

Title: The Wedding for the Ages
Date: September 6, 2020
Subject: Pictures of the church – the bride of Christ
Scripture: Ephesians 5:25 - 33

People in South Dakota do things a little differently. My brother and sister-in-law served cake and ice cream for Jean's birthday (normal) and pizza for lunch the next day (again normal). But somewhere in there they brought out snack bags of crickets. A family in the church in Iowa where Dick is interim pastor raises special brown crickets, not black ones like we see here, which they turn into snacks, protein supplements and after workout refueler. The crickets are roasted, smoked and have adding flavoring. Paulette thought it'd be fun for us to try. She started munching on them and the grandkids followed suit. They loved them and we had to tell them to stop. I had to try one. They kind of stay with you for a while... if you know what I mean.

It was a good trip. We got to see the four guys as the grandkids affectionately call the Presidents on Mount Rushmore. There was a seemingly continuous use of the VBS Mystery Island CD. Caleb said he enjoyed the conversations. We got to encourage Jean's mom though it may have been a little noisy with the 11 of us invading her small apartment.

Almost 3-year-old Sophie was up to her usual. She swings her arms as she takes big strides. We had been in a tourist shop looking for T shirts and didn't find any. As we're leaving Sophie spotted the light switch right next to the door. She reached up to flip it. We caught her just before she turned off the store's lights.

We have the incredible privilege of being part of the amazing entity known as the church. It consists of people from the past 2000 years around the globe who've placed their trust in Jesus Christ to save them from their sins and give them eternal life. The better we understand this organism, the greater appreciation we can have for the one who created it and what he gives us.

The word pictures we've seen in the book of Ephesians have included the family of God into which we've been chosen by him to be adopted into the position of sons and daughters. We're part of Christ's body, an interconnected being of diverse members but yet unified by the Head. We're a new nation combining Jews and Gentiles all with the same rights. We're the building in which God chooses to dwell, his holy temple.

The next word picture comes in Ephesians 5.

READ Ephesians 5:25 – 33.

This passage is in a section describing how believers are to live in family relationships. It zeroes in on the role of the husband and uses Christ as the supreme example by showing his relationship to the church. The two are used to illustrate each other. Our focus today is on Christ and the church which is the bride of Christ.

The focus of attention at weddings is the bride. What will her dress look like? How will she do her hair? Will she be emotional? The groom's main function, role, job, duty is to show up and not mess things up. It's the bride's day. She's the one who receives the glory.

In contrast, when we talk about the spiritual marriage between Christ and the church, the roles have shifted. It's the groom who is to get the attention and the glory. It's all about him and what he's done and does for his bride.

The marriage relationship is based on two main components. The first is commitment. Grooms and brides signify their commitment of entering a covenant relationship by saying "I do" and giving rings as a seal of their promise.

Jesus Christ has said "I do" in an eternal pledge of loyalty and faithfulness to the church in a covenant relationship. It's the new covenant sealed by his blood. Later we'll celebrate this as we take communion.

Wedding vows often include the statement *forsaking all others*. This means the bride and groom are limiting themselves to the one to whom they are speaking their vows. They aren't keeping their options open. They aren't doing any more window shopping or toying with the question: "Who else could I have married?" There's nobody else in the rearview mirror or who they might run into in the future who is an alternative. The vow is to exclusivity.

Jesus forsakes all others for the church. He's not interested in a trial marriage. He wasn't interested in trying a whole bunch of alternative prospects through a dating process to see who would be the best match for him. He knew the church was and is his one and only.

The other component is love, but not according to the world's concept. Stephen J. Cole describes their idea: "The world views love as an aimless, effortless state of ecstasy. You fall in love, kind of like falling off a surfboard. Once you're in the water, you just let the current carry you along. If you have to work at it or give it any effort, you must not have the real thing. True love is totally spontaneous and unplanned" (Stephen J. Cole, bible.org/seriespage/3-christlike-love-your-wife-part-1-ephesians-525-33).

Genuine love has a purpose of giving what one has for the benefit of the other and is based on the commitment to each other. It takes effort.

Christ's love has a purpose and is based on his commitment. And he exerted tremendous effort. Christ loved the church. Love, especially the love from Christ, isn't sentiment only. It's not just something he felt in his heart. It's unselfish. It's volitional. It's self-giving. It's for the good of the other party. It resulted in the most drastically sacrificial action a person could take. He gave himself up for the church. This is a gentler way of saying he died for her. This has been called "the extreme expression of devotion."

Christ died once and he only needed to die once. If he needed to die more than that then his sacrifice was insufficient. Christ died once for all. The church wasn't only for the people who were living when he lived. People keep becoming part of the church.

Jesus Christ continues to lavish love on the church. Christ is a doting groom. He feeds and cares for the church (v. 29). He continues to provide what the church needs. He gives us reassurances of his love through his word. He gives us direction for our lives.

He wants to make everything perfect for his bride including making the bride perfect. V. 26 illuminates his overall purpose. He wants to make her holy. He sets her apart for him, to him, with him alone. She is separated from other suitors who try to get her affection. He has positioned her as his.

In another place the Lord has Paul address the sanctity of human marriage -- one man and one woman to exclusion of all others coupled with the command to avoid sexual immorality. Christ being united to his bride is used as an illustration. "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, *The two will become one flesh*. But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:15 - 17).

In another spot God directs the apostle to cite his effort to present the church at Corinth as a pure bride to one husband, to Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2 - 4). Paul jealously worked to protect the church for which he cared. He alludes to Eve and how she was led astray and is concerned that people in the church might be led astray from their sincere and pure devotion to Christ by putting up with false teaching.

Some women spend their entire lifetime getting ready for their wedding day. I think our granddaughter Chloe may be one of them. She likes to wear her jewelry and has walked around like she was about ready to go down the aisle. She definitely wants to be a mommy. There are hopeful brides-to-be who collect bridal magazines, scout online to see the newest and latest ideas, have their wedding planned from the time they're 8 years old. They have the location, ideal day in mind. The only thing they need is to find the fella.

Any bride worth the name would never think of showing up at her wedding with greasy, matted hair, huge blotches of dirt on her wedding gown and smelling as if she'd just come from the hog farm. Brides want to show up at weddings looking their best, to be all cleaned up. It might include a day at the spa, pedicure, manicure, using various lotions and ointments and perfumes she's reserved for her special day.

The people who were going to become the bride of Christ had been covered by the stain and filth of wallowing around in the hog pen of sins -- sexual immorality, idolatry, adultery, prostitution, homosexuality, thievery, greed, drunkenness, slandering, swindling and much more. God says through Paul "that is what some of you were but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). This cleansing took place at a person's spiritual rebirth when they responded to the word, the truth of Christ. There's also an ongoing aspect of cleansing as indicated by the verb tense. The church needs to continue to cooperate as Christ is in the process of totally cleansing his bride.

There are different understandings about the meaning of cleansing and washing. The New International Study Bible remarks, "One thing is clear: the Lord Jesus died not only to bring forgiveness, but also to effect a new life of holiness in the church, which is his *bride*" (note on Ephesians 5:26).

The intended character of the church is revealed in v. 27. The goal is to be without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless. Holiness again enters the picture so it must be important. It's to live in a way set apart to God. Without stain means to have no impurity. Without wrinkle refers to not having signs

of aging. Any other blemish refers to... any other blemish. Since these are part of what the church will be when Christ presents his bride to himself, she's in a process of getting to that place. This was the positional assessment when we as individuals became part of the church, but we need to experientially become them as well.

The vice president for church ministries for our denomination put it this way, "The key implication here is the call of the church to holiness. Christ, the groom, wants to make his bride, the church, *holy, cleansing her with water through the word*. In other words, he wants his church to reflect his character. He wants us to be more like himself. If we are to be the church that Jesus intended, we must grow in holiness. One of my concerns for the Church of our age is that we're more concerned about expressing our freedom in Christ than we are about living in the holiness of Christ. We like to skirt the edges a bit - live as close to the ways of the world as possible - while trumpeting our freedom in Christ...The holiness to which Christ calls his bride is not that of legalism - living by some list of rights and wrongs in establishing ourselves in holiness. Neither is it a holiness that comes with a license to participate in things that smack of worldliness and compromise. Jesus wants his bride to look like him and not the world. He wants us to be influenced and shaped by the one who lives in us and not by the people who live around us. You may ask, 'How do we possibly live above the influence of this world?' The answer is we can't do it ourselves. Christ's goal for the Church is holiness, but that will only be realized and experienced because Christ's gift to the Church is His Holy Spirit. As holiness takes root in us, we begin to look progressively more like Jesus when we allow the Holy Spirit to do in us, for us and through us what we can never do for ourselves" (Alliance Life, Jan/Feb 2020, p. 8).

Christ does what he does because we've become one with him. The church has undergone a name change. Previously, it was known as outcast, unloved. Now it is the church, the bride of Christ and loved by him. It finds a new identity in and through the groom.

Though we've spoken in terms of the church being the bride of Christ, the wedding hasn't taken place yet. But we needn't worry. Jesus isn't going to get cold feet at the last moment. He's not going to change his mind. Jesus will present the bride to himself. He's the groom who goes down the aisle to get the bride and then brings her forward.

Revelation 19:6 – 8; 21:1 – 4, 9 - 11.

The bride is identified as the new Jerusalem, the holy city, the dwelling of God. They will be his people and God will be with them and be their God. The imagery of the city represents the people of God.

The bride has made herself ready and then is given proper wedding garments. It's the righteous acts of the saints. This righteousness comes from Christ and has been worked out in the lives of his followers. It's their faithfulness and walk of holiness as we saw in Ephesians. It could be compared to the building blocks of 1 Corinthians 3 – gold, silver and precious stones.

The analogy of Christ as the groom was used at the beginning of his ministry. John the Baptist gave this declaration: "You yourselves can testify that I said, *I am not the Christ but I am sent ahead of him*. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy

when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:28 - 30).

John viewed himself as the best man, a trusted friend who attends the groom. He's present to help the groom in any way he can. Introduce people to the groom in case they don't know him. Take care of last minute details. He understood the groom is the center of the attention and therefore he desired to direct attention to Jesus. Though the attendant has important functions, he steps back so the attention can go to the groom. He does all he can to elevate the groom, to lift him up so he can receive the glory and honor.

We're in the same position. We serve as attendants of the groom. We do what we can to make his day really super special. We want the groom's joy to increase. We introduce people to him to help make the bride complete, bigger, have more people in it. We're in the dual roles of being part of the bride and trying to bring people to into the bride the church. We do all we can to elevate Christ, to lift him up so he receives the glory and honor. We step back so the attention can go to him.

Ephesians 5:32 tells us this is a mystery, a profound mystery as it relates to Christ and the church. Therefore, one of the first things we should do is ponder the mystery. Let it rattle around in our brains. Contemplate the word picture, how it aptly describes our relationship with Christ. How we respond to it.

Our response might come in the form of questions: If we love the groom... how will we act? How do we show love to the one who sacrificially loved us first and keeps on loving us?

We'll talk positively about the groom. We desire to live a life that expresses our love to Christ and one that is in union with him, his plans and purposes. It means we spend time with him. We continue to forsake all others even as he has done that for us. We declare our dependence upon him. We submit to him and his ideas.

Sheridan Voysey conveys the story of Malcolm who as a teenager wore a mask of confidence. The truth was his turbulent home-life created fear, desperation for approval and a feeling of responsibility for the family's problems. Malcolm said, "For as far back as I remember, every morning I would go into the bathroom, look in the mirror, and say out loud to myself, 'You are stupid, you are ugly, and it's your fault.'" The self-loathing continued until he came to faith in Jesus Christ and understood his true identity. He recalls, "I realized that God loved me unconditionally and nothing would ever change that. I could never embarrass God, and he would never reject me. Malcolm then spoke differently when he looked into the mirror. "You are loved, you are beautiful, you are gifted, and it's not your fault" (Daily Bread, Aug 5, 2020).

Christ's bride will live with him forever. He told his disciples he had to leave earth to go to heaven but said he'd come back to get those that belong to him so they could be with him forever. In the meantime... he's making a really nice home for his bride. Rest assured, the bride will be vividly and absolutely stunning sight. She'll be a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.