

10.3.2021 Trinity 18 (Matthew 22:34-46)

I remember reading an article years ago about a couple from India whose marriage was arranged, perhaps even forced, by their parents. In our culture it's difficult to imagine, but the bride and groom were only allowed to see each other face to face one time before they were married. In the article, 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 unheard of, and it's difficult for us to picture being in that situation, because we live in a society where couples date, often for years, before they get married. They spend time together, get to know one another, and if they fall in love, when the time comes for the marriage proposal, the man and woman each have this beautiful image of their future spouse firmly planted in their heart and soul and mind.

It's nearly impossible for us to imagine marrying a person one day and forgetting what they look like the next, because we are people who put so much time and effort into building a strong relationship with our future spouse. We work hard to prepare and establish a firm foundation for our marriage. This is what we joyfully do for the one we love, the person we can't wait to spend the rest of our life with, but let me ask you this, are we working that hard to nurture and protect the most important relationship in our lives? When it comes to our relationship with God, are we, by His grace, exerting the kind of persistent effort that leads to true intimacy, or are we settling for an arrangement that leaves us in danger of losing sight of Him in this crowded world, or forgetting what He looks like?

I'll be the first to admit, that was the story of my life. For years I put all of my effort into building my kingdom, a kingdom of good things like family and friends and hard work, but a kingdom so full of good things that there was no room for the greatest thing. At that time I believed, and prayed, but made no real effort to spend time with God, to learn who He is, and to grow closer to Him. In my crowded world I'd 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 even possible that I never really knew Him at all, because while I had taken time to build relationships with my family and friends, I'd never taken even a fraction of that time to build a relationship with God.

When you read the parable of the Prodigal Son, it seems he made the same mistake. He was a young man who grew up with the best Father, but didn't really know Him, and therefore couldn't wait to leave His house. You'll remember that the prodigal took his inheritance, which the Father freely gave to him, and headed for a "*far country*," and that 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 that his Father was loving and generous and merciful, and when he recognized that truth, when he truly came to know his Father, how his Father loved him, the prodigal'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).

For many years I wandered, in a *far country*, apart from God. Perhaps you had a similar experience. The lesson we learn from that experience, the lesson we learn from a prodigal who leaves his Father's house because he doesn't know Him, the lesson we learn from a husband who laments that he will never find his new bride because he's forgotten what she looks like, is that we must take time to get to know God, who He is, what He truly looks like, so that in our darkest hour, in the midst of the storm, or when we've lost sight of Him in this crowded world, we won't lament, we will recognize Him and return to Him because we know Him and love Him. We love Him, as Jesus said, with all of our heart, all of our soul, all of our mind, and all of our strength (Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27; Matthew 22:37).

Our Lord tells us to love God with all that we are and all that we have is the first and great commandment, and since we've been talking a little bit about arranged marriages, perhaps we should ask the question: Can you command someone to love you? If your parents arranged your marriage, 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? Certainly not, because we all know that love must be freely given. The decision to love them would have to be your own. Therefore, I would suggest in this passage

God is giving us more than a command to love Him, He is giving us the freedom to love Him, and that fact becomes very clear when we read these words in their original context.

When Jesus used these words to answer the scribe, He was quoting an Old Testament Scripture (Deuteronomy 6:4-5) that records God telling Moses to speak these words to the Israelites after He'd set them free from slavery in Egypt. So, this command was given after God miraculously revealed Himself to His people, after He showed them how much He loved them, after He 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). God gave Israel more than a command to love Him, He set them free, and in doing so He gave them the freedom to love Him.

Think about it this way: Let's say that I caught a butterfly and put it in a jar, I trapped it and robbed it of its ability to do what it was created to do. Until one day, someone came along and saw this trapped butterfly, had compassion on it, and opened the jar. In that act, by opening the jar, and setting it free, this person is in fact commanding that butterfly, to fly, to do what God made it to do, to be what it was created to be. The first and great commandment, love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, is a declaration from God that you have been set free to do what He created you to do, to be who He created you to be.

Our sermon this morning is about knowing God, knowing God so that we don't lose sight of Him in this crowded, chaotic world, knowing God so that we don't act like a prodigal child that takes their inheritance and leaves for a far country, knowing God so that we don't view His commandments as burdens, but instead as blessings that come with the perfect freedom to be who He created us to be. Our sermon this morning is about knowing God, and Holy Scripture tells us this is why our Savior Christ came. He came to reveal God the Father to us (Matthew 11:27), and He did so perfectly, by using a language we all understand, the language of sacrifice.

I'll leave you with this example of a person who spoke that language: Several

weeks ago I read a news story about a young man named Dustin Wakefield who died while protecting his son. According to the story, Dustin was eating dinner with his family while vacationing in Florida, when a man who was under the influence randomly targeted this young family, pointing a gun at Dustin's one-year-old son. To protect him, Dustin stepped in front of his son, was shot multiple times, and later died.

Some people might say that one of the greatest tragedies in that incredibly sad story is that this boy will grow up never knowing his dad, and while I'm sure we all agree with what people mean when they say that, I'm convinced it's much closer to the truth to say, in that single act of sacrificial love, Dustin made sure that his son will always know him. There will be so many good things he won't know about his father, but he will always know, with complete certainty, the greatest thing about his dad, that he died to save him. This is the most important thing that boy can know about his father, and it's the most important thing we can know about God.