

**Sermon for the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16 B) August 25, 2024 jj
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Have you heard this? “A person should be allowed to marry whomever he or she wants to love.” At the sound of it, many people today say, That sounds fair. That even sounds loving and considerate of others. It sounds like it should be one of the rights for all people, enshrined in our hallowed government institutions, memorialized the way the Ten Commandments used to be. It’s unbelievable to think that the very idea of a man should marry only a woman--something that used to make sense to everyone-- is today labeled as unfair discrimination!

This tells you a lot about the power of the sinful nature, including the worldly flesh that still tries to inflict its temptations upon you as well. That enemy living within you forces you to struggle with the clamor for what is called “marriage equality.” But aren’t you tired yet of this agenda that is relentlessly pushed down our throats? Why does the rainbow now have to signify something so wrapped up in death and degradation? My friends, my grandchildren or colleagues are forcing me to choose either to give them full approval of their chosen lifestyle or else I’ve completely cut them off. All or nothing. Have you been faced with that impossible choice? And will we ever as a society get back the dignity of marriage that seems to be lost?

To be sure, if it were up to mere human beings alone to rescue marriage as an institution, then its days are numbered if not over. But we have the author of marriage Himself, Jesus Christ our Savior, who has promised that He will be with us always. He made a commitment to you that will never be broken off or divorced. He gave His all, when you and I had nothing. He gave His life in order to cleanse you and make you a radiant bride of a Church to stand before Him, clothed in His blamelessness. You submit to

Him, that is, you have set your selfishness aside, and made yourself ready to receive His love and blessings that shower you right along with the forgiveness that you need each day. He serves you like a husband, who is the head, ought to love and serve his wife, just as he does his own body. That’s what the Apostle Paul is getting at when he writes, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” Marriage, as defined by God, lets us in on something about God that an unbeliever will never understand, that of self-sacrifice made totally for the sake of another. If human beings, including an alarming number of Christians, make a mess of marriage, and it loses all respect in our modern culture, we will still have our beloved husband Jesus. Let God be true, and every man a liar.

Even then, we still run into a problem, and it’s similar to the problem Jesus addressed with the hypocritical religious leaders who had walked a three-day journey from the city of Jerusalem into Galilee just to take Him away from the adoring crowds and set Him straight. Before eating, they would insist on a specific washing ceremony that screamed works-righteousness through and through. Jesus didn’t observe that particular ritual, nor did He require His disciples to ceremonially baptize cups or copper pots or dining room cushions. There was no need. These were not commandments in Scripture, anyway. These were rules handed down by elders who may have seemed to be very pious men, but they ended up dead wrong on what really matters to God.

In fact, Jesus pointed out to them that they knew what God’s genuine commandments were, however they managed to find something different in their elders’ tradition that superseded them. Put it in today’s current events terms, Christians are led astray when

they follow the Biblical command to love one another, but then their trendy spiritual leaders tell them that “love one another” means they have to make room for homosexual marriage, transgendered people, and sermons on climate change and social justice. You want to point out that these are wrong? Then you must not have enough love. God wants people to be happy!

But as you probably already know, that rhetoric is only an attempt someone uses to deflect you away from the facts. It’s your sinful nature again, rejecting the blame that belongs to you and saying it’s everyone else’s fault instead. You want it to be your way, because God’s way is just too stressful, too unpopular, too inefficient, too unprofitable. You can identify with that Christian wife who has a big difficulty with the Biblical command we heard today, submit to your husband in everything. Jesus requests that you confess His name at all times before men, and you’re tempted to say, Please, Lord, anything but that!

Let’s turn, just for the moment, from the imperfect marriages we have to the One Perfect Marriage that sets the pattern. When our Lord asks His Bride the church to submit to Him, what He’s asking of you is to repent. That means, deny yourself and all your self-centered wants and your sinful thoughts, words and deeds; receive His forgiveness instead. He wants to wash you, not in some strange, merely symbolic or ceremonial way, but really wash away your sins. He baptized you in His holy name, and that is what made you holy, radiant and blameless. He lifted you out of the sewer of this world around us and instead made you a beaming light of love to all those others who are just as desperately needing release from Satan’s tyranny. Whether you are married or not, you are a stunning, resplendent bride, free of all spiritual spots and wrinkles.

You didn’t do all those things for Jesus. Obviously, He is the Savior, you are the saved. That is God’s intended order of things. Just like

most of the order and relationships between men and women cannot be interchanged or substituted or surgically reassigned without suffering huge consequences, so also you cannot meddle with the Good News of our Salvation without voiding that precious gift of forgiveness. The fact that we’re all the same in the eyes of God, does not mean that we all have identical roles as we serve together as His Church. And God alone knows all the reasons why He declares it contrary to His will to be homosexual, or why someone is led to deal with their inner problems by convincing themselves that some form of drastic sinful behavior will somehow make them happy. Maybe it all goes back to the beginning of humanity, when that one thing that you are forbidden, becomes the one thing you want the most.

But He has told us unmistakably that He loves all sinners, and He has given all of us Jesus who bestowed upon us a new identity that is ours in Baptism. Your physical appearance, your handicaps, anxieties, phobias, dysphorias, and anything else you may not like about yourself or your place in life—those are no obstacle at all for the love of God that is continually transforming you into the likeness of His Son. Your past, sinful life does not pull you any further out of heaven, now that you have repented and submitted to the sacrifice of Jesus that makes you forever pure and clean. Simply by God’s saying so, you are forgiven and pronounced free from every condemnation, even the shame that you might feel inside, from messing up in your marriage, work, family or any personal calling you have in life.

The church lets the Scripture speak on difficult subjects, not because we want negative media attention to make more enemies for ourselves in this world. The church lets the Scripture speak on difficult subjects because everything Scripture speaks about relates to Jesus and what He has done for us. Many people—many Lutherans, too—assume that all they will find in the Bible are clusters of rules to follow so that

God will stay happy with you. The religious leaders that Jesus criticized in Mark 7 believed that very same thing. Saint Paul had to correct many bad habits in the churches that he founded. But it was not because Paul wanted to establish a legacy for himself as an apostle, nor was it so that he could assert his so-called anti-female agenda on other unsuspecting mind-numbed robots. His first priority wasn't even to rescue and uphold the fabric of society, something we still desperately need today. He gave instructions, though, not only to husbands and to wives, but also to all men and women, including the unmarried and the no longer married, in truth because above all else he wanted to teach them Jesus.

Whether or not you have a husband or a wife, you are all Christ's holy Bride, the Church. He left His Father in heaven, and while on the cross He left His own mother in the care of His disciple, so that in death He would join Himself to you forever. Blood and water flowed from His pierced side to be the rib He would use to build a redeemed people founded on forgiveness in Baptism, Word and Holy Communion. Forever is, by the way, as long as you both shall live. This marriage is the only one like it. Your bridegroom lives triumphant and victorious over everything that is bothering and afflicting you now. And whatever good and blessed and powerful is His, it also now belongs to you as a kind of communal property. These blessings are for you, and also for those whose sinful lives are concerning you, and you pray for them. Yes, Jesus died for the homosexual and the transgendered, as well as the liar, thief, terrorist, and you. All sinners only need to hear His call to repent and believe in Him, trusting that He is all they need.

At times, it may not seem fair, since you cannot do what you want to do, and love has certain limits that must not be crossed. It may also not seem fair if one who seeks marriage cannot find a mate, or a lifelong partner has departed, or a couple joined with God's blessing cannot have a

child of their own. But for all of us, no matter what distinctive calling you and I have, the Apostle Paul reminds us, "The mystery of marriage is profound, because I am really talking about Christ and the Church." Jesus also assures us that although commandments of pious men won't ever help us, we still have His never-failing marriage promise to us that He is ours to have and to hold, in prosperity and in adversity, in sickness and in health, and not even death will part us.

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