

A Wedding Sermon

Song of Songs 2:10-13 and 8:6-7

Psalm 127

Revelation 21:1-7

Mark 10:6-9

For Paul Hunter and Christina Vance



I am honored to preach this morning for the wedding of two of my former students, both of whom I am exceptionally fond. Although faculty do not have favorite students, if they did, Christina and Paul would have been two of my favorite students when they were at Trinity School for ministry, where I teach.

I want to make just a few comments about the lectionary readings, beginning with the gospel. The gospel reading points back to the creation narratives of the first two chapters of Genesis, the first book in the Bible. The context is that Jesus is being asked about whether divorce is ever permissible, and he responds by quoting the 2nd chapter of Genesis: "From the beginning of creation, God made them male and female. Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife. So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt. 19:4-6; Gen. 2:24) The Bible begins with marriage. In Genesis 1 we are told that God said, "Let us make the human being in our image, after our likeness. . . . So God created the human being in his own image, in the image of God

he created him; male and female he created them.” (Gen. 1:26-27) The first chapter of the Bible tells us that to be a human being is to be created in the image of God, and to be created in the image of God is to be male or female. It is only as male and female together that we as humans reflect what it means to be created in God’s image.

In Genesis 2, we are told that God created woman because the first human being was alone, and needed a partner. “Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the human being should be alone.’” (Gen. 2:18) In Hebrew, the word for “human being” is *ha’adam*, which is the same word as the name “Adam.” The English language has historically not made a distinction between human being and male human being. English often uses the word “man” for both. But Hebrew does use different words for generic “human being” and “male human being.” The Hebrew word “ha’adam” does not mean male human being, but simply “human being.” It is only when God brings the woman to the human being – to Adam – that we first find the use of the word for “man” or “male human being” in the Hebrew text: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she called be called woman, because she was taken out of man.” (Gen. 2:24) It is only when the female human being – the woman – comes into the picture that the original human being is recognized as a male human being – a man.

The point is this, both Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 make it clear that men and women are made for each other, and what it means to be a human being is defined by our relationship to other human beings. Those of us who are men – male human beings – are human beings only as we are in relation to women – female human beings. Women – female human beings – are human beings only as you are in relation to us – male human beings. God intended us to be with one another, and marriage makes this clear. It is marriage that is the foundation of all other human relationships. As human beings, we are not meant to be alone; we are not human beings alone, but only with one

another. So the first thing that marriage teaches us is that human beings need one another. We are made to be together.

The second passage I want to look at is the reading from the Song of Songs. The Song of Songs is basically love poetry. In the reading, the lovers address one another in the direct personal language that lovers use. They speak to each other as "I" and "you": "My beloved speaks and says to me, 'Arise my love, my beautiful one and come away . . . Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm, for love is strong as death.' " (Song of Songs 2:10; 8:6) In his book, *The Four Loves*, C.S. Lewis says that the unique characteristic of erotic love is that it is a love in which the lovers look to one another. Lovers are face to face. They look into each other's eyes. Lovers do not want some thing. What they want is some one. And so the language of marriage is the language of I and of You. Marriage is inherently personal in that it is the archetype of a relationship that looks to that other person as another person, and who always addresses that person as "You." Those who study such things tell us that the greatest cause of the failure of marriage is lack of communication. When husbands and wives stop speaking to each other as I and You, and begin distancing themselves, and they find the other person becoming "he" or "she" rather than "You," marriages fail.

So the second thing that marriage teaches us is what it means to be persons. For you to be a person is to be someone whom I care for and address as "You." For me to be a person is to be someone whom you as an "I" care for and address as "You." Marriage teaches us to treat each other as persons, and not as objects as things – not someone or something we talk about, but someone we speak to, and who, in turns, addresses us. There is a helpful illustration of what this difference means. When we are talking about someone in their absence, and suddenly that person enters the room, the conversation changes. We can no longer talk about someone as "he" or "she"

when that person is present. He or she now becomes "you."

My next point depends on the passage from Revelation. As the first chapter of the Bible begins with marriage, so the last chapter of the Bible ends with marriage. The Revelation passage states, "And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.'" (Rev. 21:2-3) The very next chapter, the last chapter in the Bible, continues with this bridal imagery: "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty, come.' And let the one who desires take the water of life without price." (Rev. 22:17) One of the really interesting things about the Bible that makes it very different from pagan religions is that the Bible makes marriage a symbol or type of God's love for his people, and of our love for God. Pagan religions don't do that. In the Old Testament, the imagery is that of God's love for the people of Israel, and in the New Testament, the imagery is that the church is the bride of Christ. In the book of Ephesians, Paul takes the Genesis imagery and applies it to the church: "Husbands love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Paul quotes the Genesis passage about a man leaving his father and mother to become one flesh with his wife, and says: "This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church." (Eph. 5:25-33)

So the third thing that marriage teaches us is that marriage has something to say about the relationship between God and the church. God loves human beings, and in particular, he loves the church in the way that husbands love their wives, or at least the way that they are supposed to love their wives. Jesus showed his love for us by dying for us. And in the same way, we as human beings are made to love God in something like

the way that a human couple loves one another. This means that God addresses us as "You," and in turn, we are asked to respond by addressing God as "You." So this third point is that this "I-you" relationship that lovers have with each other is also supposed to be our relationship with God. Indeed, it is founded on our relationship with God. It is because God addresses us as "You" that we can address others as "You."

The Christian God is not a "what" but a "who." In fact, if we take the Christian doctrine of the Trinity seriously, the Christian God is not a single "who," but three "who's," three persons. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that from all eternity, God is love. In the Western understanding, the love between the Father and the Son is expressed as the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of creation teaches that the three-personal God made a universe to share this love with others: "Let us make the human being in our image." (Gen. 1:26) And the doctrine of the church says that the church is the bride whom Jesus Christ loves so much that he gave his life on a cross to redeem her. It should not be surprising then that so many mystics have used the language of marriage to describe the relationship between God and us. The Song of Songs says that "love is as strong as death." (Song of Songs 8:6) What the gospel teaches us is that God's love for us is stronger than death, stronger even than Jesus' own death on a cross.

An interesting consequence of this understanding of the correspondence between human marriage and Christ's relationship to the church as his bride is the way that Reformation churches have come to understand the function of marriage as a form of spiritual formation. In the Middle Ages, monasticism, a life of celibacy, was understood to be the highest form of spirituality. After the Reformation, spiritual writers like the Anglican priest George Herbert began to talk of marriage as a way to teach us to love God. The Christian family came to be understood as a kind of domestic

monasticism. Marriage became the context in which a husband and a wife and their children became formed in their love for God.

That leads us to the Psalm. Psalm 127 focuses on children, who are the normal outcome of marriage: "Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord." (Psalm 127:3) Children are indeed a blessing, and the church, above all places should be a place where children are welcome. Perhaps the most important thing that children teach in marriage is that the I-You relationship of marriage is not enough. Marriage is a relationship that needs to reach beyond the relationship between the man and the woman. When a child comes into a family, a husband and wife no longer look just to each other, as in the reading of the Song of Songs, but to another, to this new person. Looking again to C.S. Lewis's book, *The Four Loves*, Lewis distinguishes between Eros, a love in which the lovers look to each other, and Friendship – a love in which people share a common vision, not just looking to each other, but looking together to a common interest. Eros is a love in which two persons love one another. Friendship is a love in which two persons share a common love for someone or something else. Not all marriages are blessed with children, but I would suggest that in all marriages, the couple need to reach that point where they look beyond themselves to share a common vision – to share the love they have for each other with others as well. The couple in a marriage need to have a common care; if their marriage is to prosper, they need to love something and someone else as well. In the case of Paul and Christina, that something else already exists. Their marriage is grounded in a common love for God and his church and a common mission to the church as God's people.

So to summarize, marriage has something to teach all of us, not only those of us who are married, about what it means to be human, about what it means to love one another, about what it means to love the triune God and be loved by Father, Son,

and Holy Spirit, and about what it means for us to share God's love with others. Marriage teaches us that we need each other – that we are not meant to be alone. Marriage teaches us that we need to recognize and treat one another as persons, not as objects, as others that we address in love as "You," and who, in turn, address us as "You." Marriage teaches us that all our relations as persons are grounded in God's own love, the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the three-personal God who created us, of the Son of God who became a human being as one of us, who died on a cross, and who conquered death for us that the church might be his bride. Finally, marriage teaches us that this love that God has shared with us in Christ is a love that is productive, a love that reaches out and shares the love that God has shared with us with others as well.

I conclude by giving my good wishes to Paul and Christina – that you may grow in love for one another, that you may learn to love and to trust God throughout your marriage in good times and in bad, that your marriage will bless others. To the rest of us, both married and single, that we might learn from Paul's and Christina's example. May we learn to love one another as Christ has loved us; may we love Christ as he has loved us; may we share that love with others who may not know that God is love, may we allow God's love for us to bless others. Amen.