

So your God will delight in you

Isaiah 62:1-5

January 20, 2013

As the scripture says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his wife, and the two will become one." There is a deep secret revealed in this scripture, which I understand as applying to Christ and the church. But it also applies to you: every husband must love his wife as himself, and every wife must respect her husband.

The apostle Paul wrote these words in a letter to the men and women of the church at Ephesus. "Every husband must love his wife as he loves himself." Any argument with that? "And every wife must respect her husband." Any argument with that?

Paul doesn't seem to be saying anything very remarkable here. Or maybe, in his own social context where women had few rights and little status independent of their husbands, it was remarkable to expect mutual respect and honor and sacrifice between husbands and wives.

What is surely remarkable about Paul's instructions to wives and husbands is the motive. "Submit yourselves to one another," he writes, "because of your reverence for Christ." It is for Christ's sake, for the sake of our love and honor and respect for Jesus that we love, honor, and respect each other.

Marriage, and indeed all human relationships, must be governed by our allegiance to Christ. I love my wife, not merely to be a good husband, but to be a good Christian. I raise my children with dignity and restraint and tenderness, not just to be a good father, but to be a good Christian. I treat my employees fairly and kindly, not just to be a good boss, but to be a good Christian.

That would be remarkable enough, but Paul says something else, almost in passing, which is the most remarkable thing of all: "There is a deep secret revealed in this scripture." A deep secret. The deep secret that when the Bible talks about a man leaving his father and mother and uniting with his wife and becoming one with her and she with him, it is telling us something about our relationship, the church's relationship, with Christ.

It's like marriage! The relationship between husband and wife is a picture of the relationship between Christ and the church. Marriage, in its totality, in its intimacy, in its passion, is a metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church.

Now I must warn you that this metaphor has all too often been misunderstood and misused. The picture has been applied in the wrong direction, suggesting that the relationship between husband and wife should look like the relationship between Christ and the church, namely that the husband should be head, lord, master, and the wife his submissive servant -- which, of course, completely misunderstands both Christ and marriage!

No, the metaphor works in the other direction. It's not that the relationship between Christ and the church is the model for the relationship between husband and wife, but the other way around. Our love for Christ is the motive for our love for each other, but the deep secret is that marriage is a picture of our relationship with Christ.

We are joined to Jesus, not just as disciples to teacher, not just as servants to master, not even just as saved to savior, but as a wife to her husband -- that kind of oneness, that kind of intimacy, that kind of mutuality, that kind of enduring and growing and creative love, that kind of oneness.

Isaiah said the same about the relationship between Israel and her God.

*The Lord is pleased with you
and will be like a husband to your land ...
He who formed you will marry you.
As a groom is delighted with his bride,
so your God will delight in you ...*

We have been talking during the season of Epiphany about Israel's identity and calling as a chosen people, and ours. We have said that Israel's chosenness is more about purpose than status. The people of Israel are chosen to be a light to the nations, to bring the light of God's glory into the darkness, to be the means by which, not just they, but all nations are blessed.

And so we call them a messenger people, a servant people, entrusted with a message, charged with a task. They are called to reflect the glory of God's goodness in their everyday lives, by their justice and their mercy and their compassion and their love -- for God, for each other, and for vulnerable people, for poor people, for outcasts, for strangers.

They are God's servants, but they are more than servants. "I have called you by name ... you are mine," says the Lord. It's personal! God takes notice of them and makes them his own. They belong to God. They are chosen for a purpose, but God's choice precedes their purpose, just as it was with Jesus, when God said to him: "You are my own dear Son."

When we say we are children of God, this is how it is meant, not in some general, generic way, as in, of course we are all children of God, but in this specific personal way: I am God's own dear son! You are God's own dear daughter!

The people of Israel, and we, are God's servants, but more than that, we are God's sons and daughters, bearing God's name, bearing God's glory. But we are more than that, too -- not just servants, not just children, but a bride!

*As a groom is delighted with his bride,
so your God will delight in you ...*

I remember my wedding. Actually, I don't. I remember very little about my wedding, but I remember her. I remember my bride.

During the ceremony, I was hardly conscious of all the other people gathered in that chapel, and curiously, I was not really self-conscious either. I was thinking only of her. And I was not thinking about anything very particular -- not thinking about our future or about being together, just thinking about her, simply delighted, simply delighted that moment in her.

So your God will delight in you. This adds a whole other layer, an entirely new dimension, to the meaning of our relationship with our God. But be clear: it is our relationship, it is our God. The metaphor of marriage tells us something about our relationship with God as a people, not one by one by one.

It is not that God marries me. God marries us. God is not my husband. God is our husband. Together, as a community, as a people, we are his bride, and as a groom delighted with his bride, so God takes delight in us. We are his crown, we are his glory, we are his darling, we are his delight!

What an honor! And what a responsibility. If marriage is a picture of our relationship as a people with God, it says something very important about intimacy and passion and connectedness. But it also says something very important about our role, because a bride is not a child.

When I was a child, my speech, feelings, and thinking were all those of a child; now that I am an adult, I have no more use for childish ways ...

What was Paul talking about when he wrote those lines? Love! Love, the love that sustains a marriage, the love that comes from God, the love that reflects God in us, is for grown-ups. It requires patience and endurance and commitment and forgiveness and self-denial and faith and hope.

So we love God, as adults, as a wife loves her husband, with commitment and endurance and patience and sacrifice and faith and hope. When you're married, you're in it together, both pulling your weight, not meeting each other halfway, but both going all the way for the sake of the other. So when God chooses us, when God makes us his bride, we are in it together. We must pull our weight, too, not meeting God halfway or expecting God to do everything for us, but giving ourselves utterly and completely for his sake.

Isaiah's picture of the identity and purpose of the people of God is full and rich and compelling and wondrous. We are God's servants. We have a task, a calling, to bring the light of God's glory into the darkness. We are God's children, God's sons and God's daughters, humble, dependent, trusting, grateful, beloved. And we are God's bride. We are the bride God chooses, the bride in whom God delights.

And we are a bride chosen to be God's partner, not just children, dependent and needy and fragile, but God's partner in making beauty out of our shared love, God's partner in raising a family and keeping house, raising this human family with God and making of this world with God a place filled with shalom, a place filled with glory. May it be a long and happy marriage!

It will be ...