

The Works of Love

A wedding homily for Russell and Christi Hemati, May 15, 2004

The very first observation ever made about us as human beings, an observation made by God as the only One who could truly make it, expresses just how deeply the need for love is grounded in our human nature (Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*).

In the beginning, God as the wise and omnipotent Creator made a world that was good in every part — good in its light, its seas, its dry land, its plants and trees, its heavenly bodies, its fish and birds, its cattle, creeping things and beasts. And not only was it good in its parts, but as an ensemble of parts, as a totality, God declared it all to be very good.

Nonetheless when He looked upon the first man in his solitude, He made this first observation, saying, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” Here amidst the superlative grandeur of the original creation was something that was not good at all. In fact, it was bad for the man, given his God-given gregarious nature, to experience life single and alone apart from meaningful companionship.

The problem in this particular case was, of course, that there was no one else around with whom the lonely man could share himself and his life. True, there were the newly named representatives of the animal kingdom. But the man discovered rather quickly that they really weren't up to task of person-to-person fellowship, ontologically speaking! Chimps were chumps when it came to carrying on an intelligent conversation!

Certainly this first man enjoyed fellowship with his God. He did have the company of the animals. And he was prospering as a recently employed gardener and in other cultural tasks. Still, something was desperately wrong. Something was seriously missing. This man had no social life and his aloneness gradually morphed into the felt need of a piercing loneliness.

So at just the right time God came to the rescue, and in a sense provided this sad man with a social savior. “I will make a helper suitable for him,” God said

resolutely. So from the man's side He fashioned a woman, His *magnum opus*, His greatest work, a creature of unsurpassing beauty and loveliness. And just like the father of the bride, God brought her to the man and gave her away in the first, festive wedding ceremony in the history of the human race. What a joyful occasion this was. As one has written so beautifully, "When all things were created and made, none was made better than this: to be a lone man's companion, a sad man's cordial, a chilly man's fire. There is no other herb like it under the canopy of heaven (Elisabeth Elliot)."

This woman was indeed the man's equal, corresponding to him in stature and dignity as the image and likeness of God, and as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh. At the same time, she was different from him because she was female and he was male. What a great mystery this is, this great human sameness and yet this great human difference. What a challenge it is, especially this side of sin, for the two sexes to understand and love each other, for at times it does seem as if we are from different planets. Yet, how boring life would be if it weren't composed of such different equals! How empty the heart would be without the love and presence of male and female.

So, God in his love and wisdom provided for companionship and unity in love, making woman for man and man for woman. This is what our nature requires, for as we affirmed earlier in this ceremony, we are made in the image and likeness of a three-in-one and one-in-three communitarian God who is love. We are people, people who need people, and such people are, indeed, the most blessed people, in the world.

So, as Genesis 2 reaches its climax in verse 24, we grasp God's social purpose for His children spelled out before us in terms that establish the very foundation of human marriage: "For this cause, a man shall leave father and mother and cleave to his wife and the two shall become one flesh." God intends for a man and woman to break the ties of dependency upon their parents, to join together in an exclusive, inseparable bond, and to establish between them a lasting covenant of marriage. Marriage, therefore, is no human invention, but a

divine gift, a cheerful companionship, a great mystery, and an enduring covenant that is to be held in honor among all.

So Russell and Christi, today you are receiving this gift. Today you become one another's cheerful companion. Today you enter a great mystery. Today you become responsible to uphold the lasting covenant of marriage. Each of these themes is worthy of a few moments of reflection.

Russ and Christi, since today you are receiving this gift of marriage, I say to you both: be thankful.

First and foremost, you must be thankful to God for He is the One from whom you derive your every breath and blessing. He is your Creator and Redeemer who has worked sovereignly in your lives. He has shaped you into the two persons you are today, and He has brought you together at this sacred moment to be husband and wife. You are His handiwork. Your marriage is His doing, and expressing heart-felt gratitude to Him for these things today, and every day, is the only proper response.

You must also be thankful to and for each other. You can give no greater gift than by giving yourselves, your very lives, to each other as husband and wife. Russ, as a man you are God's gift to Christi in all that you are — body, soul, mind and spirit. Christi, as a woman you are God's gift to Russ in all that you are — body, soul, mind and spirit. In giving yourselves to one another, you must be thankful, not only today, but every day, expressing your gratitude in words and deeds, in conspicuous and inconspicuous ways, communicating the appreciation you have for all you bring to each other, the strengths and weaknesses, the joys and the sorrows, the wisdom and the foolishness. Marriage is a gift — a gift from God and a gift to each other. So be thankful. Live eucharistically.

Russ and Christi, marriage is also a cheerful companionship. So be joyful!

Your days of being alone are over. Your nights of loneliness are done. Your prayers about who is the one are answered. Your days of marriage have begun!

By God's grace, you have found each other and in each other you find joy and favor. After all, marriage brings the independent, fragmentary, and needy lives of a man and woman to fulfillment, wholeness, and unity. He who finds a wife finds a good thing, and she who finds a husband finds a good thing, and both husband and wife when they find each other obtain joy and favor from the Lord!

Russ, you have found a good thing in Christi, and Christi, you have found a good thing in Russ. In each other you have received favor from God. You will be iron sharpening iron. What you couldn't be and do apart, you can now become and achieve together. Together you are better than you are by yourselves, for as Ecclesiastes says, if either of you falls, the one will lift the other up; if you lie down together, you will keep each other warm; if you are assaulted, together you can resist. But you cannot do these things alone. But as a couple you can, and as a couple you will flourish and find fulfillment in each other, for marriage is a cheerful companionship: So be joyful! Live rejoicingly!

Russ and Christi, marriage is a great mystery into which you are entering: So be reverent.

From Ephesians 5, which Iraj read just a few moments ago, we learn that marriage is infused with sacred significance. Christi, when a wife is submissive and respects her husband and his leadership, and Russell, when a husband loves his wife as Christ loves the church and as he loves himself, then marriage becomes a living, enacted parable of the relationship between Christ and His bride, the church. For the wife's submission and respect depicts the church's respect and submission to Christ. And the husband's leadership and selfless, sacrificial love illustrates how Christ leads and loves the church and sanctifies her. This mystery is indeed great, as St. Paul says, for he understands how God has designed and desires human marriage, when rightly ordered, to reflect the divine marriage between Himself and His people.

Russ and Christi, I know that you both want your relationship to be a reflection of Christ and the church. This is a great privilege and a solemn task. It requires perspectives and practices that are counter to our culture. It is achieved

only by faith and dependence upon God's Spirit. Yet, when this divine purpose for marriage is realized, even in part, you will be blessed a 1000 fold as a couple, and you will have the joy and see the fruit of presenting before the watching world around you the sum and substance of the gospel of Christ. For the marriage relationship into which you are entering is a great mystery: So be reverent! Live spiritually!

Finally, Russ and Christi, marriage is also a lasting covenant. So be wise!

Genesis says that the husband and wife shall cleave to each other and become one flesh. This is covenantal language, for just as Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament were joined to God in a steadfast, unbreakable covenant bond, so husbands and wives are to be one in the steadfast, unbreakable covenant bond of marriage. The question, of course, is how can this kind of covenantal bond be sustained. How can it be upheld, when so many marriages in our culture, approximately one half, so I am told, break down and fall a part.

I submit to you, Russ and Christi, that this will take a lot of wisdom! Now you are both philosophers, and a philosopher by definition is a lover of wisdom. Certainly you will need that wisdom to keep your marriage covenant in tact over the years. The wisdom you will need to order your lives together as husband and wife is the wisdom of God.

I am reminded of something that St. Augustine once said when he, too, noted that philosophers were lovers of wisdom. But he also pointed out that all who were philosophers were not necessarily lovers of the true wisdom. God, he said, was the true wisdom, and so a true philosopher was a lover of God.

So Russell and Christi, as philosophers and lovers of wisdom, may you be lovers of the true wisdom, may you, in all your philosophizing, be preeminently lovers of God. As you grow truly in your love for Him, and thus in true wisdom, you will find the true wisdom and you will find the true love you will need to maintain in a rich and flourishing way the covenant of marriage into which you enter today.

And like the wisdom of God, you will also need to draw upon the love of God for your marriage. All true love is of God. As Soren Kierkegaard prayed at the beginning of his book, *Works of Love*: How could love be rightly discussed if you were forgotten, O God of love, source of all love in heaven and on earth, you who spared nothing but gave all in love, You who are love, so that the one who loves is what he is only by being in you.”

Russ and Christi, marriage is also a lasting covenant that you are called upon to uphold permanently in love. So be wise! Live skillfully! And be thankful, live eucharistically, since marriage is a gift. Be joyful, live rejoicingly, since marriage is cheerful companionship. Be reverent, live spiritually, for marriage is a great, sacred mystery.

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

So Russ and Christi, since it is your desire to commit yourself to one another in the covenant of marriage, I ask you at this time to say your vows to one another before God, your family and your friends.