

The Marriage of Heaven and Earth

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a five-week series

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Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (NRSV)

⁹Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. ¹⁰For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ¹¹Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? ¹²And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Colossians 3:12-14 (NRSV)

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

What if all our relationships were characterized by compassion, kindness, humility, and patience? What if that were true of our marriages? Our friendships? Our workplaces? Such would be the marriage of heaven and earth.

Next week, we begin a brief series on the Lord's Prayer. In the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, we pray that "God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven." You might not have given that phrase much thought, for it certainly sounds right and good in just those few words. But it is worth taking a moment to unpack a bit.

Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher, proclaiming to all who would listen and enact for all who would see, the arrival of the kingdom of God. His first words in Mark's gospel are just such an announcement: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Good News" (Mark 1:15). Granted, we still await the full consummation of the kingdom, but it is with us *already*. And when Jesus speaks of heaven, he is speaking of God's kingdom.

Thus, when we pray, "God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven," we are praying for the full consummation of the marriage between heaven (the kingdom of God) and earth (the kingdom of brokenness and sin). The prayer is larger than we imagine, touching every corner of the cosmos and every soul in it.

When we try to imagine this marriage, this "new heaven and new earth" (Isaiah 65:17, quoted in Revelation 21:1), it is easy to be drawn to images of majestic landscapes. But the heart of this transformation lies in the nature of our relationships. Try to imagine what it would be like to live in a world in which everyone genuinely loves God and one another, in which every person puts the interests of others ahead of their own. Though such a world cannot be fully ours until Jesus returns and the kingdom of God comes into all its fullness, we can certainly, by the power of the Holy Spirit, seek to live in the kingdom of God today.

I suppose it is a bit like seeing the world through a kingdom-lens and aligning our lives to what we see. But what do we see when we gaze through such a lens? To get at that we are going to return to marriage, for it is the most important relationship most people ever enter into and can be a model for all the relationships in our lives. Then, we will reconsider the church, the people of God, Christ's bride, the family of God (all synonyms!), for as Simon Chan aptly put it, "God made the world in order to make the church."

Two is good

Ecclesiastes is such an odd book to find in the Bible. It reads pretty much like a textbook on life without God. Though often bleak and cynical in its outlook,¹ Ecclesiastes occasionally contrasts the bleak with the hopeful. In contrast to the person all alone, having neither child nor sibling (Ecclesiastes 4:8), two surely are much better than one (4:9), for humans need companions and helpers. The union of a man and a woman into husband and wife ought to provide each with comfort, strength, and support that they could find nowhere else. The husband and wife are two persons, joined by God into “one flesh.”

But still, marriage can be difficult, sometimes terribly so. We do not always love God as we should. We do not always love our neighbor as we should. And we certainly do not always love our spouse as we should. Even a marriage of two mature persons, both committed to lives of Christian discipleship, is not immune to troubles. Sometimes these troubles are thrust upon a marriage by tragedy, illness, or job loss. Sometimes the troubles are born from within the marriage. Regardless, any married couple will tell you that things can get tough. What guidance does Scripture give us about getting through these tough times with the marriage intact? Obviously, this is a bigger topic than we can tackle fully here, but Scripture points married couples in at least three directions: toward each other, toward Christ, and toward the community of disciples.

The practice of love

The biblical understanding of love is grounded in actions more so than sentiments. *Agape* love is about what we do more than what we feel. We may not always feel lovingly toward our spouse or anyone else, but we can always act lovingly. Indeed, one of the best pieces of advice I’ve ever been given about marriage is this: If you don’t feel the way you want to feel toward your spouse, then do the things you would do if you felt the way you want to feel. [You might have to read that again.] In other words, the practice of love can often lead couples back to the feelings of love. The same is true of family and friends.

When Paul urges the Christians in Colossae to clothe themselves with love, he is speaking of the *practice* of love, for it is in the doing that all things are bound together in harmony. Just imagine any relationship in which each participant always acted compassionately, kindly, humbly, gently, and patiently – these are Paul’s words . . . a portrait of the marriage of heaven and earth.

Three is better

In the movie, *About a Boy*, after his mother’s attempted suicide, young Marcus comes to realize that while two may be better than one, it is really still not enough. As Marcus puts it, “We need back-up . . . everybody needs back-up.” If one person gets in trouble, it all falls on the other. Marcus knows that he and his Mom need a third, at least. Early in the last century, the sociologist Georg Simmel wrote extensively about the power of three. He noted that three close, mutually supporting friends or loved ones can create a bond capable of withstanding troubles that would crush a pair. The third person, he said, created opportunities for mediation and compromise that weren’t available to a pair.

In the marriage of disciples, there is, of course, always a third -- Jesus Christ. At the end of today’s passage, Paul goes on to say, “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . .” (Colossians 3:15-16). A marriage without Christ is like a three-legged stool that has had one of its legs cut off. I think that many Christians underestimate the power of Christ in a marriage; I know that I once did. In Christ, we have been reborn, filled with the Spirit of God. We just often seem to forget this. We

¹Actually, the bleak outlook of Ecclesiastes is really the point. A life lived without God is futile and meaningless, simply from dust to dust (Ecclesiastes 3:20).

imagine that all is well, even though we try to confine Jesus to a small portion of our lives. How many couples worship together – every week of every month? How many couples pray together? Read and study the Bible together? Each week, less than a third of the adults in worship at St. Andrew are also in a Sunday morning class together – and that is on a good week. Is it any wonder that when our marriages hit tough times we feel like God has forsaken us. It isn't God who has moved away from us; it is we who have moved away from God. We need to consider not only our personal relationship with Christ, but also our relationship with Christ as a couple.²

And a family is best of all

Christ is not only the third in our marriages, he also created a church, one body, a community of disciples to whom we can turn, to whom we are supposed to turn when we face difficulties. We forget that the body of Christ is a family. As in all families, we will be closer to some persons in the family than to others. Our closest Christian kinship is to those who journey with us as part of a small group – perhaps a covenant group, or a Sunday School class, or a Bible study, one of our Connection Groups, or a choir.

A church is not a building. We may use the words that way, but the truth is that a church is a community, a fellowship of believers who may meet in a building or in homes or even on a mountaintop to worship, to pray, to care for one another, and to go about the work given them by Christ. Each church, like the community we call St. Andrew, can be thought of as an outpost or colony of the larger worldwide fellowship of believers called “the Church.”

We are also, as Paul puts it, the Body of Christ. We are his eyes and his hands and his feet in this world. We are a fellowship that was formed by God, in the person of his Holy Spirit, and is sustained by that same Spirit. Indeed, Paul refers to us as God's temple, in whom God's Spirit dwells. We are, as Peter puts, a “chosen race, a holy nation, . . . God's own people.” And there is only one thing that we have in common, our faith, i.e., our trust, in Jesus Christ. That faith in Jesus Christ is our one and only badge of membership, not race or gender or geography, nor our obedience to a set of rules nor our conformity to a particular set of doctrines.

Why Be Part of a Church?

I sometimes get a question something like this: “I believe in Jesus, but why should I have to go to church? Can't I love Jesus just as well in my living room?” I understand where the question comes from, particularly in our individualistic society. Frankly, I'm not much of a joiner myself. And I'm pretty pragmatic, wondering what something will do for me. But there is a reason that Bishop N. T. Wright says, “it is as impossible, unnecessary, and undesirable to be a Christian all by yourself as it is to be a newborn baby all by yourself,” for all those who have faith in Christ are born anew, new creations born into God's creation, the Church. As another wise and informed Christian, whose name escapes me, wrote, “There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship to the Church.” To put it another way, we can't expect to have a healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with his Body. And to put a finer edge on the theology, all believers are part of the Body of Christ, whether they are present or absent.

You see, we humans are built for relationship, for community. We are made in the image of God, who is, in his very being, inherently relational, an eternal loving fellowship of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

²Perhaps somewhere in this lies the reason Paul urged Christians to marry other Christians. At the same time, we need to remember Paul also instructed that believers already married to unbelievers were to stay married to them, so that through the believing spouse, the unbelieving spouse might come to know and trust Jesus as well.

Thus, it is in community with one another, believer to believer, that we discover the best within us and learn what it really means to have a Good Shepherd.

So, why go to church? Because it is there, in the midst of others, that we can find the meaning, the purpose, the joy, and the peace that we all seek.

Is it too much to ask that our churches be such places, that these colonies of God's new human race, reflect the God whom we worship? In a word, no!

Now, no single church community will meet all our expectations, nor will any of God's outposts meet all of God's expectations. But being absent from church entirely is not an option for a Christian. It is here, in these places and within these communities that we discover the deepest joys of the Christian life.

My wife, Patti, and I came to St. Andrew fifteen years ago, not long after getting married, and found here the most warm, welcoming, joyful people that either of us had experienced. And we've been here ever since, in good times and bad. One son was baptized here, another married, and we've gotten to share the baptisms of our first two grandchildren with this wonderful congregation of Christians.

But even more important, it has been here that Patti and I have each found our way to a deep, enduring, and fully dimensioned relationship with Jesus Christ. God has used all these wonderful people, both clergy and lay, to reshape us both and we will be eternally grateful. Yes, church matters. If relationships matter, Church matters.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. If you are married, you might begin by reflecting upon or sharing some stories of times that your own marriage has experienced some rocky times. If you are unmarried, you probably still have experience with difficulties that beset a committed relationship. These don't have to be stories of problems that threatened to blow up the marriage. There are lots of smaller problems that drive wedges and create distance between husbands and wives. How did you get through the tough times? What advice would you give to a couple experiencing problems? What do you think of the advice to practice love even if you don't feel it?
2. Do you agree that we Americans tend to be pretty individualistic people? If so, why is it so hard for us to hear the good news as a community rather than a bunch of individuals? How might reading the NT as a people (the "we"!) change our understanding of what it means to be a Christian? How can we begin truly to read the Bible as a community?
3. What do you make of the statement "There is no healthy relationship with Jesus without a relationship with the church?" Do you agree? Has this been your own experience? What does this statement imply about our life in the church? We don't call one another "brother" and "sister" at St. Andrew although some Christians do. Why brothers and sisters? What does it mean to you to think of yourself as part of a family that encompasses all Christians? Jesus certainly thinks that the family of disciples is the family that has first call on our lives (see Matthew 12:46-50, for example).
4. Excuses. You might begin by making a list of excuses that Christians make for not being in worship each week, participating in the gathered body of Christ. What are our excuses for not joining a Bible Study? Or for serving? Or caring? So often, it simply comes down to priorities. Certainly, in my own life there were many times when, sadly, I had much higher priorities than God or church. Even now, sorting out priorities is an on-going challenge. How can we get better at setting the priorities as God would hope we'd set them?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Leviticus 19:1-18 God's word for the assembled congregation of Israel</p>	<p>Tuesday, Luke 7:36-50 A sinful woman's "forgiven-ness" generates extravagant repentance and love. Can we learn to forgive before the other person says "I'm sorry"?</p>
<p>Wednesday, Ephesians 4:1-16 The body of Christ, the Church, is to be unified.</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 The body of Christ is one, but has many members.</p>
<p>Friday, Revelation 19:1-10 (esp. 9-10) The marriage supper of the Lamb. Marriage is a commonly used image for the relationship between God and God's people.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying Exodus

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

The current series:

Doing the Right Thing: Learning to Make Moral Choices

Special Event on February 16:

A presentation and discussion of medical ethics in 2014 with Steve Love, President and CEO of the DFW Hospital Council and Dr. Robert Fine, Director of the Office of Clinical Ethics and Palliative Care at Baylor Scott & White Health.

Beginning February 23

Seven Events That Shaped the New Testament World

Scott's new book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at www.scottengle.org

Sermon Notes
