

***Sermon for the Marriage of
Jennifer Spiro to Erick Stockslager
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
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Our culture tells us that the primary unit of humanity is the individual person. In matters of justice, social order and public policy, before anything else can be taken into account, we must think about the effect on the immediate individual. And each of us is thus taught to think about ourselves first. We ourselves are the only individuals over whom any of us have immediate control. And so we establish as doctrine what each of us is prone to do in any case, be selfish. But it is now generally understood by everyone around us that we have a *right* to be sinful.

Even the Pharisees, who vigorously tried to keep God's law, fell into this trap. The passage we've read from the Gospel of Mark actually starts in the middle of the story. The way it starts is that the Pharisees are trying to catch Jesus in an error. And they do so by asking him about divorce. "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?" Jesus, of course, points them back to the Law of Moses, which assumes the existence of divorce but puts restrictions on it. But then he points them further back in the Law, to the creation account in the first two chapters. And he answers their question about divorce by describing what marriage actually is.

They have been thinking about a man and his wife as two separate people in a relationship governed by rules and regulations, in other words as inherently separable. But Jesus corrects them by speaking to the nature of marriage in creation. "They are no longer two but one flesh."

If we think that the basic structure of humanity is the man (or woman) alone and without reference to anyone else, then we have already strayed from the revealed will of God. The basic unit of humanity is not the individual person, but the family. And the form of the family, as created by God, is a man and a woman who join themselves together to "become one flesh". There is no dividing this new entity, because it is not just two separate individuals anymore. It is one human thing, which we usually call a family.

That's where we start. After that, if you want to go back and think about individuals *in that context*, we can also do that. And it turns out that God has built us in such a way that the reality of marriage and family is our natural context. All the pieces of the puzzle fit together. "God made them male and female." Notice that he does not say "masculine, feminine, neuter, or fill-in-the-blank". Those are

genders, and the list is infinitely expandable. But they aren't objective categories of persons.

Have you noticed that all the official forms you fill out these days have a question on them that's marked "gender"? But then there are no bubbles that say "masculine". The way I really want to answer that question is something like this: "as masculine as I can get away with". But the information requested on that form is actually not gender at all. What they want to know is your *sex*. It's just that the speech Gestapo won't let them say so anymore, because they want there to be more categories than just two.

The most fundamental aspect of any individual human person is his sex, whether he is male or female. There are no other categories. And the question is objectively answerable by a simple physical exam. But the most important thing about being either male or female (and here we are back to the account of creation in our reading) is that it is all about relationship. We are built to be in relationship with other human beings. Specifically, we are built to relate to each other in marriage, male and female. But even single people are created in the context of this fundamental relationship. It brings children into the world and shelters them in a net of committed, permanent relationships that extend back through the generations and out to blood relations in the current generation. Even people called by God to live celibate lives are always a part of this net of relationships, the sign of which is maleness or femaleness in every human being.

So this is what we're doing today. Erick and Jennifer are here to extend the net. They separate themselves in a significant way from the families of which they have been part, in order to form a new family. Whatever their relationship has been up to now, it has not been that. The family is formed by them today, and there is no going back. The rest of us are here to witness their solemn vows to each other, so that we can hold them to those vows in the future. Just as there is no going back for them, there is no going back for us. Our advice and counsel and treatment of them, from now on, must drive them closer together rather than dividing and parting them from each other. Marriage is hard work. And what they start today, we must help them finish.

You see, God created marriage in the beginning with the forming of Eve from Adam's own substance. The Church doesn't create it. (Neither does the State, for that matter.) Nor can we change the nature of it. We simply acknowledge and bless what is already there in God's creation. But because we have all broken from God's perfect plan for us, our marriages are broken too. And marriage becomes a battleground in the war God is waging for our souls. We need God desperately to restore us to his original plan in creation, both individually and in marriage.

The net is broken. But the Church is God's way to mend the net. When Erick and Jennifer and I first sat down and talked about marriage, they said this: "We both know that our lives have not measured up to God's will for us. But we're trying to turn them around. Help us to do this right." That's a great invitation. If we're honest, it's what we all need to say. I put some stringent demands on them, not because of rules and regulations, but because Christian marriages must try to pattern themselves after God's will. They agreed to those demands, because they understood at some level that among the Church is where healing is found. And here we are.

St. Paul's letter to the Colossians is a description of what life in the Church should be. In order to live together well, we need to be compassionate and kind and patient. We need to forgive each other as Jesus has forgiven us. We need the peace and love that come only from the spirit of Jesus Christ living in us. And in marriage, we need all of this in spades. If we don't have love that gives rather than taking, if we don't allow the peace of Christ to rule what we say and do, then the devil will eat us alive. On the other hand, Erick and Jennifer have begun to let the word of Christ dwell in them. By bringing their desire to create a family to Christ's Church, and by doing that in the name of the Lord Jesus, they have begun to bring their lives under the authority of Jesus; where love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and perseverance are all found.

They won't live perfectly after this, any more than I will or you will. But the power of Jesus to transform them and their marriage will give them the strength to love each other better and better over the years. He will help them forgive when they hurt each other. He will help them raise children within the safety of their relationship. In the end, he will bring each of them to perfection through the blessing of their living together in the net of relationships where they belong.

May the Lord give each of us strength to do our part in making that a reality.