

Grace and Peace be to you from God our Father and Jesus Christ our Lord.

Thus far this Advent, we have examined how God has created us in His image: body and soul. How through our body He gives us identity; and in how desiring to create new identities for ourselves we rebelled and brought ourselves to sin and death, fracturing our being by dividing body and soul; and how Christ, as *the* image of God, the fullness God in human flesh, has taken our sin bodily into death and rose again so that He might share His body and life with us for our eternal life in body and soul.

Now we arrive at this mysterious union between Christ's bodily life and our bodies. Scripture speaks of this mysterious union perhaps most powerfully through the image of marriage: Christ's relationship with His people as a husband-to-be with his betrothed. Traditionally, betrothal differed from marriage as a pledge of exclusive fidelity in a relationship between a man and a woman before marriage. This was a provisional state in which the couple prepared themselves for married life.

This image incorporates married and single individuals, as both share in this same betrothal as the bride of Christ, both preparing for the fullness of their one-flesh union with Jesus. That is because our created bodies were not only made in the image of God to be spiritual bodies but also to be spousal bodies. We read that in the beginning, God created man in His own image, male and female He created them.

This fundamental distinction between male and female is not only for the begetting of children, but God declares, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him." By naming the animals, each with their own partner, God helped Adam understand that he was not created to be an independent, solitary creature. Instead, he was designed to be part of a whole. And so God declares His intent to fulfill Adam's need. "I will make a helper fit for him."

The Hebrew word for "help" is a general word used in various Scriptural contexts to mean "assist and support" another. The word implies that two individuals share the same goal but that their strength or ability to do it alone is inadequate. One needs the help of the other. So to meet Adam's lack in the work God has given him to do, God will bring him a companion devoted to his good and one to whom he would devote himself, a helper fit for him, or quite literally, "his counterpart."

God accomplished this in a particular act of creation. He took part of Adam, the rib from his side, the bone closest to his heart, and as the Hebrew says, God built Eve from it. As an expert builder, God constructed the woman. He brought her to the man, prompting him to cry with joyous astonishment and delight, "This, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman because she was taken out of Man."

Adam receives her as a gift from God, another human creature like himself, made of his own substance. Yet Adam rejoices in their difference as much as their sameness. In their difference, they "fit together" two pieces of a puzzle, making up what the other lacks physically, mentally, emotionally, sexually, and spiritually. And through God's gift of the woman, Adam grows in his understanding of himself as man and Eve in her understanding of herself as woman. Each provides the mirror through which they will come to know themselves, and in love, giving of the self, they will come to know the other.

We were created as spousal bodies, to be interdependent, created toward fellowship, designed to be together in a one-flesh union, of which marriage is an image. That is because marriage points to the mystery beyond itself. The primary mystery is the union of the incarnate Christ as the head, the church as His body, and all who belong to the church as His members. The church cannot exist apart from Him, nor does Christ exist apart from the church. But the union depends entirely on him. He established and maintains it. He loved the church before she ever loved Him and still loves her, even when she no longer loves him. He transforms her by cleansing her from the stain of sin and sharing his holiness with her. He nourishes and cherishes her. He does not exercise His headship by dominating and demanding

but by serving and giving Himself to her. The church, in turn, is happy to be subordinate to Him as her head. She depends on Him, trusts in Him, and receives everything from Him.

The bodily manifestation of this mystery is found in Christian marriage, in which husband and wife are both one flesh with each other and with Christ. The husband is the head of the wife, devoting himself to her and her welfare. He takes responsibility for her well-being and takes the lead in giving Himself to her. Like Christ, he offers himself and his love to her. The husband does not demand her love as his right nor claim services from her. Instead, he woos her with his steady devotion and unwavering faithfulness. He shows his love throughout the relationship rather than just through sexual intercourse. His body is for her and her only. In the words of an old marriage vow, he “worships” her with his body. He loves her, even when she feels she no longer loves him or cannot love him as she knows she should. He nourishes her physically by providing for her; he protects and cares for her by considering her needs. He cherishes her by attending to her and valuing her more than anyone else. He never regards her apart from himself and himself apart from her.

She, in turn, values him as her head and fits him by appreciating what he does for her and all he gives to her. She is happy to be subordinate to him by taking her place in God's order for her under him and with him, like a queen beside her royal husband. Above all else, she respects him as her husband without accusation and condemnation and honors him because he represents Christ to her. This is so because both are in Christ.

The onus in the martial union rests on the husband as the head of the wife. Yet only one thing is required of him as a husband, which is impossible apart from Christ and His Holy Spirit. He must love his wife as Christ loves the church. By loving her demonstrably and self-sacrificially, he courts her acceptance of him and encourages her willing subordination to him as her head. Likewise, only one thing is required of the wife as his partner. She must honor and respect him in thought, word, and deed. She encourages him to give himself to her through her respect for him. Where and when they both do this, the image of God has begun to be restored, for, by their mutual love, they reflect the love of God bodily and show what He is like bodily.

Every divinely ordered human marriage prefigures, foreshadows, and reflects the union of God's incarnate Son as the heavenly Bridegroom with His earthly bride. Yet, its mystery only manifests in those who have faith in Jesus and are sanctified by their trust in Him. Their union with Christ transforms their union with each other so that increasingly the relationship between husband and wife corresponds ever more closely with the union of Christ with the church. Christ Himself reshapes the marriage of baptized believers so that through their spousal bodies, they embody and disclose the mystery of His union with us.

We participate in that union with Christ as He reveals Himself in His Word and gives us His body in our Baptism and the Lord's Supper. As He hung upon the cross at our betrothal, the Son of God in human flesh, from His rib, next to His own heart, where He was pierced, came flowing blood and water to make for Him a bride, fit for Him, pure and spotless, bone of His bone and flesh of His flesh. The Father gives us to Him, and He delights in us. We in turn, delight in Him. As we receive His body and share in His death and resurrection, we learn more about ourselves. We can only know ourselves rightly in relation to Jesus. We learn of who we were in our sin, who we are in His salvation, and who we will be when He comes again. And so we entrust ourselves to His loving and self-giving care, knowing that He is preparing a place for us and will return to consummate His betrothal in eternity. And as we wait upon Him, we are united with His bride's body and therefore offer our bodies back to Him in purity as living sacrifices.

Since God created human beings in His image as spousal bodies, male and female, their marriage reflects the physical union of Christ with the church. Yet marriage is not the only way that Christian men and women resemble him and show something of His likeness. They also do that in a single, unmarried

state. That, too, has God's approval. After all, Jesus himself never married. Neither did the great prophet Jeremiah nor the great apostle Paul. God created us as male and female to create us toward fellowship and show our interdependence upon one another, and those identities hold regardless of our marital status.

Those who remain single still reflect the image of God in their connection and relation to the people around them by mirroring something of Christ to them. While a husband and wife are an image of Christ and the Church within themselves, single Christian men and women embody and model true friendship and self-giving love that transcends a sexual union. In their very singleness, we see the nature of our one-flesh union with Christ as something beyond a sexual relationship. Close friendship with another Christian is the most profound kind of friendship that we can enjoy in this life because it is eternal. Single Christians show us that the spiritual friendship of believers transcends sexuality, marriage, and the family.

Thus the union of husband and wife prefigures the ultimate, perfect bodily union with Christ and intimacy with each other in the communion of saints. So, the celibacy of single Christians is a byproduct of their physical devotion to the Lord and aid to it. It reminds us of the ties of eternal, fraternal friendship and love in the church as His body. In eternal life, we will be receptive, self-giving bodies in and through our union with Jesus, perfectly equipped to receive the love of God the Father and love as He loves us.

So, when God considers the devotion of a husband and wife in marriage and the devotion of an unmarried person to Jesus, He sees in them a preview of Christ's union with His beloved earthly bride. That gives both marriage and a single life eternal worth! Inspired by the vision of our heavenly union in Revelation 19 and 21 and prompted by the Holy Spirit, as encouraged in Revelation 22, whether single or married, we who are corporately the bride of Christ say, "Come. Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"