

Apostles Anglican Church

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Marriage: A Sacrament of the Kingdom

(Is 62:1-5, 10-12 / Ps 127 / Col 3:12-17 / Mt 7:24-29)

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

When Jesus burst on the scene, it was as a wonder-working, itinerant rabbi, with the emphasis, at least initially, on *wonder-working*. He turned water into the finest wine at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. He healed the sick — all manner of sick: the deaf, the blind, the lepers, the lame. He cast out legions of demons. He raised the dead. He stilled storms with just a few words, “Peace, be still,” and he walked upon the waves. He fed multitudes with nearly nothing, multiplying a few fish and a few loaves of bread.

Such things are *wonders* because they make you wonder what’s going on. They make you wonder what kind of man this is that with just a word alters the course of nature. *Miracles* we more often call them, though we tend to use the word loosely and lightly. In the midst of a crowded parking lot we find the one open parking place on the front row; it’s a miracle. Against all odds — and perhaps against a lack of studying — we manage to pull out a solid B in a difficult class; it’s a miracle. The bonus check from work arrives the same week the water heater springs a leak; it’s a miracle. We tend to use the word *miracle* whenever anything unexpectedly good *and* highly unlikely happens *to us*.

But, to call what Jesus did in exercising his Lordship over the creation he called into being, to call what Jesus did in healing men and women created in his very image, to call what Jesus did in subduing the rebellion of fallen angelic beings made for the sole purpose of worshipping and serving him, to call any of these things *miracles* is to diminish them. They were — all of them — *signs* and not simply miracles.

After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowds followed Jesus hoping to be fed again; they came seeking not him, not really, not the Kingdom of God, but seeking more bread and fish. And Jesus answered them,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves. Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you. For on him God the Father has set his seal” (John 6:27, ESV throughout unless otherwise noted).

The multitudes saw bread and fish — the miracle — but they missed the sign entirely: the sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in their midst in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of Man on whom God the Father had set his seal. A miracle surprises you, pleases you, perhaps makes you wonder, not unlike a good sleight-of-hand magic trick. But a sign points away from itself toward something greater: not just to astonish you but to proclaim to you, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” A sign points to the in-breaking of the Kingdom — God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven, even as we pray.

“What has this to do with marriage?” you might wonder. I’ve been married almost forty-two years; some here — praise God — have been married even longer. So, I say this with the confidence of four decades of experience: when a good woman stays married to a very flawed man for that long, it is nothing short of a miracle. Given the challenges it faces, I believe that every good and lasting marriage is a miracle — something unexpectedly good *and* highly unlikely. But, to call a Christian marriage *simply* a miracle is to diminish it; a Christian marriage is a *sign*, a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in the midst of a fallen world. A Christian marriage is a sign because it is first a *sacrament*: a certain sure witness, and effectual sign of grace, and God’s good will towards us, by which he works invisibly in us to strengthen and confirm our Faith in him (cf *Article XXV. Of the Sacraments*).

Now, if you want to start a theological brawl, go to a meeting of Anglican clergy and toss out this seemingly innocent question: How many sacraments are there? Or, more pointedly: Is marriage a sacrament? Then just sit back with a cup of coffee and enjoy the verbal fireworks and expect to hear words like *Cranmerian, papist, heretic, real Anglicans, Reformation, Anglo-Catholic, Articles of Religion* and the like. You see, we Anglicans of all stripes take our Sacraments seriously, even if we don’t always agree on what is or is not a sacrament. Last week, Fr. Jack quoted the ACNA Catechism, *To Be A Christian*:

The two sacraments ordained by Christ, which are generally necessary for our salvation, are Baptism and Holy Communion, which is also known as the Lord’s Supper or the Holy Eucharist. (Articles of Religion, 25)

Far be it from me to contradict either my Rector and Dean or the ACNA catechism. Indeed, there are two and only two Gospel Sacraments ordained by Christ and deemed generally necessary for our salvation: Baptism and Holy Eucharist. And yet...and yet the historic church has generally accepted a somewhat broader view of Sacraments. If we take the position, as the church long has done, that a sacrament is a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in and through which God gives grace to his people in a unique way — and gives grace for their lives and for the life of the world — then certainly other rites of the church are sacramental: Confirmation, Confession, Holy Orders (Ordination), Unction (Anointing the Sick), and, yes, Marriage. In this sense — in the fullest sense — marriage is a sacrament of the Kingdom and a sacrament for the world.

When we discuss important theological topics — and the sacraments certainly fall into that category — semantics becomes important; words matter. For reasons that will become clear a bit later, I will now call sacramental marriage by its Prayer Book title: Holy Matrimony.

Holy Matrimony was instituted by God in creation; I would argue, from *before* the foundations of the world. When Eve had yet to be created:

Then the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept 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;
she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Gen 2:18, 21-25).

Millennia later, while on his final journey to Jerusalem, Jesus was challenged/tested by the Pharisees over this very issue:

And the Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:3-8).

There are many complexities in this and parallel passages that must be addressed pastorally and individually: with mercy and grace. This is neither the time nor the place for that. The main point here is that something has gone wrong. The sacrament of Holy Matrimony — the God-given and God-ordained permanent union of one man and one woman — has become the legal contract of marriage, which may be argued over, redefined, and even dissolved. Theology has given way to sociology and politics. Grace has given way to law.

What happened? How did this happen? Sin — the fall — happened, and the perfect union of man and woman was cursed with shame and blame and strife and

competition and dominance and all manner of disordered human desires. It's all there for the reading in Genesis 3. It's all there for the reading in the annals of human history. This disruption of the relationship between man and woman is a microcosm of the disruption of the relationship between God and all mankind, male and female. It is a sign that points away from the Kingdom of God, an *anti-sacrament*, if you will.

This is precisely why the sacrament of Holy Matrimony — Christian marriage — is so important and why we, as orthodox Anglicans — are so protective of it. This is precisely why we resist and reject any redefinition of Christian marriage that includes any relationship other than the permanent union of one man and one woman. This — and not blind obedience to outdated tradition, not homophobia — is precisely why we will not submit the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, or any Sacrament, to the whims of culture or to the authority of the civil courts. Holy Matrimony is a sacrament of the Kingdom of God, a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, for the life of the world. Holy Matrimony is a *sign* of the salvation of the world through the incarnation, life, ministry, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ. Holy Matrimony is a sacrament of the church, because it is a sign of the relationship between Christ and the church. St. Paul writes:

For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.
“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church (Eph 5:29-32).

The mystery of Holy Matrimony is the mystery of Christ and the Church.

How are we to understand this? How are we to unravel, or at least to ponder well, this mystery? We can and must do so only in Christ, for he is the very heart of the mystery of God's redeeming and transforming love.

We begin here:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Co 5:18-20).

The mystery of Christ and the church is the means and message of reconciliation. Any reconciliation of ancient grievances *in the name of Christ* is a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. And there are few relational grievances more ancient or more intransigent than the one between man and woman. It is as ancient as the fall and as current as the Women's March and the #MeToo Movement. We have tried to ignore it. We have tried to dismiss it. We have tried to legislate our way through it and out of it.

As important as these human efforts are, they always seem somehow too little, too late. And yet, in the midst of our struggles there is a sign of hope; there is an in-breaking of the Kingdom of God, a message of reconciliation of man and woman offered by Christ in and through his church; the sacrament of Holy Matrimony is a sign that in Christ the ancient rift may be reconciled. The prayers in the Rite of Holy Matrimony beseech God for this reconciliation and union:

Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life, author of salvation, and giver of grace: Look with favor upon this man and this woman *whom you make one flesh in Holy Matrimony*, and enable them to fulfill the vows they have made.

Grant them wisdom and devotion in the ordering of their *common life*, that each may be to the other a partner in prayer, a strength in need, a counselor in perplexity, a comfort in sorrow, and a companion in joy.

Grant that their wills may be so knit together in your will, and their spirits in your Spirit, that they may grow in love and devotion to you and with one another all the days of their lives.

Holy Matrimony is a sacrament of reconciliation not just between one man and one woman. It is a sign of the reconciliation possible between all men and women, married or single, in Christ. Even more, it is a sign of the reconciliation of the world to God in and through Jesus Christ.

Holy Matrimony is a sacrament of *iconicity*. I need to explain that one a bit, don't I? In the beginning,

God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Gen 1:27).

Man — male and female — was created to be the image-bearers, the *icons* of God. In the fall the image of God in man was tarnished, not lost entirely, but obscured sometimes seemingly beyond recognition. Our minds were darkened and our hearts were hardened, and we neither knew God nor clearly bore his image. But there was one who did know God. There was one who was the perfect image, the perfect icon of God: Jesus Christ. And he dwelt among us to make God known, to display the icon of the Father, to lighten our minds and to soften our hearts.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might

be preeminent. *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*
(Col 1:15-19a).

Now, how does Christian marriage fit in? Holy Matrimony is a sacrament of iconicity, because in it and through it husband and wife are transformed into the likeness of Christ and the image of God in mankind is restored. Male and female roles in marriage are neither identical nor interchangeable. Rather, both husband and wife learn, grow into, and manifest an appropriate *part* of the image of Christ so that together the image, the icon, is literally fleshed out in greater fullness in their relationship of respect and self-sacrificial love. In the true estate of Holy Matrimony, the relationship of husband and wife is the sign and icon of the relationship between Christ and the Church, and the icon of Christ is restored in husband and wife together. Let's be clear. God calls some men and women to a holy, single life, as he did Jesus of Nazareth and Paul of Tarsus. Such lives are also iconic, not least of the self-sacrificial, universal love of Christ. Holy Matrimony presents a different and complementary icon, an icon of the relationship between Christ and the Church.

Holy Matrimony is also uniquely the sacrament of human life, the means of grace through which man — male and female — may fulfill the original mandate to be fruitful and multiply. The priest's opening address to the people and the persons to be married in the Rite of Holy Matrimony captures this well:

Dearly beloved: We have gathered together in the presence of God to witness and bless the joining together of this man and this woman in Holy Matrimony.

Almighty God established the bond and covenant of marriage in creation as a sign of the mystical union between Christ and his Church. Our Lord Jesus Christ adorned this manner of life by his presence and first miracle at a wedding in Cana of Galilee and it is commended by Holy Scripture to be held in honor among all people.

The union of husband and wife in heart, body, and mind was ordained by God: for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord; for mutual joy, and for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; to maintain purity, so that husbands and wives, with all the household of God, might serve as holy and undefiled members of the Body of Christ; and for the upbuilding of Christ's kingdom in family, church, and society, to the praise of his holy Name (Holy Matrimony, ACNA Book of Common Prayer 2019).

Holy Marriage is the sacrament of human life and the God-ordained context for the procreation of children — as God calls and wills and blesses — and for the children's nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord.

So, yes, Holy Matrimony is a sacrament, because it is a sign of the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God in and through which God gives grace to his people in a unique way — and gives grace for their lives and for the life of the world. And, yes, Holy Matrimony is not simply for the husband and wife. Holy Matrimony is their vocation for the life of the world, as together they become a living sacrament and witness to the world of reconciliation, iconicity, and life in Christ. Amen.