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Pentecost 20

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“A Model Marriage”

Text: Mark 10:2-16; Genesis 2:18-24; Hebrews 2:9-18

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

We've made a mess of marriage in our world today. Instead of seeing marriage as a wonderful gift of God, for the mutual benefit of husband and wife, many today see marriage as “just a piece of paper,” which they can take or leave. Divorce with increasing frequency today puts asunder what God has joined together. And in just a few weeks, we in Virginia will have a chance to vote on the definition of marriage – whether it is to remain the union of one man and one woman, or become something of our own definition and choosing.

The results of all this have been devastating. Our world is filled with broken and hurting people, and broken and hurting families. Single parent households are becoming more and more the norm. And holidays, instead of being times of togetherness and love, have devolved into tugs-of-war between families, extended families, and step families. The joke of marriage as “the old ball and chain” has unfortunately become a reality for many. With marriage being no gift, but a burden, a struggle, an imposition on my freedom.

How far we have fallen from Adam's wonderful “**Aha!**” when God first presented his bride, Eve, to him. It's a wonderful picture we heard there in Genesis. Adam goes through all the creation of God, but is disappointed that there is no one for him . . . until God forms for him a special mate, specially made. So that when Adam wakes from his sleep, he cries out in complete joy, “**AH! At last!**” Someone for him. It is the same joy we see for newlyweds on their wedding day. And we see a glimpse of the gift of God that marriage was intended to be.

So what happens? Sin happens. It doesn't take Adam and Eve long to have their first fight, Adam blaming Eve for eating the forbidden fruit and giving some to him. And you can be sure that wasn't the only fight they had in 900 years of marriage! By the time of Moses, God has *permitted* (but not desired!) divorce, because the hearts of His people had become so hard and calloused. And today, for many, marriage has become a “take it or leave it” thing. Just another option in life, like whether or not you will get the DVD

player in your new car. And now even to its redefinition as something of a civil right, and whether or not we will allow *anyone* – regardless of sex – to marry. . . . Yes, we've made a mess of marriage.

But the answer is *not* to go the way of the law. That was the way of the Pharisees, asking Jesus: ***“Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?”*** No, the law cannot give us the reformation we need. It cannot fix our problems. In fact, according to St. Paul, the law only makes things worse – not only exposing our sin, but even arousing our sinful passions in us and making us worse! (Romans 7) No, laws won't fix marriage – or, for that matter, any of the other problems plaguing our world and society today. Laws are good, but they cannot make us better, fix our problems, or give us the holiness that we need.

No, we need a change of heart. A change from the inside out. Holiness that is *received*, not *achieved*. And that is why *Jesus and the children* at the end of the Holy Gospel that we heard today. It seems out of place there, doesn't it? Tacked onto the end of a reading about marriage, divorce, and adultery. But it is there to serve as the anti-Pharisee; to show the way of God as opposite the way of man – of our pharisaical desire to achieve our own holiness. For the children brought nothing to Jesus, they weren't there to test Him, or get anything from Him – only to receive from Him. His good and perfect gifts. His blessing and love. And to give to them is the very thing that Jesus desired to do. No, even stronger than that! It is the very thing He came to do, and *delighted* in doing.

Yes, Jesus *delighted* in the children, just as Adam *delighted* in his bride, and his bride in him. For in these children brought to Jesus, we see a picture of the marriage of Christ and His bride, the Church. And it is in Holy Baptism where Jesus takes us as His own, vows to us His love and His life, and where we become *one flesh* with Him. And to rebuke the children coming to Jesus and try to prevent them from coming would be to put asunder what God has joined together. For to even these small brides of Christ, the kingdom of Heaven belongs. Not because they *achieved* it, but because they *received* it. Because their bridegroom delights in them! Because they are holy through the forgiveness of their sins.

And so too you and me. If we seek holiness through what we do (which means: through the law!) . . . if we seek holiness through our performance of good deeds and our avoidance of bad deeds, then our lives and our relationship with our Saviour will wind up tattered, torn, and broken – just as we see in many marriages today. But our relationship with our God is much more than that; much more than a matter of law-keeping – it is a gift. And even though the Holy Gospel we heard today is not a proof text for infant baptism, it helps us to see *all* baptisms as infant baptisms – that we receive the kingdom of God and become one flesh with our Saviour as little children, whether we are 8 days, 8

years, or 8 decades old! And that at each baptism is not only the forgiveness of our sins, and the promise of eternal life and salvation, but our Saviour's "**Aha!**" of delight in us! Receiving us with the love of a husband or wife on the day of their marriage. Receiving us as His bride, and giving to us all that is His.

And what God has joined together, let man not separate.

You see, that is what makes sin so serious – not just because we happen to do something wrong, but because it is spiritual adultery; it is separating us from our heavenly bridegroom; and if left unchecked, would lead to divorce. And in such a case, the question of whether or not that is *lawful* really doesn't matter, does it? It is sad. It is destructive. It is life-killing. Just as we see in many hurting and broken people today; in many hurting and broken families, and churches. And when you're hurting and broken, you don't need someone to come and tell you what to do – you need rescue! You need a spouse to love you when you are unlovable. And to forgive.

Our marriages are not like that, as much as we wish they were, or that we could legislate them to be! But as I have been saying, there is one that *is*, and it is our heavenly bridegroom, our God and Saviour who comes to us with rescue, love, and forgiveness, exactly when we are *most* lost, *most* steeped in sin, and *most* unlovable. Our Saviour who in His incarnation became one flesh with us, so that through His death and resurrection He might make us one flesh with Him. And so on the cross He spoke His marriage vow to us, His sacred "I will," as He laid down His life for His bride. And so just as a tree broke that first marriage in Paradise, so a tree has restored marriage – our relationship with God. And in Him, we are washed clean and made holy (or sanctified) in the forgiveness of our sins.

And this vow our Saviour didn't only make once – once for all on the cross, and then once for me and you in Holy Baptism. Not only then, He also *renews His vows* to us – His vows of forgiveness, life, and salvation – every time we gather here at His altar, taking us in His arms in the Absolution, and giving us His body and blood in His Supper. Here delighting in us, as He makes us His own. Never tiring of receiving us. Never tiring of forgiving us. We brides who come as black as sin, and leave as white as snow. For the Son came from the Father and holds fast to His wife, His Church.

Again, *our* marriages are not like that, but in Christ, **we don't only have to wish they were!** In Him, we have been given the holiness and change of heart we need to begin living like this. Not perfect, to be sure! But forgiving and loving as we have been forgiven and loved. No amount of laws can produce that; but the Gospel can! The Gospel of our Bridegroom, whose marriage our marriages are modeled after. If we make

marriage something of *our* doing and *our* definition, we are doomed to failure before we even start. But in Him, and modeled after Him and by Him, we see marriage as our Lord always intended it – as gift, not law. As blessing, not obligation. As one flesh, not paper.

So should you vote for the marriage amendment in a couple of weeks? Well, we should always vote to uphold God's Word. But *not* in the expectation that the Law will solve our problems, make us holy, or return us to paradise. No, paradise, holiness, and forgiveness are already ours, in Christ. We now live the life we have received, as brides in the arms of our bridegroom; as children in the arms of our Saviour. And with such a perfect bridegroom, we live not in fear, but in confidence, knowing that what God has joined together, He will let no one put asunder!

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.