

August 26, 2018

Ephesians 5:22-33:

“A Profound Mystery”

*Pilgrim Lutheran Church
2155 North Oakland Avenue
Decatur, Illinois 62526*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our epistle lesson for this morning we have **A Profound Mystery** (5:32) that refers to Christ and the church. It is important for us to understand how Paul uses the word “mystery.” In his commentary on *Ephesians*, Thomas M. Winger writes: “A mystery is something that was once hidden in the mind of God, but has now been disclosed through the revelation of Jesus Christ to his apostolic messengers [and to us through them].” A “mystery” is great and full of insight. It is profound - full of depth. Whenever Paul uses “mystery” in *Ephesians*, it necessarily takes us to Jesus. In our text, we discover that the mystery is attached to marriage, which “implies that *Christ* was once hidden in marriage and is now visible.”

Paul quotes Genesis 2:24 in our lesson (5:31), “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh,” but then he states in the next verse, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” The physical act of marriage points to a higher spiritual reality. Since marriage is considered to be the highest physical relationship of oneness that two people can have, the person and work of Jesus reveals to us that, by its very design, marriage illustrates the relationship that Christ desires to have with us in a spiritual sense; namely, he wants us to be his eternal companion, his wife. As Winger points out, the whole idea of a man and woman becoming “one flesh” in Genesis was designed to teach about “Christ’s sacrificial love for the church and the church’s corresponding submission to his saving work [that he might present us to himself in splendor]. The mystery is ‘great’ not because it is unusually difficult, but because its content (the Gospel of Jesus Christ) is so significant.”

Of course, in no way would we ever see marriage as a Sacrament like the Roman Catholics do, for it does not impart life in heaven. Nevertheless, in the garden, Adam and the woman were supposed to eat from the tree of life, who is Christ, and would have been united with him in an even higher relationship that they could have had with one another. Instead, they chose to reject this and thereby united themselves to death. God knew that they would do this very thing, as any one of us would have done the same, and so all future generations are united to death. But, in this fallen world marriage goes on, we are allowed to go on, and hidden in marriage is Jesus and his desire to still have his bride, the church forever. The occasion of our fall into sin has given our Lord and Savior the opportunity to show to us the full extent of his love.

There are two passages that I would like to set in front of you, and then some words from an outstanding Lutheran theologian to tie them together. We see the extent of the love of Jesus for us on the cross. John writes: “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe (John 19:33-35).” In his first epistle John comments: “For there are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree . . . Whoever believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself . . . And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:7-8, 10a, 11).” In *The Church*, Kurt E. Marquart observes:

Given the reference to Genesis 2 in *Ephesians* 5:31, one may at least draw attention to the parallel between the creation of Eve and the “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17) of the church. As

Adam's bride was taken out of his side while he slept, so the Second Adam's Bride is brought into existence by means of spirit, the water, and the blood (1 John 5:8), which correspond verbatim to what issued from His sacred body when He began his three days' sleep of death (John 19:30, 34).

Hidden in marriage, what Satan has distorted and destroyed by chauvinism, feminism, sexual immorality, divorce, and loneliness, is the Gospel of Jesus which is the love he has for his woman, the church. Despite our fall into sin, he willingly goes to the tree of the cross to become a tree and fruit for sinful humanity that we might eat and have life again - and thereby become his eternal companion. We taste this reality by faith in the Lord's Supper. As the first woman was from the side of Adam, so are we re-created from the side of Christ to be sanctified, declared holy and to be made holy. In our text, the apostle Paul especially focuses in on our re-creation in the renewing waters of Baptism where he writes, "having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word." The groom wins his wife by doing what Adam failed to do. Jesus presents "the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish," as Paul writes.

A Profound Mystery! Jesus wants us to be with him forever in a relationship that is like a marriage, only a perfect, spiritual marriage of divine love. He has in mind for us a destination, and that destination is to be his Bride, as it is clearly indicated to us in Revelation 19:7b-8, where John hears what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude: "Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted to her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure, for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." Our destination is to be with the Lamb and to see him as he is, to be his companion, and live with him bodily in divine love in the new heaven and earth.

Notice the similarities of Revelation 19 and Ephesians 5. There is a mighty emphasis placed upon the Bride being "clothed with fine linen, bright and pure," and the church being "without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish." Jesus is holy and his bride is to be holy as they live in holiness forever. The bridal idea calls the church to the highest standards of fidelity and submission to her husband and Lord that he may, not only cleanse her, but keep her clean. He makes her free from sin, death, and Satan, and preserves her from any vain attempts to justify herself by attempting to observe the Law and work her way into heaven. As the Lamb cleanses his Bride, it motivates her to strive to do what is right and overcome her desires to be faithless.

In *New Testament Nuptial Imagery*, Richard A. Batey states: "The free acceptance of divine love, which wills that which is best for the church, brings about unanimity of will and purpose . . . To surrender herself to a Lord who loves her with sacrificial love is the way to liberation. The dialectic between freedom and submission is adequately conveyed by the Bride image." Those are fairly lofty words, but very meaningful. If we wish to be free from sin, death, and the devil, then such liberation means that we desperately desire to rid ourselves of the ability to say "no" to Jesus. We want to submit to holiness, life, and Jesus alone. As we consider this spiritual reality, we then begin to understand what that means for a truly Christian marriage, or for that matter, the way that men and women are to interact.

In our text, Paul writes some words that this generation sneers at, but when understood correctly, in light of the gospel of Christ, they are not so bad:

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.

What Paul is saying is truly remarkable. Christ died for the church that he might sanctify her and present her to himself in splendor. The church willingly submits to such cleansing. In marriage, it is the duty of every husband to sacrifice himself in every way to keep his wife from sin, and more broadly, it is the service of every male to care for and want only what is good for every female, as it says before our text, we are "subordinate to one another in the fear of Christ." We have the example of Jesus who nourishes and cherishes his bride; that is, he gives her only what is good and cares for her so much that he willingly dies for her. In the garden, Adam should have loved the woman, even before he had named her, to care and protect her from the evil one and point her to the good tree of life.

Consider it in another way. It's the same idea when Jesus stoops down and washes the feet of his disciples. Shall the church submit to such a cleansing, or refuse such sacrifice? Our pride says "refuse!" much like Peter did by saying to Jesus, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Peter abruptly changes his mind and willingly submits to the washing. And who wouldn't? For all who submit to Christ have a share in him. Winger writes:

Ephesians 5 not only contains a most remarkable restoration of the original institution and purposes of marriage as a blessing to man and wife in this life, but it also transcends the earthly blessings by revealing the mystery of the Gospel hidden in every marriage, if husband and wife would have the eyes of faith to discern it. For each day as the husband loves his wife in a thoroughly self-sacrificing way, he proclaims Jesus Christ to her and likewise to himself as he puts to death the old man and emerges in the image of Christ. And each day, as she submits to his love, as she entrusts herself to him, as she respects his headship, she learns ever more the nature of faith and sees the contours of Christ's redeeming sacrifice in the Christlike figure God has placed into her life. In this way marriage is for the Christian couple a very holy thing.

Indeed! **A Profound Mystery!** It's nothing to sneer at!

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott