

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER: GOOD SHEPHERD SUNDAY

John 10:1-10

Married Life

The relationship between a pastor and a congregation is a lot like a marriage. An arranged marriage, of course: the Lord Jesus Christ, Bridegroom of the Church, His Bride, doesn't want just any hireling taking care of His Bride's less pretty sisters, the visible churches in which the invisible Church is made manifest. And just as an arranged marriage isn't something rushed into lightly, it isn't something gotten out of easily either.

In the beginning, the marriage is usually a joy. Pastor and church are newlyweds. They still dress up for each other, whisper sweet nothings, go the extra mile to do the little things that fuel the puppy love that fills their hearts. Perhaps they even gush about each other to friends and family. "Oh, you have to see my church." "Oh, you have to meet my pastor."

But then something happens. The pastor stops hiding his gray hairs and the church doesn't wear as much makeup anymore, and they wake up one morning and think, "This isn't who I married. This person has flaws. This person's breath stinks. This person ate the last piece of pizza and didn't toss his socks in the hamper. This person tells the same stories over and over again and doesn't listen to anything I say." And puppy love melts into annoyance. And gushing turns to grumbling. And the marriage isn't quite the walk on a beach it was before. And the rings feel tighter, and the house seems smaller, and the sprightly Bach playing in the background dials into the blues. And you know what? That's when love starts. That's when the real marriage begins.

But the honeymoon is nice, isn't it? You betcha. Sure is. But when it ends, it isn't time to look for a new honeymoon with a new spouse. No, it's time to get down to the nitty-gritty of life together under Christ and to form in that a bond no honeymoon could ever produce. It's precisely when the new car smell wears off that the engine starts revving, when God speaks, not to the quick growth that is here today and withers tomorrow, but to the roots laid by His love that brought us together in the first place, and reminds us that every Christian marriage, whether between man and woman or pastor and church, is a cord of three strands, as Solomon reminds us. That's when the rubber hits the road on the benediction that is our second lesson (Hebrews 13:20, 21).

After Luther died, the marriage, so to speak, between Lutheran pastors and people was put to a serious test. Were pastors willing to suffer for the gospel, and for their people, as Roman Catholic authorities invaded their territories and tortured, banished, and even martyred faithful preachers? Were the people willing to suffer for the gospel, and for their pastors, when new papistic preachers were hoisted upon them together with the threat of punishment should they not receive such Roman preachers with open arms. Many fell away, but some fell in love.

Matthias Flacius, a personal hero of mine and a man whose work Pastor Kuske and I have been translating, wrote to the pastors placed in such a quandary:

The shepherds are also not permitted to withdraw from their sheep-pen so quickly when they refuse to give certain little sheep to the wolf to appease him... They are to remain as long as their flock has not driven them away. The shepherds should in this way prefer to suffer injury from the wolves as they gather and guard their little sheep rather than to become mute watchdogs, or to flee, or to give the wolves some little sheep today, some again tomorrow, in order to stave them off in that way. They should consider that Christ's sheep are entrusted to them, just as children are entrusted to parents, citizens to the authorities, a wife to her husband, the Church to Christ.

No one said marriage was easy, but marriage is for life, and pastor and people must approach it that way, and there was no greater love they could show, one to another, than to both suffer for their True Love, Jesus Christ, who had given them to each other to begin with. And while many didn't, some did, and we are the heirs of their marriage, of their faithful love, born not of emotions, but of unwavering commitment to one another and to Christ.

So you didn't brush your teeth. So I didn't pick up my socks. You're my people. I'm your pastor. I have to love you, and you have to love me, that is, if we love Christ. We're stuck with each other, makeup on or off. And, really, it's when the makeup's off that we really get to know each other. It's when we confess our sins, receive forgiveness, and set out on yet another fresh start that we're really living the marriage patterned for us by Christ.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. A stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.”

There are wolves all around us. They want to devour our souls, even if they have to gnaw on our flesh to get to the filling, that they might also consume our bodies in the resurrection. Thieves abound, eager to steal what belongs to God alone. And all we have is each other as we gather under the cross. So there are going to be times I shove you back into the pen, even when you'd rather wander about in the pasture.

So, my dear ones, there are going to be times when I tell you to flee, even when you think I'm just being an alarmist. Why? Because I can only shepherd as my Shepherd has taught me to do so, and that means that before I'll let the wolves get to you they are going to have to chew on some of this fat first, and I pray my heavenly Father that this fat gives them indigestion that burns like the hell to which they belong and gas that reeks like the sulphur that is their inheritance. We're what we've got as we gather around the cross—this marriage of ours—and how dare we let some wolf or thief rob us of it.

There have been and there are going to be times I think some not so nice things about you, my dearly beloved, sometimes I've even speak such things to God or a brother in the Ministry, as if you were my burden and not my joy. Forgive me. And I pledge my forgiveness to you, for your thoughts, for your words. That's part of marriage, you know. Letting go and taking hold. Letting go of grudges and taking hold of forgiveness. Letting go of anger and taking hold of contentment. Letting go of frustration and taking hold of patience. Jesus taught us that, when wed Himself to us by His incarnation, when He gave Himself to the wolves in our stead, laying down His life for His sheep, when He dressed us in His righteousness in Holy Baptism, and when He threw for us the upper room feast that is His Supper. And He still washes those robes of righteousness when we stain them through His Absolution. And He still sets a plate for us at the feast, feeding us His Body and Blood that the wolves might never feast on us. Because that's what a husband does for His bride. May we drink that love so deeply that we can't help but overflow with it for one another. And I'll tell you what, we'll both take out the garbage today. We'll leave it at the foot of the cross. Amen.