

A GREAT MYSTERY

FOURTEEN WEDDING SERMONS

by
Peter J. Leithart

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To
Garnett Pierce Leithart

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PREFACE

ONCE UPON A TIME, staying married was simply what everyone did. It took no more energy or determination than it does to avoid drowning while sitting in a boat carried along by a lazy river. You just had to stay put, careful not to rock back and forth, and the current would do the rest. The destination was perhaps not marital bliss, but it wasn't marital catastrophe either.

Over the last half-century, this lazy option has vanished. Nearly a decade ago, in her book *The Abolition of Marriage*, Maggie Gallagher concluded that marriage was over as a legal institution:

From a formal, legal standpoint, marriage is no longer an enforceable commitment. The legal, social, and economic supports that sustained marriage over centuries have been dispatched with astonishing speed, and marriage has been reconceived as a purely private act, not a social institution. . . . Thanks to no-fault divorce and the attitudes, norms, and policies that support it, getting married now more closely resembles taking a concubine than taking a wife.

The various ferments that cluster under the umbrella of “the Sixties”—feminism, the sexual revolution, changes in divorce laws—are usually blamed for the demise of marriage,

but these are only the most overt and visible and recent enemies of marriage. The more serious threats are those that go unnoticed either because they have so thoroughly triumphed in the erotic imagination as to become invisible as the air or because they have been around long enough to attain a kind of venerability. Edifices of great antiquity can certainly topple quickly, but only when they have been rotting for a long time.

Here I will mention only two of the many deeper and longer-term factors that have conspired to soften the foundations of marriage in modernity. The first is what Zygmunt Bauman has described as the “liquidity of life” in late modernity. In our consumption-obsessed society, everything has become a “commodity,” that is, a good used *up* in the using of it. A china tea set is not a commodity; a styrofoam cup is. Goods are commodified when they are purchased with an implicit “use by” date. In part, this universal disposability is driven by technology and the marketing that accompanies it—your kids want the newest X-Box when it comes out, because there will be games that cannot be played on the old console. In other sectors, the speed of change has more serious consequences. No matter how secure his position may seem, the computer programmer who fails to keep up will suffer more than shame; he’ll be out of a job. In late modernity, the chameleon flourishes, and the market favors the Protean being that is capable of a self-makeover at a moment’s notice.

Social relations tend to get caught up in the drive toward commodification. As Bauman says, the modern world “privileges those who can travel light,” and therefore “if changed circumstances require a fast move and starting anew from scratch, long-term commitments and any ties difficult to untie may prove to be a cumbersome burden—ballast that needs to be thrown overboard.” The sexual lives of high school and college students suggest that social connections have been thrown into hyperdrive. “Going steady”

and even “dating” are becoming outdated, replaced by shifting alliances that last a night or a weekend.

All the pathologies of contemporary marriage—high divorce rates, serial polygamy, the trophy wife—are perfectly consistent with the way we live, with the one overarching imperative to *keep up*. The current has quickened, and there are ample opportunities to skip from boat to boat. If you go with the cultural current, this is where it takes you. To *stay* married, by contrast, is to stand against much that the contemporary world holds dear. When the whirl rules, persistence in a permanent commitment is an act of the most profound subversion.

The second cultural force that has undermined traditional marriage is the romantic conception of love, which is largely the product of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Distortions are more difficult to identify here. Erotic passion did not spring into existence two centuries ago, and passion has always been a recognized enemy of obligation, especially marital obligation. The romantic conceptions of love, furthermore, owe a significant debt to the semi-Christianized notions of the medieval courtly love tradition. Without the confession that God is love and that God has saved the world out of love, what Robert Polhemus has called “erotic faith” would never have taken cultural hold. Yet, the erotic faith of romantic love is a threat to Christian love and marriage, since it represents a substitute for Christian faith.

As Polhemus describes it, erotic faith is

an emotional conviction, ultimately religious in nature, that meaning, value, hope, and even transcendence can be found through love—erotically focused love, the kind of love we mean when we say that people are in love. . . . Men and women in the hold of erotic faith feel that love can redeem personal life and offer a reason for being. . . . with the spread of secularism since the eighteenth century, erotic faith, diverse and informal though it may be, has given to

some a center and sometimes a solace that were traditionally offered by organized religion and God. By love we can change the situation—that sentiment moves people: love relationships have the highest priority in the real lives of millions as they have had for innumerable characters in fiction.

Love at first sight is the sacrament of erotic faith—a love that is not merely sexual attraction but, as Anthony Giddens puts it, “an intuitive grasp of qualities of the other. It is a process of attraction to someone who can make one’s life, as it is said, ‘complete.’”

The flaw in this romantic conception is subtle but deadly. The key shift can be neatly expressed as a grammatical one, a shift from the Christian confession that we love because we are first loved to the erotic faith in first love, or love at first sight; from the Christian confession that the God of love saves to the erotic faith that Love saves; from the Christian confession that God is love to the erotic faith that Love is god. The faith that self-transcendence and “completion” come through erotic attachment to another human being is a species of idolatry. Marriages built on or infected with this vain hope are doomed, for what happens when the satisfaction is lacking, as it must be?

To resist these cultural tides, Christians need both a practical understanding of marriage and an understanding practice of marriage that is rooted in something deeper than mere moral exhortation. We need a marital understanding and practice rooted in the reality of the living, triune God of love. Hence this brief collection of wedding sermons, which I would somewhat playfully call a “systematic theology of marriage.”

I didn’t set out to write a systematic theology of marriage. I wrote each sermon individually, attempting to offer a meditation that was relevant for the couple and bringing into play my fascination *du jour*. When I had finished a dozen or so sermons, I realized that they were beginning

to form a set of approaches to theology from the perspective of marital love— for each locus of systematic theology can be illumined by images drawn from marriage. The perichoretic union of Father, Son, and Spirit can be unpacked in terms of the one-flesh union of man and woman (cf. 1 Cor. 6), a one flesh that under God’s blessing produces a “third” that serves as a site where the love of the two meets. Barth was surely at least partly right in saying that man is the image of God precisely as he is male and female, in the differentiated unity of sexuality. Adam’s fall was his failure as a guardian-husband, and Israel’s history could easily be allegorized as the story of a marriage (Ezek. 16). In Jesus, God and man are united as One, which is another echo of the one-flesh marital relation, as the Eternal Word came to dwell in the feminine flesh of humanity. Jesus came as the bridegroom who offered Himself for His bride, the Church, which is sustained through history by the bridal washing of baptism (Eph. 6) and the continual celebration of the Lamb’s marriage supper. Believers are “one spirit” with Christ as man and woman are one flesh (1 Cor. 6). The history that began with the glorious bride revealed to the risen Adam in the garden will end when a heavenly bride descends from heaven to be face-to-face with her new Adam forever.

Trinity and anthropology; original sin, covenant and call of Abraham; Christology and pneumatology; ecclesiology, sacramental theology, eschatology: they are all there for those who have eyes to see, tightly wound in, with, and under the daily round of a common bed, sex, conception, childbirth, and childrearing, conversation, work, and mutual comfort. For those with eyes to see, the mystery of marriage is the mystery of the world, and those with such eyes might be able to recognize and avoid the shoals that lead to marital shipwreck, the rocks toward which every cultural trend drives us.

* * *

I would like to thank all the couples at whose weddings I delivered these sermons, both for the privilege of uniting them as husband and wife and for permission to use their names in this collection. Thanks also to Doug Jones at Canon Press for his interest and willingness to publish it, and to Jared Miller for planing rough spots in my prose.

This book is dedicated to my fourth daughter, Garnett Pierce. Born when my wife and I were in our mid-forties, Garnett feels like our first granddaughter, her brothers treat her like a favorite niece, and all the kids have great fun calculating how old they will be when Garnett graduates from high school. At two, she is, I trust, a couple of decades away from marriage, but when one reaches a certain age decades begin to pass as minutes once did, and so I am beginning to brace myself for that inevitable walk down the aisle. My confident prayer is that when that day arrives she will be firmly rooted and grounded in the triune love of the God in whom she already lives and moves, and that she will spend a long life bearing fruit like a tree beside the waters.

J DIVINE LIFE

*Marriage of Daniel and Khiree Appel
May 18, 2002*

SCRIPTURE READING

Genesis 1:24–28; 2:18–25

Then God said, “Let the earth bring forth living creatures after their kind: cattle and creeping things and beasts of the earth after their kind”; and it was so. God made the beasts of the earth after their kind, and the cattle after their kind, and everything that creeps on the ground after its kind; and God saw that it was good. Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” . . .

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.” Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called a living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all the cattle, and to the birds of the sky, and to every

beast of the field, but for Adam there was not found a helper suitable for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that place. The LORD God fashioned into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man. The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones,
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man.”

For this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed.

HOMILY

All the world over, the beginning of a marriage is marked by celebration and festivity. Even in an age when divorce is rampant, when millions of children grow up in broken homes, when families consisting of his, hers, ours, and somebody else's are the norm—even in our day, weddings continue to possess an atmosphere that belies the facts of contemporary marriage. Think of the energy expended on the preparations for a wedding—not just this one, but any wedding. Think of the joy and expectation that fills not only the couple but also the family and friends. Think of the care and attention given to every last detail of the service.

That last point is especially striking. Pastor Wilson remarked to me yesterday that weddings are the last bastion of formality in an age of informality, the last ritual in a culture barren of ritual. Though we punctuate almost nothing else with ceremony, and “winging it” is the order of the day, weddings are still written in italics, underlined, and bold-faced.

Why is this? What is it about marriage that elicits such effort, joy, and hope? Why do we lavish so much attention, time, and expense on weddings? Why, even in the most unceremonious civilization in history, do we still turn weddings into ceremonies? Why, in a culture where spontaneity reigns everywhere else, is a wedding the one event that is still scripted?

In part, we make ceremony out of a wedding because we recognize that this event marks a decisive transition in the lives of everyone present. That is most obvious in the case of the couple: Daniel and Khiree came into this room as single people, from opposite sides of the room; they came in as two *Is*, but they will go out together as a married couple, as a *we*. An hour ago, there was this one and that one; less than an hour from now, two will be made one.

But the transition is not just a transition in the histories of the couple, but also in the lives of their families and friends. Daniel's and Khiree's parents will remain parents, but after today, they will never again be parents in the same way that they have been. Daniel and Khiree will still have siblings, but those relations will change as well. Friends will remain, but those friends will from this day be dealing with a couple—not just with Daniel, but with Daniel-who-is-married-to-Khiree; not just with Khiree, but with Khiree-who-is-married-to-Daniel.

Weddings mark a death and resurrection. For everyone here, one world ends today and another world begins; everyone dies today and everyone is risen. Death and resurrection is a miracle, a great mystery too full of wonder and danger to meet head-on, and so we feel safe in approaching it only through the indirection of ritual.

Behind this, however, is something more fundamental. When we address this question as Christians, we realize that weddings continue to have this hold on us because at a wedding we have a glimpse of the inner story of human history. History is the story of a marriage, beginning with Adam

awaking from a deep sleep to find Eve, through Satan's seduction of Eve at the tree of knowledge, through Jesus awaking from death to see the women come to the garden tomb, to the final revelation of the bride at the end of all things, the bride-city that surrounds her Husband and is filled with His glory. As Jonathan Edwards put it, the Father created a world so that His Spirit could prepare a bride for His Son. Marriage is the alpha and omega of human history. Even pagans have some sense of this, recognizing that a wedding unveils some vast secret.

But I think we need to go further than this, and Edwards points the way. Weddings provide a glimpse not only of the meaning of all human history, but also of the meaning behind the meaning of human history. At a wedding, and in a marriage, we can see through the dark glass and glimpse, however briefly and dimly, the life of God.

The Bible teaches that marriage is a covenant relation: a binding, personal relationship that demands love, loyalty, and faithfulness from all parties. That is what you, Daniel and Khiree, are entering today, by the marriage oaths that you will make in a few moments. And that covenant relationship pictures the relationship of Jesus Christ and His bride. But beyond that, it pictures the relationship of the persons of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit constitute the original, the eternal covenant community, an eternal fellowship of love, loyalty, faithfulness.

In fact, it's only because God is triune that marriage is possible. Since the world is created by a triune God, the world is not made up of unrelated individual things, nor is it simply one big thing. Since the world is created by the triune God, the creation, like God Himself, is a harmony of difference, a dance, polyphony. Because God is triune, it is possible to make a *we* from two *Is*, to make a *we* where each *I* remains an *I*.

Marriage forms a union that reflects the inner life of God. God is Father, Son, and Spirit; the Father is God, the

Son is God, and the Spirit is God; yet the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father, and there are not three gods but one God. So in a marriage, two are united into one and yet remain two. As we've read, "God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." The image of God is located in Adam and Eve as individuals, but it is also located in their union with each other. In this primordial human society of husband and wife, we have the first image of the God who is an eternal society.

Yet the triune character of marriage is not just a philosophical point, and marriage is not some mathematical or metaphysical puzzle. Instead, the Trinity shows us the basic shape of marriage. Paul tells us in various places that the marriage relationship pictures Christ's relationship to His church, but in 1 Corinthians 11:3, he says that marriage pictures the relation of the Father and Son: "Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ." The Father's headship over Christ is the archetype of the husband's headship over his wife.

Since we're sinners, we get this all wrong. Men hear that they are heads of their wives as God is head of Christ, and all they hear is that they get to live like gods. We think we have an excuse to act like little tinpot deities around the house, spending our lives enthroned in the easy chair, holding the channel-changer as a scepter, demanding beer and chips. "I'm like God to my wife, after all," we say. Women hear that their husbands are godlike heads over them, and they wonder, "Why does he get to play God, while I have to slave around?" They conclude they can only be like God if they can wrest headship from their husband.

Both these conclusions are wrong because they assume and proclaim a false view of God. When a husband hears that his relation to his wife is like God's headship over the Son, and he uses that as an excuse to tyrannize and dominate his wife, he is saying that the Father is a tyrannical

despot over His Son. When a wife hears that she has to submit and concludes that her dignity has been destroyed, she is saying that the Son can have honor only if He usurps the place of the Father. In both cases, they are giving false testimony about the character of the Trinity. Both the domineering husband and the grudgingly submissive wife are committing blasphemy.

The God revealed in Christ is no tyrant, no dictator. He is the Giver of every good and perfect gift, who gives to all without reproach, who shines His sun on the righteous and the wicked. And He is the *eternally* giving God; before all worlds, the Father was glorifying the Son through the Spirit, and the Son was honoring His Father through the same Spirit, and the Spirit was enfolding both in glory, light, and love. God is, and is essentially, the God who gives Himself. Christ gave Himself in love for His bride, and this self-sacrifice of the incarnate Son reveals the eternal character of God. Christ gave Himself for the life of the world not *in spite of* being God, as if self-giving contradicted the nature of God; Christ gave Himself *because* He was God. To live divinely is to live as gift. Self-giving is the shape, the dynamic, the choreography of divine life.

Both husband and wife are called to live lives patterned after the life of God. Husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church, and also as the Father loves the Son. Husbands are properly heads of their wives only if they imitate the Father's loving headship over Christ. Wives submit to their husbands as the church to Christ, and also as the Son glorifies and honors His Father. A marriage formed by the pattern of the Trinity will be simply this: The husband, like the Father, giving himself in every way to beautify and glorify his bride; the bride, like the Son, giving herself at every opportunity to honor and glorify her husband.

Discerning the trinitarian pattern of marriage gives us a hint of the life of God, but it also places a demand on those who are married. Self-giving does not come naturally to

fallen men and women. Self-indulgence is much easier than self-denial; forcing others to sacrifice for you is far more the norm than sacrificing for another. Especially in a marriage, you are called to self-denial. A marriage without self-denial and self-giving is destined to be a disaster.

And so, this is my charge and exhortation to you both: Through Christ, you both have been brought into the eternal fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit. By the grace of God, live divine lives together; strive by the grace of God to make your marriage an image of your Creator. Daniel, offer yourself every day to glorify Khiree, who is your glory; Khiree, offer yourself every day to glorify Daniel, who is your head. And may your marriage not only bring you both great joy, but may it radiate divine life and love and power, so that everyone you meet will know from your marriage that you serve the Father of Jesus Christ, the giving God, the God who is gift.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.