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Holy Matrimony (II): Marriage As Redemption

All marriages suffer temptation and in various ways and degrees all marriages fall short of their vows. This is the human condition and the actual experience of Holy Matrimony, including (one might say especially in) Christian marriages.

But as our Lord wrought redemption for humankind, He also transformed the estate of marriage into another and higher form. We are made not only for the procreation of life, the cultivation of virtue, and the delights of sensual love. Holy Matrimony also becomes a way of redemption.

This is what I think St. Paul is getting at in that difficult passage in Ephesians where he writes about the submission of the wife and the love of the husband. If one reads the whole of this passage carefully within its context, one sees neither the severe subjugation of the woman to the man as existed in the Jewish world of Paul's day, nor the notion of an ordered household structured according to the pagan idea of the paterfamilias and the superiority of the husband's religious heritage and custom.

Rather there is an attempt to fill the natural union of husband and wife, a union which is afflicted by sin, with the grace that flows from Christ Jesus. It is His grace that enlivens the mutual will of husband and wife. Only from the heart can one voluntarily follow another's lead, and only from the heart can one give as Christ has given.

With the intention of Redemption, Christian marriage is an image of the Mystical Union between Christ and His Church. Holy Matrimony becomes a union that acts to free us from the natural tendencies of man, which in their tainted unhealthy forms tend toward egotism and domination.

Egotism and domination could well be the underlying problems that Paul addresses in his instruction to married couples. I would suggest that self-preoccupied egotism may be the husband's principal sinful inclination. And on the other hand domination may be the misguided natural tendency of the wife's motherly instincts. Each presumes the element of power, one peculiar to men, the other to women, which asserts itself toward the spouse.

In order to overcome the tendency to domination the wife is encouraged to imitate and image the Church that strives to serve the

Lord freely and with reverence. And in order to overcome selfish egotism, the Husband is instructed to imitate and image Christ who freely gave His life in love for the sake of the Church. Love is the counter balance to egotism, honor and reverence to domination. Only by the transformation of such distorted power into Christian freedom can marriage use its inherent energy for the purpose of blessedness.

This way of experiencing and appropriating redemption in marriage becomes the comprehensive purpose of Holy Matrimony. At the end of the marriage rite in the Book of Common Prayer, the theme of redemption comes fully into view with the final blessing. "God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Ghost bless, preserve and keep you; the Lord mercifully with His favor look upon you, and fill you with all spiritual benediction and grace; that ye may so live together in this life, that in the world to come ye may have life everlasting."

With such a perspective of redemption, marriage can catch "the little foxes that spoil the vines." And more than this, when the little things become menacing and monstrous in stature, the will to live within Christian freedom means that forgiveness and a deeper mutual obedience to the Lord are truly possible.

And so marriage can recover from greed and ambition and lust. Sins such as these are not necessarily and wholly destructive. The very same forgiveness with which we are reconciled to our Lord may be given and received in the bond of matrimony, if only we will.

And if we will, there is no greater witness to this wicked world than the true forgiveness that comes from love. And there is no more valuable lesson within the dynamics of a family than to admit failure and selfishness and to have these covered with the hard but courageous act of forgiveness and reconciliation. Everyone, spouses and children, can witness and feel the grace of God, and rejoice in Him!

It may be that a married couple comes all the way to that point where love is required for one who has made himself or herself unlovable. But then, that is precisely the case with God's love for us. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He is the love of God for us. In Him, "charity beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Charity never faileth."

It goes without saying that if we choose not to live within the redemption our Lord offers us, then we shall not offer His redemption to others. That is precisely the place in which we find ourselves today in the state of marriage. Forgiveness and the will to redeem are absent from the consciousness of many, even many of those who claim Christ as their Lord. There is, therefore, no spiritual strength within such marriages on which couples may draw to transform their behavior and to reconcile in peace. The simple fact is this. If one has not known the experience of forgiveness in Christ, one does not have the spiritual resources to offer the unconditional and sacrificial love that marriage demands.

That is precisely the state of marriage today. And from a universal and cultural perspective, we must recognize that the Episcopal Church has lost its understanding of the sacred trust of marriage. Divorce and remarriage are simply common events. This is not to deny that on rare occasions divorce is legitimate as the lesser of two evils. Nor is this to

forget and neglect those who have known the pain and failure of divorce. But it is to say that our married lives are meant to image the Mystical Union between Christ and the Church. And our understanding of this Mystical Archetype becomes altogether meaningless if we allow our sacred bonds to be made and unmade simply because we decide not to offer voluntarily the forgiveness and unconditional love that is the freedom of the Christian.

But in reality, despite the low esteem with which the Episcopal Church views the estate of Christian marriage, God will keep His sacred trust with us. The gates of Hell shall not prevail against the Bride of Christ. The union of Christ and His Church is a divinely ordained union that no man can put asunder. And so it is that the true estate of marriage, the image of the Mystical Union, will always provide a way of redemption for those who will appropriate His bountiful grace.

And so let us catch the foxes that spoil the garden, and say, in the words of the Song of Solomon, "Let us get up early to the vineyards; let us see if the vine flourish, whether the tender grape appear, and the pomegranates bud forth: there will I give thee my loves."

The Rev. Dr. Michael L. Carreker

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