

The Fourth Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Jeremiah 28:5-9

Romans 7:1-13

Matthew 10:34-42

There is a marvelous line in the Order of Holy Matrimony. It is marvelous because it is Biblical, marvelous because it is Christological, marvelous because it is full of divine grace and love and forgiveness and hope. You know this line. It is part of our cultural lexicon. Jesus spoke it. It comes very near the end of the liturgy for a marriage ceremony. It is the voice of God embedded in the service so that His will is the echo that lingers as the happy couple recesses down the aisle. Here is the line: “What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.” It is a quote from the Gospel of Matthew. “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (Matthew 19:4-6).

That needs to sink in a bit because it has some pretty expansive repercussions, and not just for marriage, but let’s start there. For most of us, marriage is not an endless sequence of emotional unicorns, Care Bear Rainbows, and Raisin Bran Suns with smiling faces. My wife is married to a sinner. Being married to a sinner, even a Christian one, can sometimes be the opposite of a picnic. But God joined us together – not Pastor Chamberlain, not the state of Oregon, not even Alise Delaine and Wiley James Sidney. God joined us together and He said that He doesn’t want anyone to rupture that union. So when I sin against my beauty, I repent and ask forgiveness and she forgives me (admittedly, sometimes it starts slowly, this forgiveness, but it always gains steam). I’m not to put this marriage asunder; neither she nor any other outsider is to do it either. Marriage is the living portrait of Christ and His bride, the church, and that union is unshakable, indissoluble, an eternal joining of the highest order.

Here’s a few other things that God has joined together that we are not to separate. Christ’s righteous suffering and death and the product of our forgiveness. Never separate those. Jesus paid the price for your sins – top to bottom. Your good works don’t generate forgiveness. If you want to find forgiveness and you ceaselessly look for it someplace other than Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, then you are an idolater, faithless, and you remain dead in your trespasses and sins. What God has joined together let not man separate. God has joined His Son’s atoning sacrifice to the means of grace which He instituted to deliver that sacrifice. You receive the benefits of Christ’s once-for-all historical work through the living Word, through the sacrament of Baptism, through Holy Absolution and through the Communion of His body and blood in the eucharist. You must never separate the cross of Christ and the means of grace. If you want to receive forgiveness and you look to something other than the Word and the Sacraments then you have made a grave error. God joined those things together. What God has joined together let no one put asunder. Here’s another – faith and good works – God has joined those together as well. Faith without works is dead (James 2:14). God has prepared good works for us to walk in (Ephesians 2:10). God Himself is at work in you, through your faith, through the Holy Spirit, to will and to act according to His good purpose (Philippians 2:13). We must not separate faith and good works. What God has joined together let no one put asunder.

Something more for you to perceive this morning, something to learn and inwardly digest is the inverse of that statement; the inverse of that statement is equally profound. You are to learn it in relation to the Gospel reading and Christ's words regarding peace. Our Lord speaks vividly: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). What? Jesus is the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:7). The angels declared peace at His birth (Luke 2:14). When the King of kings rose from the dead, He proclaimed peace to His disciples and then showed them His hands and His side (John 20:19). Listen again: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." A sword – conflict, enmity, discord, strife. There is a conflict among us. There is a conflict between belief and unbelief. We do not create this conflict. And we don't resolve it either. Here is the inverse statement that is equally true, equally profound: "What God has separated let man not join together."

St. Paul asks a rhetorical question, a question that may sharpen your mind. He asks: "What fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial" which is a reference to Satan (2 Corinthians 6:14-15). Answer? None. What God has separated let man not join together. Neville Chamberlain, Prime Minister of England attempted to work out a compromise with Adolf Hitler to avoid war. "Peace in/for our time!" Neville Chamberlain announced as he returned from the conference after having tried to appease evil, after he tried to disarm evil with concessions. It was the epitome of folly, dangerous and ill-conceived folly. Does Christianity compromise with evil to make the Lord Christ more palatable to the masses, more palatable to the enemies of the cross, to those who would silence the church's voice and remove Christianity from the public square? We do not have the authority to unsay what the Lord Christ has said.

God's ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8). He is at work in the conflict between good and evil to achieve His purposes. Sometimes this conflict breaks our heart. Jesus speaks about the conflict running right down the middle of a family. How can that not break your heart? Most of us have found ourselves in that conflict in one way or another. We have discovered that we cannot deny our Lord, cannot call evil good and good evil, cannot apologize for the truth. Faith sometimes doesn't follow a family tree. The result is difficult. God knows that pain. He longs for His people, all people. He sent His Son to claim them from death, from hell, from being separated from Him. In the Lord Christ, God and man were joined together and in Him they remain united. He did not abandon us when it came time to suffer and die. Those who tortured and killed Him, for them Jesus both prayed and bled. That love continues to call to all people – every language, tribe, and nation. Some will continue to love evil. They hide from the light. They refuse to repent. They spurn the Savior. The problem is not with good, not with light.

Here is the irony. The peace which we have with God, won for us by Jesus' death and resurrection, will result in conflict in this life. Our peace is with God, never to be undone. Our peace is in heaven. Our peace passes all understanding. Our peace is exceedingly deep and no earthly conflict can take it away from you. That sword Jesus speaks of – Do not think that I have come to bring peace, I have not come to bring peace, but a sword – Jesus suffered that sword to be plunged deeply into His flesh. In death, a Roman soldier thrust a lance into the side of God, bringing forth a torrent of endless grace – blood and water rushed from the side of the crucified King. That is the peace that rests upon you. The church is the bride of Christ, drawn from the side of her Bridegroom, as Eve was taken from the side of Adam. Our household is intact. The

family of faith is strong and true and growing the world over. God is achieving His purposes because all across this globe the Gospel is unleashed and the Holy Spirit adds to our number daily those who are being saved. It is our duty not to join together what God has separated. We do not join truth with lies. We do not join what is holy with what is profane. We do not mingle religions together into some syncretistic stew. We trust what God has done, we trust what God has said, we trust what God is doing. Why?

St. Paul tells us why. “Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, ‘For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.’ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:33-39). We relish having those tender words linger in our ears: “What God has joined together let no one put asunder.”