

## Ephesians 5:22-33

This text would have fit in well with last Sunday's surprise--your gift and reception for which my wife and I are truly grateful. I hesitated to preach on this text today because church members who are not husbands or wives may feel left out. But the beauty of this text is that it speaks not just to those who are married, but to all Christians married or single, widowed or divorced.

Think back with me to that day in your life when you approached God's altar not to make an oath to your spouse, but to make an oath to God...the day of your confirmation. And some of you will simply need here to look forward to that day. There is a pretty strong parallel between the two--a wedding and a confirmation, and Ephesians 5 helps bring this out.

Today a lot of young confirmands look upon their Confirmation Day not so much as a beginning, but as an ending. Perhaps you and I did that to some extent. At last we could put our catechisms away. We were done, we thought, with Christian education and Bible study. What if a husband and wife saw their wedding day in that way...as an ending rather than a beginning? The hand-holding, the opening of the door for her, the saying "I love you" to each other--does the wedding bring all these to a crashing halt? Or is it not true that a whole new chapter in their lives is just beginning? True, the time of courtship is over. The time of learning...of finding out if they're right for each other has come to an end, but certainly a wedding marks the beginning of a new and exciting life together as husband and wife.

The young man or woman who calls it quits soon after the day of their confirmation; who sees it as an ending, is like a husband or wife who, soon after saying "I do," tells their spouse, "Even though we're married now, I don't want to spend any time with you." Then why get married in the first place? And why say "I do" to God before His altar if your heart is really saying "I don't?" It's like Jesus says in our Gospel reading for today, "This people honors Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me." After saying "I do," couples rightly have the desire to share life with each other. And just so, young Christians need to be taught that saying "I do" on the day of their confirmation marks a whole new chapter in their life with Christ, not apart from Him.

Now it is important to note here that all of you who are baptized into Christ are married to Christ whether you are confirmed yet or not. He made you His beloved bride in those sacred waters where, as our text says, He washed you clean of your sins with the water and word. Your confirmation before God's altar was simply the public pronouncement of that marriage. After all, what is marriage? It is, as St. Paul says, the total giving of a man and a woman to each other; giving their heart, their mind, their body, their possessions, their promise.

In Holy Baptism Christ gave Himself totally to you. He held nothing back. He gave it all. He gave His body to the cross for you. He gave up His life's blood for your forgiveness. He gave you eternal life, and all these are yours in baptism. And you gave Him the only thing you had to give--your sins. That's all we were--just wretched sinners. But Christ took our sins freely and gave you His perfect innocence in their place. When you were confirmed before God's altar, you publicly confirmed the blessed exchange which happened in your baptism--His holiness for your sins; Himself for you--and you promised, as a bride promises her husband, to be faithful to Christ for as long as you live.

A bride will come up to the altar on her wedding day dressed in white...white for purity. How many of you wore a white robe the day you were confirmed? That white robe is just like a bride's gown. It symbolized that you stand before God innocent and pure. Whether you wore such a robe or not, Paul

says in our text that all of you are declared pure by God. Your baptism cleanses you of every spot, wrinkle, and blemish. Even though a husband will notice, and even point out, his wife's sins and faults, your God does not. He doesn't forgive you one day and condemn you the next. Paul says that you are even now, and always as Christ's baptized bride, beautiful in His eyes, holy and blameless.

After the wedding, a husband and wife enjoy a reception given in their honor, and begin living in the same house with each other. It is the wise couple who refuses to leave Christ at the altar, and takes Him with them to their reception and into their home. After your confirmation, a reception was given in your honor, and friends showered you with gifts like it was your wedding day. You ate cake and ice cream. You opened cards with money inside. But you did not, did you, leave your Spouse standing at the altar? Has the Bible you received as a gift on that day been worn out through much reading, or is it still in mint condition? As God's saint, whether you were confirmed years ago or just recently, His house is also your house. As a husband and wife move into a home together, so Christ invites you to make this place your dwelling place, and His words for you a daily habit in your life. Can you imagine a marriage where a husband and wife do not even speak to each other? So God invites you to come often in prayer to Him, and He in His Scriptures comes to you.

After a wedding, a husband and wife become intimate with each other. It is not right to be so intimate before the wedding day. The Lord's Supper is the place of intimacy with our Lord. Before you were confirmed, that intimacy, that close communion with Him is something you only looked forward to. Now that you are confirmed, you enjoy this intimacy often as Christ becomes one flesh with you by giving you His flesh and blood to eat and drink. A marriage that lacks any intimacy; where the husband and wife are not drawn to each other; are not loving toward each other, is a marriage that needs help. In the same way, a Christian who is confirmed and after a few months, years, or decades has little or no desire to be intimate with Christ in the Lord's Supper; to become one with his or her Savior there, is a Christian who needs help. If this desire is lacking within you, know this for certain--there is never a time when your Savior does not desire you. He never shuns you or pushes you away. He is never too busy for you. He is never too angry with you that He refuses to draw you into His love.

"Husbands," Paul says, "Love your wives as Christ loved the church..." No husband loves in that way. Although we want to strive for it, our love is weakened by sin. Our love becomes superficial. Our love can fail. But you, as Christ's bride, have a Husband who never fails. His love is perfect. He doesn't just love with words; He loved in deeds. He acted on your behalf. He died that you may have life. Even if you have broken your confirmation vows, Jesus has not stopped loving you. Even if you have been unfaithful...unfaithful to your spouse, unfaithful to your God, Jesus is faithful to His promise. Your sins are washed away. He forgives you.

Some years ago at an army basic training camp at Camp Roberts, California, an instructor was teaching a platoon of young soldiers the proper way to throw a hand grenade. He pulled the pin and held the handle tight against the grenade as he drew his arm back to throw it. But as his arm came forward the grenade accidentally fell out of his hand, rolled off the platform and trickled, fully armed, among the trainees seated on the ground in front of him. Pandemonium broke loose. Some went flying away from there as fast as they could run. Others threw their bodies down flat on the ground. Some sought shelter behind a tree or a bench. One trainee sat there hesitating. He started for the grenade to fall on it so that it would not kill anyone else, but then quickly turned away and hid down behind another's body to be safe from the exploding fragments.

If you ask me later how that story turned out, I'll have to tell you that I don't know. But I do know how our story turns out. You and I often behave like that trainee. We have good intentions. We married our spouse fully intending on loving them for better or for worse until the day we die. We gave our confirmation vow fully intending on being faithful in worship, Bible reading, and Christian living. We intended on falling onto the grenade. But something happened. We failed. We did not love perfectly. We disobeyed. We turned away and hid in shame.

Friends, and I call you friends, do not fear. Get off the ground. Jesus covered the grenade for you. He felt the fragments--the nails in His hands and feet, the thorns in His head. It killed Him. It put Him in hell for you for a time. But He's back now. He lives. He, your Divine Husband, is alive for you, and He forgives you...for running away and hiding, for disobeying, for breaking your vows. He forgives it all.

And so live without fear. Live in joy. Whether you are married or single, widowed or divorced, confirmed or still being taught, go in peace. Your Savior goes with you in sickness and in health, for better or for worse, and not even death can part Him from you. Amen.