

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church & 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 the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy & without blemish.

PRESENTING THE CHURCH

A man stops at a local discount store to buy oil & a filter for his car. While there he buys his wife a bouquet of flowers that are always on display near the checkout counter. During one trip, some women in line behind him were oohing & aahing about a husband getting flowers for his wife. “How often do you do that?” one of them asked.

Before the man could answer, the cashier, who was more than familiar with his routine, said, “Every three months or 3,000 miles, whichever comes first.” That information sort of removes the romance from the equation, doesn’t it? And in the mind of our culture romance trumps everything. Not even commitment should stand in its way.

Commitment is such a rigid strait jacket that today it can hardly be considered worthy of the idealistic concept of marriage that is prevalent. In America, marriage is supposed to be all about romance. Once the romance is gone the marriage is over, because for many people Jesus has no part in their concept of wedded life.

The sermon text from Ephesians paints an entirely different picture than the one so prevalent in our culture. As Paul writes to the church at Ephesus His concept of marriage is more like the “every three months or 3,000 miles” notion than the “romance is everything” version so common in the attitudes of people today:

“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church & gave Himself up for her...”

Maybe at first thought that doesn’t strike you all that hard, but consider what it is that Christ did

in order to love the church & give Himself up for her. He put aside His godly powers, & though He was God of God & Light of Light, Jesus took on human flesh, coming down from heaven to live in a world broken & corrupted by sin, populated by obstinate & disobedient people.

Men, have you ever felt like Jesus, like you've been sent into a household broken & corrupted by sin? Do you get frustrated by how Murphy's Law seems to take over & turn to drudgery the best laid plans? In those times when the romance has gone out of your life, God's design is that you love your wife & give yourself up for her in those very circumstances.

Wives, were you listening to the reading from Ephesians? "...submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord." Wow, talk about taking the romance out of a relationship. 50 years ago & longer it wouldn't have created too much of a stir, but in our day & age those are fighting words for much of our population.

There's a reason many people today have little fondness for the writings of St. Paul, but if people claim to believe in Jesus Christ they should realize that God's Word defines what 'believe' is to mean:

"For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, His body, & is Himself its Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands."

To believe in Jesus is to submit to Him, & God has designed the order of creation to include a wife's submission to her husband. Now God realizes that isn't a very romantic notion, but in a world where the majority of people are on the road to eternal suffering, hindsight will make it very clear that romance isn't the be all & end all of life.

Still, enough people have a difficult time submitting to Christ who is holy & perfect. It's not complicated to understand why submitting to a sinful husband is seen as a less than desirable

expectation. Husbands are called as leaders into households that are broken & corrupted by sin. Wives are called to submit to husbands that are far from the Christ-like figure they're supposed to be. That's the narrow context of today's Scripture reading from Ephesians. The broader context involves the order of salvation & God's great purpose for His church.

St. Paul is writing to inform us that we've been brought into a new relationship with our heavenly Father, by His Son Jesus. In fact that relationship has incorporated us into the body of Christ, & Scripture defines that as the one Holy Christian Church. That true church, consisting of all believers throughout time, is invisible to us, which complicates life greatly.

When called to love our wives & submit to our husbands, if they're Christians, God sees them as holy, even though we certainly don't. Our heavenly Father sees them as holy, & loves them, even when the romantic love is nowhere to be found. Falling in love, no matter how romantic, is not about hero worship. Marriage is a call to death & to resurrection.

Unfortunately, because we live in that broken & sinful world, the death part is all too clear to our physical eyes, once the romance fades. The resurrection part can only be seen with the eyes of faith, & that's why the institution of marriage belongs to God. He created it. He defines it. He sustains it.

If you're less than satisfied with your marriage, your problem is not the relationship with your spouse, but the relationship with your God. And since He's perfect & holy you know where that places the blame.

If the husband is struggling with giving his life for his wife, then his trust in God is not as strong as it should be. If the wife is struggling to submit to her husband then her trust in God is not as advanced as God wants it to be. Obviously then the entire system of marriage, as God designed it, is dependent upon both husband & wife turning to God for strength & faith. If they

do so, they will be able to love each other & fulfill the roles which our Father in heaven has given to us. The fall into sin disrupted His original intention & resulted in the all too familiar ‘battle between the sexes.’ Yet, our Father’s original plan is restored by His grace in Christ as Christian husband & wife live in communion with their Lord in His body – the Church.

After all, the Apostle writing to the Ephesians comes right out & says it, “Therefore a man shall leave his father & mother & hold fast to his wife, & the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is profound, & I am saying that it refers to Christ & the church.”

As the Biblical language puts it, marriage between a Christian man & woman reflects the relationship between Christ as the groom & the one true church as the bride. The wife is to submit to her husband as she submits to Christ, therefore we are to submit to Christ in all that we do here at St. Matthew Lutheran Church.

Likewise, as the husband is to love his wife & give himself up for her, so Jesus loves all of us in His church & gave up His life that we might experience the resurrection & thus life as our Father intended it when He created Adam & Eve perfect & holy. Generally speaking we are to submit to each other in humility & forgive each other in humility as well.

How that plays out specifically in each of our lives will depend entirely upon the individual circumstances of our lives. Given a million couples there are a million variations. Yet the overriding goal of life is that Christ “might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy & without blemish.”

So it is not just husbands & wives that, in humility, are to submit to one another, & to forgive each other. It is also members of the church who are to do the same & we are to keep in mind what Christ’s goal is whenever we are dealing with each other. Our heavenly Father wants everyone you see here to be presented to Himself in holiness, & without blemish. Are you

praying for each other? Are you concerned with the well-being of all the members of this community? Jesus said of the Pharisees, "...in vain do they worship me..." If here in this place we are only looking out for ourselves, then we too are worshipping our Lord in vain. God's Spirit works in us to build up the body of Christ in works of mutual love & service.

That's the business we are to be about, & our failures are too numerous to count. We find the good news of the Gospel not in how hard we work at submitting. Nor do find that good news in how much we work at giving ourselves up for each other.

As always, our hope lies in this: That Christ "might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing." Jesus is the One who takes action in order to save us from eternal death. His intent is that we live constantly in the freedom He won for us when He said, "It is finished!"

There's nothing we need to fear, so there's no reason for us to hold back from submitting to each other in love & humility. Our Lord is working all things together for the good of those who love Him, & He never stops working all things together. Christ has made us alive when we were dead in our sins.

Now we've been rebuilt on the foundation of the Apostles & Prophets with Jesus as the chief Cornerstone, in our marriages & in our congregation. And that building is still going on, day by day, week by week, year by year. "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

Marriage is an institution through which God loves & blesses His people, therefore the husband's headship is not a self-earned right to exert authority, but rather a God-given responsibility to love, through thought, word & deed, even if the romantic aspect of love is not there at the moment. Needless to say, submission & love are not easy to practice, even for

Christian couples. So God continues to forgive, sustain & preserve them & the entire Church, through His Word & Sacraments. As we remain connected to the Vine He will work in us to bring life out of death, & to bear the fruits of His Spirit.

Christ exercises His lordship by submitting to our evils & ills, by going to the cross under the weight of our sins. Exercising dominion according to Gods' model means to serve, to become a slave to that which God has given us to take care of.

The most dramatic example of the Bible's picture of marriage, as it describes the relationship between God & His people, is found in Hosea, where the prophet is called to marry a prostitute in order to demonstrate what kind of love God has for His disobedient people.

God joins us to Himself through the death of His Son which took place while we were not yet His bride but rather still caught in the whoredom of our sinfulness. Jesus takes us, as His bride, home to His Father, now our Father, & gives us a place at His table. We are one with Jesus in such a way that through His perfect humanity we finally become fully human.

What does it mean that Christ has chosen us to be His bride, to be presented to Himself? It means that He knowingly chose us while we were obstinate & disobedient so that on Judgment Day He might present the church to Himself in holy splendor, without spot or wrinkle, that she might be sinless & truly human. It is an honor to be called a child of God. Amen.

The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord; she is His new creation by water & the Word. From heaven He came & sought her to be His holy bride; with His own blood He bought her & for her life He died. Amen.