

Commemoration of Holy Matrimony ~ 60th Anniversary

Eugene and Nancy Fenton

Colossians 3:12-24

Luke 24:13-35

A courtship, a proposal... a ring, a vow, and a new life. Twin pronouncements pierced the air on April 2nd, 1961 in St. John Lutheran Church, Forest Park, IL. "Christ is risen" was echoed shortly thereafter by this never-before-uttered phrase: "Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Fenton." "And he who was seated on the throne said: 'Behold, I am making all things new'" (Revelation 21:5). Newness, perennial newness, comes striding out of the tomb on Easter. Life, crucified and risen, is the divine and eternal newness which God wills to give to sinners. Marriage was marvelously new on that early spring day in 1961 for Gene and Nancy. Life beckoned; Christ Himself bound them to each other, to Himself, and life beckoned. A courtship, a proposal, a ring, a vow, and a new life – marriage and Easter have been intertwined for this happy couple ever since.

Marriage is wholesome. Our culture is not particularly interested in what is wholesome these days, but Christ's church is. Man was created in such a way as to need another, someone so very like us but also so very different. The other – we give ourselves to the other, the one for whom we were created, the one who needs us. The man of the earth was alone in the Garden. God saw that it was not good for the man to be alone. A helpmate was crafted, the sublime Eve. Feasting his eyes upon God's good gift, the man was elated. "At last!" Bone of his bones, flesh of his flesh, but unlike anything that he had ever seen. "At last!" The two were genuinely one. God's design elevated each of them for they had the ability to give themselves to another – to love, to serve, to embrace. Be fruitful and multiply this gift that I have given you (Genesis 1:28). The beauty of marriage is in modeling Christ. The wholesomeness of marriage is in modeling Christ's bride, the church.

Life is difficult. There is no way one can be married for sixty years and not to have faced difficulty. The pastoral life is rewarding, to be sure, but it is not without heartache. There are challenges in raising children, challenges in marriage between sinners, challenges in growing old, challenges that come entirely out of left field – and who, humanly speaking, does one turn to? Adam failed Eve. He did not protect her. He failed to defend her against evil, against lies, against Satan's craft. Eve failed her husband. Eve abandoned Adam and chose herself. Sin infects our hearts, our minds, our choices. Marriage is no exception. Difficulty comes for one reason alone. But Adam is not only failure. Eve should not be known only for the fall. Our sin doesn't define us; forgiveness does. Christ's person, Christ's work, Christ's love; the union that defines marriage defines us.

"An excellent wife who can find?" (Proverbs 31:10). Is she sinless? No such thing. Faithful, loving, dependable, gracious to others, kind-hearted, quick to forgive, gentle in correction – what a wonder a good wife is! "The heart of her husband trusts in her; and he will have no lack of gain" (Proverbs 31:11). Gene gained. Gene gained confidence in himself by the love Nancy afforded him throughout these sixty years. Gene gained humility by the gentle-spirited woman who stood by his side as he served in Christ's stead. Gene gained a light heart as the former Miss Mohr found humor in life's twists and turns. An excellent wife Gene Fenton found. He

was smart enough to keep her. Humanly speaking, Gene turned to her when the demands of his office were pressing. Gene turned to her when deciding how to navigate parental waters. Gene turned to her when earthly allies were few. Nancy has loved her husband and has endeavored to submit to him as the church submits to Christ. An excellent wife, Gene has found.

Marriage is our soft place, a sanctuary of safety from the world. Two are better than one – so King Solomon writes. “For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!” (Ecclesiastes 4:10). Christ fell and was all alone. Bearing His cross to the place of the skull, the Lord who was in search of a bride fell beneath the weight of His burden. Crucified, blood pouring from His flesh, the Father gave His Son to the world. “This is my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased.” As Eve was brought from the side of Adam, so Christ’s bride would come flowing from His side. Death was the marriage proposal, a cross was the ring, and an empty tomb was the new life.

We all have been washed in Christ’s blood. Sin, with all of its deathly merit, soiled us to the bone. And God caused His Son to fall into a deep sleep and a soldier’s lance opened a place in His side, bringing forth a torrent of blood and water. “At last!” The crucified bridegroom could have exclaimed on Good Friday. “For the joy set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, despising the shame” because He was winning for Himself a bride (Hebrews 12:2). “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 with water through 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” (Ephesians 5:25-27). At His altar, His bride becomes one flesh with her Easter groom. Take, eat; take, drink – those are wedding words, Christ and His bride being united. Gene and Nancy crafted their marriage around Christ, His Words, His altar. That is a wholesome picture 60 years in the making. That is a union that has weathered the storms of life.

Gene was a trusted colleague of mine for many years. The reason I trusted him wasn’t because of his Chicago manner, wasn’t because of his good looks, it wasn’t because he produced a son who would push me in regard to election and free will in Bible class every chance he got (Paul!) – the reason I trusted Gene was because of His great love for Christ’s church. He protected her. Pure doctrine – that is how Gene protected Christ’s church. Parallel to that is Gene’s devotion to his wife. In love, Gene watched out for Nancy. Protected her by the sweat of his brow, gave her the fruit of his labor, saw to it that she had everything she needed – physically, emotionally. It is a joy to be a husband. It is a joy to reflect Christ, as meagerly as we do. It is a joy to see a woman flourish by virtue of a husband’s love. To love one’s wife as Christ loved the church is an art, it is the ballet of life, the dance of sacrifice and devotion that lifts us above the worldly muck of self-gratification. Gene has danced, giving himself to his Easter bride. Gene has danced, putting Nancy above himself, occupying himself with her needs.

Abide with us, stay with us – so said Cleopas and his unnamed companion to Christ. It was Easter and the Lord Christ “went in the to stay with them” (Luke 24:29). On Easter Sunday, 1961, Gene and Nancy said the same thing as they were married. Stay with us; and so He has. It is now the twilight of their marriage, fast falls the eventide, and the Lord is still with them, to bless, sustain, forgive, and direct. Jesus still opens the Scriptures to them and their hearts burn

with the glory of God in the face of Christ. Forgiveness, love, truth, heaven – a courtship, a proposal, a ring, a vow, and a new life – Christ and His church, Gene and Nancy Fenton.