

EPIPHANY II – JANUARY 16, 2022 – EPHESIANS 5:22-33

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

“Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church, and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”

Thus far our text.

This is the traditional epistle reading for the rite of Christian marriage in the hymnal. However, this is not without controversy. I’ve heard it said by many a would-be or future bride that she doesn’t want to utter the word “obey”, which is also in the traditional vows, during the marriage service, because of the negative connotations that this word implies in our current situation. And, given the many instances of domination in our sinful world, one can understand such reluctance. We live in a sinful world, where everyone seeks to gain the advantage, to “win at all costs”, to step on whomever is necessary just to “get ahead”. Physical and emotional abuse are all over the newspapers, as more and more marriages are stricken with brutality and selfishness that knows no bounds.

Even in our text, the word that Paul uses for “respect” is the same word used elsewhere in the Scriptures for fear, worship and/or reverence. Context is the only way to determine what the

usage and meaning is in a given passage. Since Paul continues to compare the actions of the husband toward the wife to the actions of Christ toward the church, we can assume that Christ doesn't fear or worship His creation; rather, He respects His creation. He loves it so much that He would do anything for it; indeed, He would even die for it. But, I'm getting ahead of myself! Let's delve into this passage a little bit, and see if we can see what the Holy Spirit, through the inspired pen of St. Paul, wants us to learn about the building block of human society, the basis for the raising of children, the foundation of stability in the home – marriage.

How did God set up marriage in the first place? He said that it was not good that man would be alone; rather, He would make a suitable helper for him. According to a literal translation of the Hebrew, “helper” really means “help-meet”. Or, to put it another way, the purpose of the wife was to help Adam, to meet his needs, and for Adam to meet her needs and help her with the various tasks of life. Adam had already named all of the animals (what a job that must have been – coming up with the duck-billed platypus and the elephant!), and a suitable helper wasn't found among all of them. God wants to not only provide for our basic needs (food, clothing, shelter), but for ALL of our needs. He doesn't want us to feel alone, or abandoned. Especially since the fall into sin (which He knew was coming, in His divine foreknowledge), He knew that Adam would be lonely without the perfect communion and companionship that he originally had with God, Who made a habit of walking in the garden in the cool of the day.

God set up Adam to be the head, and Eve to be the helper – this wasn't that Eve was somehow inferior to Adam, but rather had an assigned role of being under Adam's headship. Note – not domination, but headship. Not control, but protection. Care, loving charge, concern. There has to be a head in any organization; otherwise, chaos ensues. In a company, there's only one CEO; leadership by committee, when it comes to the day-to-day operations, rarely works,

and usually results in confusion. Each person has their role, and does it well – from the head all the way down to the lowest man on the totem pole. In the best-run companies, all are appreciated, know that they are appreciated, know what their tasks are, and are SHOWN care and concern while they are doing their work.

In another reference from Scripture, Paul talks about jealousy among the children of God in various roles. What if the arm said, “I’m not a head,” and thinks that it is not only inferior, but also that they aren’t going to work together to do the functions of the body? It won’t work! Each person has their vocation or station in life. Husband/wife, parent/child, employer/employee. We are called by God to work within the vocation He has given us, to show love toward all as He has shown it to us, and to give thanks to Him for the blessings He gives to us no matter what station in life we are in. It’s not that husbands are somehow better than wives; rather, it’s that they have different ROLES in the economy of the family. Some are placed to do some things; others are placed to do other things. In God’s perfect plan, this would take place in harmony, without jealousy, power-struggle or strife.

Another important reason/activity of marriage was to be the strong base for the raising of children, with the various roles personified and represented – more on this in just a few minutes! After all, He told Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply – this was an expectation, in a perfect world like the Garden of Eden was, without disease or need or illness.

How did this all get messed up? Very simply, the fall into sin of Adam and Eve. Headship changed into domination – a desire for control, rule and power. Rebellion came into being – wives started resenting this sinful control exerted by husbands, and bridled against it. Strife entered into the marriage relationship for the first time, and that which God created for good and harmony became anything but! Denial of there even being different roles for men and

women – we see this in our day and age – ultimately, this is selfishness and a sinful grab for power from one group that wants the grass that’s greener than the other side of the proverbial fence.

Notice how Paul presents this – he gets the difficult to understand/follow stuff out of the way (wives, submit to your husbands), and then gets on to the counter argument (husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church). Both of these are difficult to follow in the sinful world that we live in. Men are apt to love their wives, but only in a very possessive and sinful way; not as Christ loved the church, not sacrificially, but selfishly. Women have trouble submitting to their husbands, but this is often because husbands aren’t doing things the way that they should, and it is very difficult to submit to one that you don’t trust is working in your best interest. I’ve heard it said that women don’t have trouble submitting to a man who expresses sacrificial, Christ-like love for them. Would that be so!

The idea of marriage has ceased to be based on God’s institution, and rather is centered around what we sinful creatures think it ought to be. That’s where you get corruption and sin and selfishness and self-centeredness to enter in. Divorce – it was only permitted for two reasons in Scripture – for adultery and desertion. Both of these reasons weren’t in God’s original plan, and just because He allows them, doesn’t mean that they were part of His design. Rather, they are a result of the sinful world we live in, and the assaults and pressures of the devil. Marriage has become just a civil contract that can be broken by the mutual consent of the two parties – I don’t think that God intended that marriage be analogous to a contract for purchasing a good or service! More marriages end in divorce than with the death of one of the spouses – a sad commentary on how far we’ve strayed from God’s original institution.

Another corruption of God's idea of marriage has to do with abuse. If you look at the newspaper, abuse and brutality seem to be at an all-time high. This was never intended by God! But, as we've talked about earlier, it's what happens when headship is traded for domination and leadership is changed into utter control.

What does God propose to fix all of this? Here's where the Good News comes in! He came to earth Himself, and set things right. There are even Sacramental references in our text – He washes us with water and the Word – that's what He does in the church, and Paul uses this as an example of the love and care that the husband has for his wife. Not that the husband literally washes the wife, but rather that he keeps her unsullied, taken care of, tended to, secure. This is talking about the spiritual care of the family, being the spiritual head of the household.

Remember Luther's Small Catechism – it was written for the head of the household to teach to the members of the house under his care. It was not just written to be studied in Confirmation class, and then gather dust on the shelf!

Just like a man doesn't despise his own body, but feeds and nourishes it, so Christ nourishes the church – through the Word and His blessed Sacraments. It's not an accident here that Paul is alluding to the Lord's Supper. That's where we receive the forgiveness of our sins, and the strengthening of our bodies and souls, for the difficult task of living in this sinful world that surrounds us. We are called to be beacons of light to a world that doesn't even know that it is languishing in darkness anymore. That's why He shows His love for us in coming and dwelling among us, and dying and rising again for us and for our salvation. Not only that, but He gives us His gifts of love – the Word and the Sacraments – to sustain us and forgive us every day.

He continually reminds us of what He would have marriage to be, even though the world around us doesn't want to hear about it. Once we are strengthened and redirected to the truth, then we are empowered to tell others about the truth. This is important in this crucial time – to influence our friends and family members, those who we have relationships with, that will trust what we say. Remind them of the truth of the Gospel. Maybe most important – show them the blessedness of Godly marriage, that doesn't depend on our needs being met, but rather on love being shown; sacrificial love; selfless love; love like that which Christ showed us. This is important stuff – this is set up by God! If we start messing around with this foundational truth of Scripture (it's in Genesis Chapter 2, by the way), it's God's foundation for the family, for society, and for His kingdom here on earth. We shouldn't be surprised that this assault comes – the devil is roaring around like a lion, like Luther says. But we should also know that our hope isn't in this world – THANK GOD!

Next time you go to a wedding service, take notice of what readings are used. It's become quite unusual to use Ephesians 5 as the epistle reading. Rather, the most common epistle has become 1 Corinthians 13, which is fine as far as it goes – after all, it's Scripture! But, if you look at the context, it really doesn't pertain to marriage as clearly as Ephesians does. In fact, 1 Corinthians relates more to the love of God toward us His creation than it does to the marriage relationship, to the inner workings of the home. Paul's writing to the Corinthian Christians is much more general when talking about love (it uses the word love over and over and over again); it can easily be misinterpreted to eliminate whatsoever this idea of headship and reflection of God's love in the marriage relationship. But, in keeping with the idea that Scripture interprets Scripture, we use the most clear and appropriate passage to explain a given doctrine of God's Word. Paul's letter to the Ephesians couldn't be more clear – that wives are to submit to their

husbands AS TO THE LORD; husbands are to love their wives AS CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH, and that this love between husband and wife is the closest reflection that we have this side of heaven to the sacrificial love that Jesus had for us when He died on the cross and rose again for our salvation. This is important stuff! Thanks be to God that He continues to make it clear to us, and teaches us, and doesn't give up on us, and forgives us, and works with us every day to gradually make us more and more into the image that He has for us, until He takes us home to Himself at the end of time, when His day comes. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.