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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 16 (Pentecost 14), Series B
Saturday, August 25th, 2018
Sunday, August 26th, 2018

Sermon: Dying to Love
Text: Ephesians 5:21-33

Focus Statement: In his great love, Christ died for his bride, the Church.

Function Statement: That husbands and wives would love and serve one another without keeping score.

Sermon Structure: Text-Application

Doctrinal Locus: “We should fear and love God so that we lead sexually pure and decent lives in what we say and do, and husbands and wives love and honor each other” (SC, 6th Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Marriage is in trouble in America today. According to research by the Barna Group, fully one-third (33%) of all American adults have been divorced at one time.¹ And ever since the Sexual Revolution of the 1960’s and 70’s, fewer and fewer adults ever actually *get* married (only half). Instead they just live together. In fact, nowadays most couples “shack up” before marriage.

People are also getting married much later in life than they once did. In 1960 the average age for a first marriage was 22 for a man and 20 for a woman.² Today it’s nearly 30 years old for men and 27 years old for women!³ There are many reasons for this delayed marriage, of course, including higher education for more women. However, one of the biggest factors for delayed marriage is a kind of serial monogamy in which couples fall in and out of love and fornicate with multiple sexual partners throughout their twenties and thirties. Because they no

¹ <https://www.barna.com/research/new-marriage-and-divorce-statistics-released/>

² <https://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/03/getting-married-later-is-great-for-college-educated-women/274040/>

³ <https://www.womenshealthmag.com/relationships/a19567270/average-age-of-marriage/>

longer save sex for marriage, there is less incentive to marry, this despite the apostle's old adage that "it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (1 Cor. 7:9).

It used to be that the "next step" after falling in love was to get married and start a family. Now the next steps appear to be (1) move in together; and (2) get a puppy. (It's no accident that at the same time Europeans and North Americans have fewer children, they have more pet dogs).⁴ Many couples tell me that living together before marriage is a good way to see if they're compatible. Unfortunately, even apart from the moral issue, research proves that couples who live together before marriage are more likely to get divorced than those who wait.⁵ This makes sense, of course, because if two people are unwilling to take the plunge and make a firm commitment to each other in marriage, then their "try before you buy" attitude will plague them all the months or years of their doomed relationship. As someone crassly told me yesterday: "Why buy the cow when you get the milk for free?"

As I stated earlier, the institution of marriage is in trouble. And yet marriage has always been in trouble ever since the fall into sin. Ever since God confronted Adam and Eve for eating the forbidden fruit, marriage was broken by distrust, blame, shame, selfishness, and manipulation. As Adam complained to God, "The woman *you* gave me—*she* made me do it!" (cp. Gen. 3:12). And, as God told Eve, "Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you" (Gen. 3:16). Adam became lord of the living room and king of the couch. Eve became his subservient slave, pregnant and barefoot in the kitchen. Instead of helpmeets, men and women became competitors.

⁴ <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2017/11/beware-of-dog>

⁵ "The Relationship Between Cohabitation and Divorce," in *Demography*, vol. 29 (1992), 357-374, as quoted in *What About...Living Together without Marriage* (St. Louis: CPH, 1998).

"Commitment and the Modern Union," in *American Sociological Review*, vol. 53 (1988), 127-138, as quoted in *What About...Living Together*.

Now, because of the curse of sin, marriage has devolved in to a caricature of God's original intent. We focus on how the other person can make us happy instead of seeking the benefit and wellbeing of the beloved. Instead of putting our spouse's needs before our own, we selfishly seek to use the other person to meet our needs, whether they be for acceptance, soothing our egos, or satisfying our sexual urges. Instead of a means to experience intimacy, we turn sex and affection into a bargaining chip, a system of punishment and reward.

In this scenario, marriage becomes an economic transaction of *quid pro quo*: if I do something nice for you, then you'd better do something nice for me in return. Unfortunately, as soon as we start keeping score, nobody "wins" and everybody loses. We resent one another for our unmet expectations. And if we get bored or bitter, we'll go looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places, whether it be Internet pornography or an extra-marital affair.

But into this mess of marriage steps the apostle Paul with a better vision for life together: "Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord.... Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5:22, 25). These aren't easy words for us to hear. Submission and self-sacrifice are dirty words in our post-Christian, hyperfeminist, individualistic culture. Women don't want to become doormats for their husbands, and men don't want to put their wives first. All of this goes against the grain of our sinful way of thinking. "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (John 6:60).

Yet if you want the perfect picture of marriage, it is not the smiling young couple on their wedding day or even the wizened old pair at their 50th Anniversary celebration; the perfect picture of marriage is Jesus dying on the cross for your sins. At his crucifixion, Jesus forgave the sins of the whole world, including our selfishness, infidelity, divorce, and hardness of heart. Jesus even forgives us for wrecking our marriages and destroying our families. And then he

shows us a better way: the sinless Son of God gave up his life for sinful humanity. With his blood he bought his bride and made her beautiful. “This mystery is profound,” Paul admits, “and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32).

Paul’s picture of Jesus and the Church in Ephesians 5 is the *only* way that marriage *can* work. Marriage is meant to mirror the relationship between Christ and his Bride, the Church. Just as the Church submits to Christ, obeying his commandments, so also the wife submits to her husband “in everything” (v. 24). And, even more notably, just as Christ laid down his life on the cross to forgive our sins and make us holy, so also husbands lay down their own lives, setting aside their personal “rights” and agendas in order to help their wives become the women God desires them to be (vv. 25-27). Jesus did not wait for us to get our act together or meet him half way before he died for us. Timothy Keller writes, “He loved us, not because we were lovely to him, but to make us lovely. That is why I am going to love my spouse.”⁶ Mutual submission and self-sacrifice are the only way to make marriage work. And it is work.

In 2013 actor and director Ben Affleck addressed his then-wife, Jennifer Garner, in his Oscar acceptance speech: “I want to thank you for working on marriage for ten Christmases. It’s good, it is work, but it’s the best kind of work, and there’s no one I’d rather work with.” The very next day, the media criticized Mr. Affleck for not sounding very romantic in his declaration of love. But his statement is true: marriage *is* hard work. It’s a good work, a holy work. And it takes work, because a good marriage doesn’t happen by accident.

“Marriage is glorious but hard,” says Timothy Keller. “It’s a burning joy and strength, and yet it is also blood, sweat, and tears, humbling defeats and exhausting victories. No

⁶ Timothy and Kathy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage: Facing the Complexities of Commitment with the Wisdom of God* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 109.

marriage I know more than a few weeks old could be described as a fairytale come true.”⁷ The *feeling* of “being in love” cannot sustain a marriage. As C.S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*: “Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing... You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling.”⁸ Psychological research reveals that “the average life span of a romantic obsession is two years.”⁹ Yet a loving Christian marriage can last for a lifetime—“till death do us part.”

Common interests, a good sense of humor, and an active sex life can do wonders for a marriage, but without the model of Christ and the Church, it all falls apart. It is mutual submission and self-sacrifice “out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21) that makes a marriage last. “Love” based on feelings will fade away, but love based on Christ’s forgiveness will endure. “Be kind to one another,” Paul writes, “tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as *God in Christ forgave you*” (Eph. 4:32). Only because Jesus loves and forgives me can I love and forgive my wife. Only because Jesus gave up everything for me, can I even begin to attempt to lay it on the line for Lisa. I am not a perfect husband, and Lisa is not a perfect wife—as wonderful as she is! But “love covers a multitude of sins” (1 Pet. 4:8, NASB).

“Wives, submit to your husbands, as to the Lord” (Eph. 5:22). “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v. 25). Due to past misrepresentation of this Scripture—and the excesses of feminism—many women are afraid to submit to their husbands. Some brides even try to wiggle out of having the words “submit” or “obey” in their wedding vows, but I don’t relent. In the Old Testament, Sarah called her

⁷ Kellers, *The Meaning of Marriage*, 21.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1960; reprint, 1991), 99.

⁹ As quoted by Gary Chapman in *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts* (Chicago: Northfield, 1992, 2010), 30.

husband, Abraham, “Lord” (1 Pet. 3:6; cf. Gen. 18:12). So ladies, if you want to call *your* husband “lord,” that would be all right!

Submission is *not* a dirty word. In New Testament Greek, submission (*hypotassomai*) means to willingly place yourself under another person’s authority for leadership and protection. The word “submit” must *never* be used as an excuse to abuse or mistreat women. But submission to a good and godly man is a safe and wonderful thing.

Similarly, how many husbands want to give up their lives for their wives? Sure, it sounds heroic when it means pushing her out of the way of an oncoming bus or donating a kidney. But really dying for your wife means that day by day, minute by minute, you set aside your own goals, priorities, dreams, and plans in order to do what *she* needs and requires.

Dying for a nagging wife sounds awful. King Solomon says that a nagging wife is like a continuously leaking roof (cf. Prov. 27:15). And Solomon would know: he had 700 wives (1 Kings 11:3)! But dying for a woman who trusts and follows you is the greatest thing in the world. The key to a great marriage is to put the other person first—just like Jesus put us first when he died for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life. When it’s done right, “Christian marriage proclaims the gospel.”¹⁰

“This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). The Greek word Paul uses (*mysterion*) can also mean “secret.” Timothy Keller asserts that “this is the secret—that the gospel of Jesus and marriage explain one another. That when God invented marriage, he already had the saving work of Jesus in mind.”¹¹ So when you are discouraged or tempted to throw in the towel, look to the cross—the perfect picture of marriage. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

¹⁰ Keller, 218.

¹¹ Keller, 47.

That's precisely what Jesus did for you. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.