

Proper 22 – The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost  
St. Mark 10:2-16

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

I can't help but think of a wedding sermon with today's text. After all, Mark recorded the words of Jesus thus: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.' So they are no longer two but one flesh." A man and a woman are being given to each other—they are a gift to each other—and they are being joined together. While there is mutual consent on the part of the man and the woman, it is interesting to note that they are each more recipient than giver. Let me explain: The woman gives herself to the man, but so does her Father, as does God; therefore, a man ought to see his wife as a gift from her, her father, and especially God, and the same is said of a woman with regard to her husband.

Scripture uses this image of husband and wife to describe how things are between Himself and His Church. St. Paul illustrated this beautifully in his letter to the Ephesians:

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 the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. (Ephesians 5:22-32)

So, while texts describing weddings and marriage are properly understood as referring to a man and his wife, in light of marriage as described by St. Paul, marriage texts should also be understood as that between Christ and His Bride, the Church, and you, Her members.

Also, for the third week in a row, you heard Jesus say, "Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (or something like it). So, once again, I'll repeat: little children are completely givable to. They can only receive and have nothing to offer toward their livelihood. They receive—and so they exemplify faith. I guess another quality of children that exemplifies faith, especially one that has been put into practice here these past few weeks, is that they often need to have things repeated to them.

There is an idea of wholeness the resonates in all of this. A man gives himself wholly to his wife and vice versa. Parents put the whole of their being and effort into being a parent—everything they do is for the sake of parenting. It's like you put the whole of your being into being someone else's someone. Think about it, when you are asked who you are, a big part of your answer is, "I am her husband," or, "I am his father," or the like.

At the same time being a husband or wife is a bigger thing than being a parent. Much bigger. Children leave their parents to join to their spouse. Furthermore, it's like a new life begins with marriage. Two become one flesh. A Roman Catholic priest at a wedding I attended once described it this way: you no longer just think of one of these two or the other; now that they're married, whenever you think of one of them, you automatically always think of the other. That's what marriage does; that's how the wholeness of this one flesh union finds an expression in the rest of the world.

So also should you think of the marriage between Christ and His Bride. Yes, Jesus is the enfleshed Second Person of the Holy Trinity, but by His life, death, and resurrection, He created for Himself His Church, fulfilling the narrative of God and His Chosen People. And, as St. Paul put it, He presented to Himself His Bride. Now, you ought not think of only Jesus alone, but Jesus and His Church.

And you, being a part of the Church, began a new life when you were made a part of the Bride. You were joined to Christ and made a child of God, the Father. Your wholeness is in Jesus, your Bridegroom and you are totally givable to by the Father of all mercies. St. Paul wrote, "I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2:20) Does that not sound like marriage to you?

Well, here's a beautiful illustration to help that along. Two of Jesus' last words from the cross help to paint the crucifixion as a wedding scene. Seeing John and His mother standing near the foot of the cross, He leaves His mother with the words, "Woman, behold, your son! Behold, your mother!" (John 19:26-27) Then, He left His Father crying out, "'Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'" He is joined to His Bride in His Death for Her, as He gave Himself to Her in order that He would present Her to Himself spotless and without blemish.

Now, all of this ought to be understood in the context of the frailty of this human flesh. Yes, husband and wife ought love each other and give wholly of themselves to each other, but does it always work that way? No, it absolutely never does. Individual expectations aren't met, blame is cast, and the relationship is harmed as a result. Pride and personal desire often get in the way of wholly given oneself to another. Loyalties are tested and pitted against each other. The result is imperfect and broken marriages and damaged children. The sickness of sin infects all, and propagates itself in these destructive cycles and tendencies.

It plays out, even more terrifyingly, in your life as a member of the Bride of Christ. Divided loyalties, pride, and personal desire lead to eternal destruction. Brought to their destructive end, when the Bridegroom returns to take His Bride to be with Him in eternity, the word from the Master is, "I do not know you." (cf. Matthew 25:12) No more frightening words can be uttered from the mouth of God at the End of Days. Deny your givable-to-ness, your reliance on Christ for your redemption and salvation, and at the Last, He will deny you. "[W]hoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 10:33)

So, how do you guard against that? Better, I say, it is to acknowledge that it exists in you, confess it, and be absolved of it. Nothing brings greater joy to the Bridegroom and His angels than that you repent of your sins and receive the forgiveness for which He gave Himself over to death. Jesus is most Bridegroom to you when He gives Himself to you and you receive Him for your forgiveness, life, and salvation—here in these words, in the words of Holy Absolution, in the waters of Holy Baptism, and in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

Where your love as a member of the Bride of Christ for Him wavers and fails, His love for you as your Bridegroom never does. He has given Himself wholly for you, that you would be wholly His. And as you are now wholly reliant on His grace, you receive that grace in order that you would be wholly His in eternity. For that day, by His mercy and grace, you wholly wait and hope, knowing that He has promised wholly to bring you through it to Himself. Dear Bride of Christ, rejoice! Your Bridegroom has come and is coming for you! He now gives Himself wholly for you, and you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.