

### ***This Mystery Is Profound***

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Today's Epistle lesson from St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians is one of the most misunderstood and (as a result) despised passages of Holy Scripture. "Wives, submit to you husbands? Why, that's patriarchal! It's misogynist! It's downright evil! Surely it can't apply to Christians living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century!" I've heard people say things like this. You have too. In response, I'll admit to the first accusation. It is patriarchal, decidedly so. But in no way can it be described as misogynist. God doesn't hate women. He loves them. So do most men. We love our mothers our wives our sisters and our daughters. We love our aunts and our grandmother's too. As to the charge of being evil, you can only say that if you accuse God of being evil; and I don't think you want to go there. And as to whether these words apply to Christians today, let me say this: the Word of the Lord stands forever. It doesn't change. So, rather than resist and rebel against the Word of God, let's try to understand it.

What Paul describes in this passage is God's design for marriage: the way things are supposed to be between a husband and a wife – which is the first and most foundational of all human relationships. It's the center and source of the human family, and consequently of all other human relationships. By extension it is the source of human government, which was originally organized by family, clan, and tribe. So, even if you are not presently married (and don't discount the possibility that you may be one day), it's still important that every one of us understand and support the institution of marriage the way God designed it to be.

In the process of gaining this understanding, let us do so boldly and without apology. In the wake of radical feminism and modern egalitarian thinking, I've heard too many pastors and teachers back down and try to explain why these inspired words of Holy Scripture don't really mean what they very clearly say. It's both cowardly and dishonest. No. Let God be true and every man a liar. Let's stick to what *he* says and abide by it.

Start at the beginning: in the first chapter of Genesis, we read how on the sixth day, as the crown and capstone of his creation, God made man in his own image. "In the image of God he created him [singular], male and female he created them [plural]." The man first, the man and the woman together second; but something about them was a reflection of God himself.

Now, being Lutherans, we ask that most Lutheran of questions: What does this mean? What does it mean that humankind was "made in the image of God"? It can't be in the sense of physical appearance because God is spirit and such has no physical appearance. Nor can it be in the sense of many other of the attributes of God: he's everywhere present, all knowing, all powerful, never changing, transcending time – without beginning or end. None of those apply to us. Some have suggested that it has to do with having intellect and the ability to reason; but angels can do that, and yet they weren't made in God's image; only humans were.

But there is one essential quality of God that mankind was designed to reflect. God is love. And mankind was made to love like God does. And when we speak of love in a biblical sense, we aren't talking the about those warm fuzzy feelings of affection that we usually call love. Those feelings are great; but they aren't love. No, godly love is voluntary self-sacrificial devotion. It's not a feeling; it's a decision, a commitment. Love is willingly denying the self and putting the object of your love first. What matters most is not me, but you: your good, your

needs, your wellbeing. And I will do whatever is necessary to ensure them for you – even if it costs me my life. Jesus said, “Greater love has no one that this: that he lay down his life for his friends.” God is that kind of love. And he made humans to be like him in that way.

We see this in the way he made the first married couple, Adam and Eve. First the Lord hunkers down in the mud and forms Adam from the dust of the earth. When he’s got him all put together and shaped just right, he leans in and breathes into him the spirit of life. The man becomes a living person. But he’s all alone. And God says that isn’t good. Why? Because it doesn’t reflect his image. God is multiple persons, three to be precise, who are in communion with each other, sharing the same divine essence. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – they love each other. And the man has no one like himself to love. So God makes one for him. But note the way he does it. He doesn’t get back into the mud and shape her from the soil. Instead, he causes a deep sleep to come upon Adam, and while he sleeps the Lord does a little surgery. He removes a part of him from his side. And with what he takes from the man, the Lord fashions the woman. She is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh.

Doing it this way, the Lord is revealing something about himself, about the mystery of the Holy Trinity. It’s an image of the relationship between God the Father and the Son. The Father is the Father because he begets the Son; that is to say, he takes his own divine essence, that spiritual substance that makes God God, and sacrificially gives it for the Son’s existence. In this way the Father loves the Son. He gives himself for him. So they are two persons sharing the same divine essence. And understand this is an eternal thing. It’s always happening and it always will because God is always love.

The creation of the woman from the man reflects this. As the Father gives himself for the Son, so the man gives part of himself – part of his very substance – for the woman. With God it’s 100%; with the man it’s much less, but that’s because it’s only an image. God is the reality. Mankind was made to reflect God’s reality. But now the man and the woman are two persons, but together they are united by God in marriage to be one flesh. Two persons, one human essence – as the Father and Son are two persons, one divine essence. And, as the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son sharing their divine essence, so from the man and the woman united proceed offspring that share their human essence, their flesh and blood. So, we see the human family is an image of the Holy Trinity. As Paul says, “This mystery is profound.

There’s more. In the creation of the woman from the man we are given a second image: that of Christ and his bride, the Church. When God wanted to make a bride for the first man, Adam, he put him into a deep sleep, opened his side, and took out what he used to make her. When God makes a bride for Christ, the second and more perfect Adam, he does the same thing. He puts him into a deep sleep: the deepest sleep of all – death on a cross. And while he sleeps, his side is opened. There’s an outpouring of water and blood. And Christ has given all for his bride. Not just a rib, but himself entirely: his body on the cross, his Spirit when he breathed his last, his last Word of mercy, “Father, Forgive them”, the water and blood that poured from his side. And with the Spirit the water and the Word he gives birth to the bride in Holy Baptism, and with the Word, the Spirit and the body and blood he feeds and nourishes her unto life everlasting. Thus Christ continues to give himself completely for his bride, the Church. This is how he loves her.

And this, Paul says in today’s Epistle, is how husbands are to love their wives: as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her. A man should love his wife as his own body, because united as one in marriage that’s what she is: his own flesh – part of his own body (I

daresay the better looking part of it, too). He is to defend her. Care for her. Provide for her. Nourish and cherish her – as Christ does the Church. For Jesus, the Church *is* his own body. That's why we call it the body of Christ. And so a Christian man is to see and treat his wife the same way.

He is called to give himself sacrificially for her. That may mean making the ultimate sacrifice: to die in her defense. That's why traditionally it's men who go to war and face down threats of violence. It's their job to do. But short of that, he is to live sacrificially for her: placing her needs, her good, and her wellbeing before his own. A man who manages that is hard not to love in return.

But the love she is to give in return reflects a different reality. Where he is called to sacrifice himself, she is called to sacrifice her will. She is to submit to his authority. In doing so, she is not alone. The Father gives himself for the Son. That's how he loves him. The Son can't give himself back to the Father to express his love. That won't work. Instead, he surrenders his will. That's his sacrifice. "Not my will but yours be done, Father". Yes, even the eternal Son keeps the Fourth Commandment. He honors and obeys his Father; but that does not make him any less God. They are equal in majesty and glory; but not in authority. In the Holy Trinity there is a chain of command. Every organization needs one.

So it is also in the Church, the body of Christ: he's the head. We take our orders from him, gladly submitting ourselves to his authority. Our goal is to follow and obey his will. That's a good thing. His will is good and perfect and right. Our wills are corrupted by sin. The desires of our hearts are evil. But in giving himself for us, in washing us in Baptism, in giving us his Spirit, by his Word, his body, and his blood he is in the process of transforming our sinful wills to conform to his, that he may present the Church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. Though he is God in flesh, he does not see us as anything less than himself because we are one with him.

In the same way, a Christian woman is not anything less because she submits to the will of her husband. She is instead reflecting the image of God: of the Son who submits to the Father. She is reflecting the Church that Christ died to save; the Church who submits to his authority. She is submitting to God who has ordained a chain of command in the family that places the husband at the head. Now, this does not mean she cannot express her will or make her feelings known or offer suggestions that she thinks will be helpful. Christ prayed "If there's any other way, Father, let's do that." But there wasn't another way to save us. So he did his Father's will – as difficult as that was for him. And sometimes submitting to the will of her husband will be difficult. That's a sacrifice she's called to make.

But she makes it knowing that he has been given authority over her precisely because God is holding him accountable. His authority comes from God who expects him to exercise leadership for the good of his wife and children. He is not an autonomous dictator who makes up his own rules and seeks to be served. No, he is to lead his family in keeping God's commands, in doing God's will, in pursuing spiritual purity and holiness. This is the charge he's been given. And he knows that one day he will be called to account for his stewardship of those the Lord has placed under him. That's a fearful responsibility he bears, one that his wife does not share. Therefore in love a godly wife supports rather than resists her husband's authority.

This mystery is profound indeed – how the Holy Trinity, Christ and his Church, and God's institution of marriage are all related. But I've been talking about ideals: the way God designed things to be in marriage and family life. Obviously in this fallen world we always fall

short of God's ideal. Every married couple consists of two sinners who by nature seek to serve self rather than their partner. He doesn't want to give of himself, he is hesitant to lead as he should, and she doesn't want to surrender her will to his. But here in the Church, by God's grace and through faith in Christ, we are not just sinners. We are also saints, forgiven of our sins, declared righteous by God, and being sanctified daily, equipped and prepared to do God's will. So we confess our faults one to another. The glue that holds the Church together is the forgiveness of sins. And the same is true of every good and godly marriage: husbands and wives who practice the art of forgiving each other their sins: their sins against each other *and* their sins against God in failing to pursue and attain his ideal for a proper marriage. They can only do that, though, if they know what God's ideal is and strive to attain it.

The world has other ideas about marriage. It makes it a struggle for power, for getting one's way, for forcing one's will. It makes it a competition rather than a partnership; a battle between oppressor and victim. It makes for marriages that are desperately unhappy and that don't last.

Anecdotally, I have noticed that the happiest and most successful marriages are those in which both husband and wife are striving for the divine ideal – the ideal that reflects the very image of God and that of Christ and his bride, the Church. May God our Father in his grace and mercy help us to strive for his ideal, forgive us when we fail, and help us to show forth in our lives the superiority of this profound mystery that is wedded love and faithfulness according to God's design. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***