

A Match Made in Heaven

In the name of him who bids us “Take up your cross and follow me”, dear friends in Christ: Ah, the things people say at weddings. “They are such a lovely couple.” “They’re perfect for each other.” “They were *made* for each other.” “Theirs is a match made in heaven.”

Me, I’m a bit more cynical – as is anyone else who is married or has been married. We know the truth that a successful marriage depends on a lot of hard, steady work. That’s because it’s made up of two very imperfect people, and there’s simply no way you can add imperfection to imperfection and come up with perfect. Therefore even in the best marriage there will be conflicts and struggles and misunderstandings and burdens (or perhaps I should say *crosses*) to bear. There are no perfect marriages. But there are *good* marriages in which the partners learn to live with each other’s imperfections with forgiveness, self-sacrificial love, and unwavering commitment to the vows they made to one another.

But now imagine a married couple in which one of the partners *is* perfect. (My wife doesn’t have to imagine it. She’s living the dream. Okay, I’m joking ... a little; but) That’s what St. Paul is asking us to do in today’s reading from his letter to the church at Rome. In describing each person’s relationship with the Law of God, he asks us to cast the Law in the role of the perfect husband and you, yourself, in the role of the Law’s bride – or rather, I should say the Law’s *bridezilla*.

For those not familiar with the term, bridezilla is contraction of the words “bride” and Godzilla; Godzilla being the giant dinosaur-like monster best known for stomping on Japanese cities and torching them with his atomic breath. The term bridezilla comes from a TV reality show (mercifully no longer in syndication) that told the stories of petulant, spoiled young women who thought that being the bride at a wedding conferred upon them god-like powers to rule over others, to treat them with utter contempt, and to insist on their way about absolutely everything. Each week episodes left viewers asking two questions. First, why would anyone volunteer to appear on a program that was designed to show them at their absolute worst? And second, what man in his right mind would want to marry this contemptible ... *person*?

Apparently, from St. Paul’s point of view, the Law of God didn’t have a choice in the selection of his spouse. And neither did you. You were bound together by the Lord himself in a sacred indissoluble union. I suppose you could say it really was a match made in heaven. But it was anything but perfect. Mind you, the Law *is* perfect. No faults to be found in him. And being perfect, the Law can demand only one thing of his beloved bride: complete and total sinless perfection. And therein lies the problem: you ain’t perfect. It’s as if you’ve taken an oath before Almighty God to love, honor, serve, and *obey* Mr. Law, and you can’t do it. Your inborn sin nature – your inner bridezilla – makes it impossible. Thus you’re a bride who cannot live up to your husband’s perfectly legitimate expectations. No, you can only earn his rightful wrath and yes, just punishment.

And the thing about marriage is that the Lord takes it *very* seriously. He intends it to be permanent. Indeed, the only truly legitimate and sinless way for a marriage to end is if one of the spouses dies. Death ends the marriage contract. It’s even part of the vow: it lasts “until death do us part.” This is what Paul is saying in the text: “a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if he dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive.” And Paul’s original audience would have understood that the penalty for adultery was death for both

the woman and the man she was with who was not her husband. Like I said, the Lord takes marriage very seriously.

And so should we, which is why this being married to the Law is such a powerful image. It shows us where we stand before God and how impossible is the situation we are in. We can't just walk out or run off on Mr. Law. Nor can we divorce him. Under the Old Testament rules, a woman wasn't allowed to do that. The only way out of this unhappy union is for one of us to die. And because the Law is part of God's unchanging Word, he can't die. The Law is in this sense immortal. He endures forever.

That means in order to be free *the bride* must die. And so she does. How? In Baptism. This is what Paul means when he says, "you have also died to the Law through the body of Christ". In the preceding chapter of Romans, Paul writes, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

Your baptismal death with Christ ended your marriage contract with Mr. Law. He no longer has any claims on you. He can't have any expectations of you. You're free of him. As far as the Law is concerned, you're dead. But in Baptism you were not just killed and buried with Christ, you were also raised with him and given a new life born from above. This new life is no bridezilla; but in the Lord's great plan of salvation she is a bride. As Paul says, "You have died to the Law ... so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God."

You are part of the Church, the bride of Christ – who is another perfect husband, but infinitely better than the first. And it's the Lord's intent that this union bears fruit – just as in the normal course of things a marriage produces the fruit of children. In the Church's union with Christ it's the fruit of love and good works the Lord is looking for.

That wasn't possible for you under your old covenant with the Law. We'll get there in a bit; but first, based on what Paul has said so far, someone might get the impression that the problem in that first marriage was the Law's fault. Paul anticipates this and tries to head off the argument by asking, "What then shall we say? That the Law is sin?"

He emphatically answers, "By no means!" The Law was necessary, as he explains, "If it had not been for the Law, I would not have known sin." He gives an example: "I would not have known what it is to covet if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet'." We need the Law to tell us what's right and wrong. More specifically, we need the Law to show us our sins and how thoroughly sinful we are even in our thoughts and desires.

But there's a catch. The sin nature in us, the old bridezilla, uses what's good and perfect, the Law, to deceive itself. It does it in two ways. And to see how it does, we need to understand that the Law motivates us by hope of reward for obedience and fear of punishment for disobedience. God says in the Law "Do this and live and be blessed; don't do this and die and be cursed." So, along comes a Law, it doesn't matter which one. God says, "Don't do this." And the sin nature says, "Don't do what? Oh, that looks like a good idea. There's a benefit to be gained by doing it, and whatever it is outweighs the penalty." Think of the first temptation: Satan tells the first bride the wonderful things will happen if she eats the fruit, and the bad things the Lord spoke of, well, that won't happen. She believed it. The bridezilla in us still does. But she's wrong.

The other way the sin nature uses the Law to deceive itself is by thinking she *is* keeping it. Along comes a Law. God says, “Don’t do this.” And bridezilla says, “Who, *me*? Heavens no, I would never do that! I’m a good girl, I am.” It’s called self-righteousness, which itself is a sin.

The sin nature in us uses what’s good, the Law, in all the worst ways and by so doing only compounds our guilt. And it’s the second form of self-deception that’s particularly insidious. Most of the time you know it if you break a commandment; but when you deceive yourself into thinking you’re doing a pretty good job keeping the commandments, you aren’t aware of it. We are blind to our sinful pride and self-righteousness. This is what Paul means when he says, “I was once alive apart from the Law”, that is, before Paul properly understood the Law. Remember, he was a Pharisee. He thought he was as good as a person could be. But then he says, “when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died”. That is to say, the Law revealed to Paul what a terrible sinner he actually was, and that caused him to die the death of repentance – which in turn led to his death with Christ in Baptism – and his subsequent rising with Christ in his righteousness – and the life of real fruit for God that followed.

You see, it’s only one who has been freed from the Law and raised and united with Christ who *can* bear fruit for God. Why is that? The Law, you will recall, motivates by fear of punishment or hope of reward. In other words, you obey it by compulsion. It’s not that you want to obey the Law; it’s that you’re afraid of what happens if you don’t *or* you want the blessing that comes if you do. So, if you obey the Law, you’re doing out of self-interest. You’re simply looking out for number one.

But all of the Law is summarized in two commandments: Love God and love your neighbor. And love, you’ve heard me say a thousand times, is *voluntary* self-sacrificial devotion. It’s wanting to do for others without thinking about yourself and what’s best for you. So, by definition, if you’re compelled to keep the Law by either the carrot or the stick, so to speak, you can’t do it.

But if you’ve been raised with Christ and united with him, you can. How? First, it’s because you’ve been freed from the Law and its compulsion. Christ died to pay the penalty of all your sin. There is no stick anymore. The Law carries no threat to you. And in Christ, you have all of God’s blessings. There’s no extra carrot or reward for keeping the Law. You’ve already got eternal life in glory. What more can God give you? So now, if you obey the Law, you do it not because you must but because you want to.

And that’s precisely what the new bride that God raised up and united with Christ wants to do. She, your new nature, wants to bear fruit for her husband. She wants to do it for him. He loved her and gave himself for her; she wants to return the favor. That’s what brings her joy. Theirs is truly a match made in heaven.

Thus the Christian life in this world that began in Baptism is one of daily returning to that Baptism in repentance, putting to death and burying nasty old bridezilla by the Law, and rising again to new life with Christ. It’s a life of making the most of our match made in heaven, bearing fruit for God, and looking forward to the day when Christ returns, bridezilla is destroyed for good, and we are raised immortal to live in perfect harmony in that perfect marriage about which truly can be said, “and they lived happily forever after”. God grant it to us for Jesus’ sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!