance, and as a bride promised to her Groom, may we carefully and diligently use the time that God has given to us to make ourselves ready by working and praying and giving to further His kingdom, all the while remembering that our worth to the Bridegroom, who loves us and gave Himself for us (Ephesians 5:25), is not found in what we do for Him, but in who we are to Him - His holy, radiant, and spotless bride.