

United with Christ by the Spirit

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Genesis 2:21-24 NRSV

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 its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Heidelberg Catechism

76 Q. What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink his poured-out blood?

A. It means

to accept with a believing heart
the entire suffering and death of Christ
and thereby

to receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

But it means more.

Through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us,
we are united more and more to Christ's blessed body.

And so, although he is in heaven and we are on earth,
we are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone.

And we forever live on and are governed by one Spirit,
as the members of our body are by one soul.

Sermon

It's a touching scene, and a humorous one. There's one human being in the world. He's all alone. And alone is not good. So God decides to end the man's loneliness, to provide the man with a helper and partner. That's why God makes animals, of all things, makes a whole set of them, one or two or three at a time, and brings them to the man. For his part, the man sizes up each animal and gives it a name that fits. It's a long process. And at the end of it, the man still has no helper and partner. The man is still alone.

So God puts the man to sleep, removes a bone from his side, and from that bone makes something new. When God brings this latest effort to the man, the man gets it. He recognizes standing in front of him what he's been waiting for all along. He knows the place of this one. And he knows the only name that fits. "This one," he says, "is bone of my bones and flesh of

my flesh. I belong to this one, and this one belongs to me. And because I am called a man, she will be called a woman” (cf. Genesis 2:23).

“Bone and flesh” is an Old Testament idiom with a related cluster of meanings.

In Job 2:5, “his bone and his flesh” indicates Job’s raw and vulnerable center. In 2 Samuel 5:1, “we are your bone and flesh” anchors the loyalty of all the tribes of Israel to King David. And in 2 Samuel 19:12, “you are my bone and my flesh” expresses the bonds of kinship between David and his own tribe of Judah.

The words in Genesis 2, however, carry the idiom further and deeper. The man says that the woman is not just “bone and flesh,” not just “my bone and my flesh,” but “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” In other words, the man and the woman correspond to each other at the deepest level of their identity. They come from the same place. They belong to each other. And they are fully themselves only in relation to each other. It’s significant, then, that the Heidelberg Catechism uses that expanded idiom to describe our union with Christ: “We are flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone” (A76).

Genesis 2 is typically interpreted as referring to the institution of marriage. To the God-given nature of marriage and to the sanctity of the bonds between husband and wife. That’s a valid interpretation. It’s one taken up by Jesus himself.

Of course, with us and our neighbors, the picture in Genesis 2 and the principles derived from that account are most often honored in the breach. On the one hand, we cherish the ideal of marriage as a mutually-edifying partnership between a man and woman. And we craft stories about two people who are meant for each other, two people who overcome every obstacle until they are together at last, married or on their way to the altar. But too many marriages break down and break apart. We know that intimately. And among marriages that do endure, too often “endure” is the operative word, so that, as one of my friends puts it, “It’s not who you love the most, it’s who you can stand the longest.”

But the ideal endures. It will not surrender. And there’s good reason for that. First of all, there are marriages that do more than endure. There are marriages built on lasting love and commitment and fidelity, There are marriages that shine. Some of us grew up in the middle of one of those marriages. Some of us are partners in one of those marriages.

The ideal also endures, among Christians at least, because we know that marriage points to something bigger than us and bigger than itself. Beyond everything else, marriage, the marriage ideal, reflects the relationship of love and commitment and fidelity that exists between Jesus Christ and his bride, the church. Marriage is a small-scale enactment of the large-scale reality of the union between Christ and his church, a union that stretches across the ages, across the earth, across all creation, a union of body and soul, a union that is passionate, yearning, and ultimately self-giving, a union in which we are best described as “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone.”

Now, what is it that makes a marriage real? What is it that binds a woman and man together in enduring love, commitment, and fidelity? A passage in the Book of Ecclesiastes

(4:9-12) speaks of a cord in which two strands are bound securely together by a third strand, as if there is some outside force that holds together what the two on their own could not.

In a marriage relationship, there are many candidates for that third strand. It could be the community within which the marriage is made and lived and what that community expects and supports. It could be the vows that a man and woman make on their wedding day and the virtues of integrity and promise-keeping. It could be the active presence of love, of a love that is above and beyond the love of man for woman or the love of woman for man, a love that participates in the divine love that flows from all eternity within the Holy Trinity. It could be all of these and more.

But what is it that binds us to Christ? What is it that unites us with him, so that we are “flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone”? According to our Catechism, and this is according to the biblical revelation of the Trinity and of the relationships within the Trinity, so that the Father and the Son and the Spirit are “in” one another, and also according to the promise of Jesus that the Spirit will be “in” us – according to our Catechism, it’s by the Holy Spirit, who lives in Christ and in us, that we are so thoroughly united with Christ.

Now, in that first story, we see that the man and the woman correspond to each other at the deepest level of their identity, that they come from the same place, that they belong to each other, and that they are fully themselves only in relation to each other. So it is with Christ and his church. So it is with Christ and you, with Christ and me, with Christ and all our brothers and sisters across the earth and across the ages. There is a correspondence between us. We are made for each other and are fully ourselves only in relation to each other.

Now, don’t mistake me as saying that the Son of God is made for us, that the Son of God is only fully himself in relation to us. That’s not so. The Son of God has his identity and complete fullness within the Holy Trinity. The Son of God doesn’t need us in order to be the Son of God. But the Son of God has become Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is only Jesus Christ as God’s holy Messiah, as the Savior of his people, as the royal Bridegroom who is united in love to the Bride he has saved by his own blood. And this union is effected by the Holy Spirit.

It’s the Holy Spirit who, as the power of resurrection, gave new life to the dead body of Jesus Christ (cp. Romans 1:4). It’s the same Holy Spirit who gives life to us, who wakes us already now in this world as it is to the life of the age to come. In that coming age, we will be joined fully to Jesus Christ, in a way not unlike the way in which a wife is joined to her husband. Meanwhile, we are pledged to each other – we to Christ, Christ to us – in an unbreakable engagement. Meanwhile, we are not together physically. Christ is in heaven, and we are on earth. But the Holy Spirit unites us. By faith the Spirit binds us to Christ. And through the bread and wine of the Holy Supper, the Spirit unites us with Christ, unites us to his body, in a holy mystery.

The old story says that “a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). That’s why we understand the husband and wife relationship as the primary relationship, the relationship that supersedes all others, including

the deepest and oldest ties of family and clan, of tribe and nation. It's the same, only more so, when we are united to Christ. Then that relationship supersedes all others.

Our first loyalty is to Christ. Before allegiance to our country or to our homeland or to our family, we belong to Christ and are loyal to him. It's common in a marriage ceremony to refer to "forsaking all others" and to "being faithful" to the one you are marrying. That's what we are called to be and to do in Christ. Only in union with Christ are we truly ourselves, truly who we are, truly who we will become. We belong to him, body and soul, in life and in death. We belong to him and to no one and nothing else.