

Introduction:

- A. At the beginning of last summer I had shoulder surgery so I was blessed to spend the two weeks after that sitting out on our front porch, reading and waving at the kids and dog-walkers. I decided to read this big book by Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ*. I read quite a bit but I almost never read big theology books but I felt I needed to think more deeply about Jesus' death for us.

You may not be aware of this, but there has been considerable debate and division over the centuries as to just what Jesus accomplished in dying on the cross. Sometimes these differing viewpoints are called *theories of the atonement*. Dr. Rutledge strengthened my own conviction that we'd do better to describe different *motifs of the crucifixion*. Christ's death accomplished many wonderful things, all at once. Her chapters included these motifs: "The Passover & the Exodus," "The Blood Sacrifice," "Ransom & Redemption," "The Great Assize" [court case; legal hearing], "The Apocalyptic War: *Christus Victor*," "The Substitution." They're all different aspects, interrelated accomplishments of Christ. That is how the sermons of these next seven weeks came to be. Each one focuses on one of the motifs of Jesus' death.

- B. Today I'd like you to turn to **Eph. 5:25-27**. This is in the passage about Christian marriage. The Apostle Paul explains the relationship between wives and husbands by taking us to the love and sacrifice of Christ for his bride the church. Today we're not going to focus on human marriage but on what we learn about Jesus' death for us, his bride.

- C. We just passed through Valentine’s Day. I suspect there were *some* men who stood pie-eyed in front of the picked-over wrack at Walgreens, reading this card and that, thinking, “*Well, that’s nice; that’ll work,*” knowing full well—as will his wife—that he has never come up with a sentiment like that in his life, no matter how dearly he loves her. I always think of that famous letter from the Civil War by Sullivan Ballou, who wrote home to his wife, about a week before he was killed in battle. This guy *loved* his wife!

Sarah my love for you is deathless, it seems to bind me with mighty cables that nothing but Omnipotence could break.... The memories of the blissful moments I have spent with you come creeping over me, and I feel most gratified to God and to you that I have enjoyed them for so long. ... If I do not [return] my dear Sarah, never forget how much I love you, and when my last breath escapes me on the battle field, it will whisper your name. Forgive my many faults and the many pains I have caused you. How thoughtless and foolish I have often times been! How gladly would I wash out with my tears every little spot upon your happiness ...

Now *that’s* a love letter!

- D. The passage before us is a love story but in the language on the page it might seem more like a somewhat sterile Valentine instead of the description of great love that it is. **I’m praying that the Holy Spirit will help us grasp something of the passion in this story because, of course, we are the bride so loved.**

V.25...

I. CHRIST LOVES THE CHURCH AS OUR HUSBAND LOVING HIS WIFE

A. Let me take you back to where it all started. **Eph. 1:3-4**,
“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he [God the Father] chose **us** in him [the Lord Jesus Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.”

Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match,
Find me a find, catch me a catch.

God the Father was God the Son’s matchmaker. You remember the creation story where Adam was alone and God created the woman from Adam’s side and brought her to him? God created and chose that woman, Eve, for him. In a way, it was like that for God the Son. The Father chose and predestined people before *any* people were created. He chose them *in Christ*, which means that he already regarded those Jesus would save as being *in him*, all “before the creation of the world.” And the people he chose were “to be holy and blameless.” All decided before creation in the intimate unity of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

B. Christ loved the church with the full intensity of the love among the Trinity. Jesus Christ does not gear down his love for his church from that which he has for his Father. Nor is this some kind of theological love, cooler more abstract than the kind of love we feel at our wedding day. The fact is, *our* love at its deepest, warmest, happiest, pales in comparison to the passionate love of Christ for us, his bride. He is *smitten* with us

C. To God the Son the church is his dream girl. She is everything he ever dreamed of, the perfect bride, the perfect match, with whom he wants to share his kingdom.

She is altogether lovely to him and he wants nothing more—*nothing* more!—than to live with her—with *us*—forever. Jesus loves to be with *us* more than any newlyweds ever could.

- D. Christ loves the church, all of us together. He loves us individually, of course. “*Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.*” We emphasize Jesus’ personal love for us so much that we forget that he loves us together. *Together* we are his bride. *Together* we are his body. A parent loves each of their children personally, but that parent *also* loves them as a group, as a family. *Illus.:* Jim Lindberg told me he wouldn’t be here this morning because their family is gathering at their cabin in Wisconsin. “*I just love it when my kids are all together,*” he said. “*I love how much fun they have together. Sometimes I smile so much that my face hurts!*” He loves them each and he loves them all together. That’s how Jesus loves us. Sometimes people say, “*Even if I was the only sinner on earth, Jesus would have died for me.*” As if to say, *that’s how great his love is!* But it is a far more stunning truth that he loved us *together*.

Well, that’s all well and good, but honestly, what does he see in her?! You’d think that God the Son would have better taste in choosing a wife. And it all fell apart right from the beginning, when Adam and Eve sinned against God, and sin infected us all. In **Ezek. 16** God tells his people Israel a story, how when they were born they were abandoned, umbilical cord uncut, bloody and naked, in an open field. “*Then I passed by,*” says God, “*and saw you kicking about in your blood, and as you lay there in your blood I said to you, ‘Live!’ I made you grow like a plant of the field, you grew up and developed and became the most beautiful of jewels.*” Then God says that later he passed by and looked at her “*and saw*

that you were old enough for love... I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you... and you became mine."

They got engaged. God tells how he dressed her—his people—in the most beautiful garments and jewelry, fed her the finest food and “*your fame spread among the nations on account of your beauty, because the splendor I had given you made your beauty perfect, declares the Sovereign Lord*” [v.14]. But, tragically, God says she threw all that away to pursue other lovers, “*acting like a brazen prostitute.*”

How could God the Son go through with that marriage? And that’s not the half of it. He not only determined to marry Israel, but also to join Jews and Gentiles—*pagan Gentiles!*—together as his bride.

II. THE SON OF GOD COULD CERTAINLY LOVE SUCH A PEOPLE BUT SURELY HE COULDN’T MARRY HER. COULDN’T MARRY US!

- A. God tells us now “*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?*” So surely the Son would have to break his engagement with such people. The wedding had to be called off! But his love was so deep and committed that he could not call off the wedding, and yet he could not marry such a bride. The Triune God had to find a solution.
- B. But it was not only that the bride had to be fit for such a Bridegroom. That really wasn’t his motivation. It was that in his love, God the Son saw the misery, the humiliation, the homelessness and hopelessness of his beloved, and for her sake, he had to do something to restore her to the beauty she was created to have.
- C. God required the prophet Hosea to live out this story when God told Hosea to marry Gomer. Gomer soon abandoned Hosea for other lovers, just as Israel abandoned God.

Frederick Buechner retells the story in his book, *Peculiar Treasures*. Let's pick up where Gomer has left Hosea yet again.

He swore that this time he was through with her for keeps, but of course he wasn't. When he finally found her, she was lying passed out in a highly specialized establishment located above an adult bookstore, and he had to pay the management plenty to let her out of her contract. She'd lost her front teeth and picked up some scars you had to see to believe, but Hosea had her back again and that seemed to be all that mattered.

He changed his sandwich board to read, "God is love" on one side and "There's no end to it" on the other, and when he stood on the street corner belting out

How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over, O Israel!
For I am God and not man,
The Holy One in your midst. (Hosea 11:8-9)

nobody can say how many converts he made, but one thing that's for sure is that, including Gomer's, there was seldom a dry eye in the house. [pp.43-44]

III. "CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH AND GAVE HIMSELF UP FOR HER, TO MAKE HER HOLY." (VV.25-26)

A. We speak of Jesus' last week as the *passion* of Christ. It is an apt way of putting it. Jesus' passionate love for his stained, disfigured and blemished people brought him to the most extraordinary display of love ever shown when he "*gave himself up for her.*" In some weddings, when the rings are exchanged, the bride and groom each say, "*With*

this Ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow.” I was at a wedding where at the point the bride giggled—because she had no worldly goods. She was as poor as a church mouse! But when our Bridegroom gave himself up for us, it was a sacrifice beyond our capacity to grasp.

- B. Let us once again follow the epic descent of God’s Son
Who, being in very nature God,

did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;

rather, he made himself nothing

by taking the very nature of a servant,

being made in human likeness.

And being found in appearance as a man,

he humbled himself

by becoming obedient to death—

even death on a cross! [Phil 2:6-8]

Jesus’ last words were, “*It is finished!*” What was finished? Rescuing his beloved bride from the curse of the **Law** of God that rightfully condemned her for her faithlessness, from the **Devil** whom she’d once embraced and would never be able to defeat, from the **death** she could never hope to escape. Redeemed from all that!

- C. “To make her holy.” Remember what **Eph. 1:4** said, “*for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.*” Jesus cleansed us, bleaching our garments in the blood of the Lamb. Once we are reckoned holy in Christ, we are brought together in the church and we are the agents of God’s truth, righteousness, and grace in this world. Rev. 19:7-8 looks ahead to the wedding:

*Let us rejoice and be glad
and give him glory!*

*For the wedding of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready.*

*Fine linen, bright and clean,
was given her to wear.”*

*(Fine linen stands for **the righteous acts of God’s holy people.**)*

Each time the church—any church, *our* church acts righteously in the ways we love one another and those around us, in the ways we choose not to sin but to be obedient, it is as if Jesus says, “*Isn’t she beautiful!*”

- D. The next line in 5:26 is kind of puzzling: “*cleansing her by the washing with water through the word.*” This is taken in various ways but I think he’s saying that Christ cleansed his church by giving her a bridal bath, a bridal baptism, in the truth of God’s gospel word. **Titus 3:5** says, “*He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit...*”
- E. And now we come full circle. The plan of the Triune God awaits the last and most wonderful step, in v.27, “and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but **holy and blameless.**” This is the grand event for which all heaven waits. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, *gave himself up* for his bride to *make her holy*. Now, clothed in Christ’s own righteousness, he *sees* us as holy but on that day when Christ returns he will be as a groom waiting at the head of the aisle, there in the clouds, as his church rises to meet him in the air. Then, clothed in white, we shall sit with him at the wedding supper of the Lamb and all heaven will shout *Hallelujah!*

John in his great vision says, “*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.*”
And that will be ***us!***