

Two or three

Matthew 18:19-20

September 4, 2011

Greg and Michelle Holt were married ten years ago on a Sunday afternoon in Galena, Illinois. They stood on an open air pavilion in the middle of Grant Park, surrounded by a large gathering of family members and friends. I remember that day well because I was there, standing on the pavilion facing them! I performed their wedding ceremony.

The date was September 2, 2001. It was exactly nine days before two hijacked airliners flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, and it was exactly nine days after the memorial service for my father held at St. Francis by the Sea Episcopal Church in Blue Hill, Maine.

The day of their wedding was bookended in my mind and heart by these two profoundly sad events, and yet my memories of that day are entirely fond and entirely happy. The joy of that wedding day and my capacity for sharing it was not overshadowed by my grief over my father's death. And the ongoing joy that is carried in Greg and Michelle and in me and in all those who were a part of that celebration was in no way diminished by the terrors that gripped our nation's consciousness nine days later.

Wow! I had forgotten that their wedding so soon followed my father's death, and I had forgotten that September 11, THE September 11, followed so soon after. And that's my point: I had forgotten. The joy of such moments is undiluted and lasting, in some way absolute, not merely relative to whatever else might be going on in our lives at the time. The joy of such moments comes as a gift from God and, when we do remember, such moments serve as signposts of God's grace to us then and still.

It was a joyful wedding day! It was a beautiful September afternoon. It may have been a little warm, maybe even a little too warm, but I don't remember that part well. I remember the people.

I remember nine-year-old Kaylee carrying flowers with a ringlet of flowers in her hair.

I remember six-year old Tristan carrying the rings and standing alongside his mother and his father-to-be.

And Japhy? Japhy wasn't there! Japhy came later!

I remember Michelle's mom, and her step-mom, and her father, Roger, taking photographs. I remember Greg's parents and his brother who stood up with him and all the friends, some from our church, but so many whom I did not know. Parents and siblings and children and friends ... and Jesus.

It was a joyful moment because it was a holy moment. It was a holy moment because Jesus was there. And Jesus was there because he had been invited: "Where two or three of you come together in my name, I am there." We came together around that pavilion in Christ's name to celebrate a wedding, and Jesus Christ joined us there.

We have come together today in this sanctuary in Christ's name and Christ is with us here. So this too is a special moment. This too is a holy moment, a moment I hope we all will remember with joy. We are invited this morning to share Greg and Michelle's joy once more as they renew their marriage vows, and to share the joy of all those who will join them in renewing their own marriage vows.

[Ceremony of the renewal of marriage vows]

Where two or three come together. Marriage is two, two coming together, and when husband and wife do come together in Christ's name, Christ is present with them in their marriage, in a way they may experience themselves and in a way others may experience through them. A marriage made in Christ's name is a blessed and powerful relationship, but I believe the importance of Christian marriage has been both understated and overstated.

The importance of a marriage made in Christ's name has been understated.

The marriage landscape is changing. Fewer people are marrying. More people wait longer to marry. The definitions of marriage itself are being challenged and reconfigured. The changing culture landscape makes it all the more important for Christians to do what Christians do, which is to follow Christ, not the tide of the times.

I'm not talking about standing either for or against what the culture is saying and doing about marriage. I'm talking about standing entirely apart from the prevailing culture by being faithful, by honoring commitments, by saying what you mean and meaning what you say, regardless of what everybody else is doing and saying.

It takes more courage today to say "I do" and mean it, and it takes more resolve today to keep that promise. It has become so easy, so easy and common and even acceptable, to dissolve a marriage!

I am not suggesting that there are no instances when divorce may become necessary and even, given the circumstances, the best of any available options. I am simply reporting what I have seen, that ending a marriage has become “no big deal,” a choice made all too quickly when little or no attempt has been done to work on the relationship. It’s just time to move on and try something -- try someone -- else!

In this climate, there is something very powerful and very important about a lasting, committed relationship. Not a relationship made in heaven, but a relationship made on earth by doing the hard work of knowing and serving and loving and adjusting to another human being very different from you.

Not a relationship that lasts because “we are still in love,” but a relationship that lasts because making it last matters.

Not a relationship built even on the foundation of our unwavering commitment to each other, but a relationship built on the foundation of our unwavering commitment to Christ.

Not a relationship that endures because we “chose well” or because we are sufficiently compatible or because it is “right,” but a relationship that endures because we make sacrifice, sacrifice in obedience to Christ, sacrifice in imitation of Christ, sacrifice for the sake of the glory of Christ.

That is a marriage that bears powerful witness indeed to a God whose love can and does change lives.

Marriage exposes us, leaves us vulnerable, like few if any other human relationships do. If we can find a strength beyond our own to work at that relationship day by day, patiently, persistently, celebrating its joys and enduring its sorrows, showing mercy, giving forgiveness, holding fast to hope, we show to the world the face of Christ himself among us. Where two come together in his name, he is there.

But the importance of a marriage made in Christ’s name has also been overstated.

Where two or three come together. Two’s company and three’s a crowd, and you don’t make a marriage of a crowd!

Where is Christ present? Where two ... or three ... come together!

Where two or three come together in what sort of relationship? Whatever! Spouses, friends, colleagues. Choir members, staff members, church members. People you work with, people you worship with, people you eat with. Praying partners, golfing partners, a parent and a child. Wherever two or three come together in Christ's name, he is there!

Sometimes in the church, we overstate the importance of marriage and family. These are social units, not spiritual units, not the primary unit of the Christian church. What is the primary unit of the Christian church? Two or three!

Marriage is a gift given to some of us by God for a time -- for our blessing, for our education, as a tool by which we may learn something about his love and show it to others. But it is given for a time. It isn't meant to last forever, only "as long as we both shall live." There are married Christians and there are unmarried Christians, and neither has been more or less blessed or gifted by God. One or the other is just another way, just another context, for being what we are called to be.

We are blessed and gifted, blessed by the presence of the living Christ and gifted by the activity of the Holy Spirit. When? Whenever and wherever two or three come together in the name of Jesus!

How many people do you need to make a church? Two or three!

How many people do you need to do worship? Two or three!

How many people do you need build the kingdom of God? Two or three!

How many people do you need to gather together to get God's attention? Two or three!

Do notice that God has not made us to be loners! You need at least two, two or three. But just two or three is enough!

Where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them.

When we come together in Jesus' name, any two or three of us, there is blessing. Blessing because Jesus is there with us. Blessing because the presence of Jesus himself is a blessing: blessing for us and blessing for those with whom we come in contact, because they come in contact not just with us, but with Jesus too.

There is great blessing when we come together in Jesus' name, but there is great power, too.

Whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.

Wow! I must confess that when I hear that statement I am filled with all kinds of misgivings and I'm ready to attach all kinds of conditions. Whenever two of us agree about something we pray for, it will be done?

And yet, Jesus said it! It will be done! Well, friends, if that's the case, just what might we want to agree on?

O Lord, keep us safe, and make us whole ...

Bring to ruin the plans of evil people, and keep us from becoming evil people ...

Heal the wounds of bodies broken by disease and heal the wounds of hearts broken by betrayal ...

Let hungry people be fed and the lives of poor people be filled with good things ...

Give us enough courage to do the things you call us to do, and give us enough confidence and enough humility to be the people you call us to be ...

Give us joy!

Give joy to this world!

Give us all the joy of your presence as we gather in your name!

Let your church be your church ...

Do you think we could agree on these?