

If your primary source of love comes from your spouse, then you're always dependent on them to give you what you need. And what do you do when he or she fails you? What do you do when he gets sick? What do you do when she spends many hours at work, or he is committed to some pastime or is caring for an aging parent?

But that's why we need a source of love that is far greater than that which your spouse can afford. The joy of marriage comes from putting someone else ahead of your own needs. Living for yourself is actually a desperately meaningless and lonely existence. But you need the resources for this to come from somewhere.

Think back to the "Giving Tree" story I told a few weeks ago. The tree gave her leaves, and her apples, and her branches, and her truck ...and the tree was happy. The secret of happiness – the way to deep satisfaction in life is not from receiving everything you want. No, true happiness comes from making someone else the benefactor of your love.

We know this is true. How do you feel when you give someone the perfect gift? How do you feel when you cheer someone up? How do you feel when you hug someone who's having a bad day? You feel great. You feel alive. You feel like your life has purpose and meaning – it gives you true joy.

But we can't do this day after day, week after week, year after year, without tremendous love resources to back it up.

For those who are married, what if the biggest problem in your marriage is your self-centredness? Oh, I know he always forgets to take the recycling out. It's such a simple thing. Why can't he just do that one thing? And I know, she runs up the credit card bill every month? Doesn't she know how hard it is to pay it off?

But Paul says that's not the biggest problem in your marriage. The problem is that we're too focussed on ourselves. That's why his answer is submission to the other. Putting

yourself under the authority of the other who is also under the ultimate authority of Christ. It's why marriages that don't include Christ are a bit of a gamble – you're going it on your own resources.

But that's why we so desperately need a fulfilling love relationship with Christ now, and hope in a perfect love relationship with him in the future. Because without it, married people put too much pressure on their marriage to fulfill them.

Max Lucado describes his personal relationship with Christ this way: "If Jesus had a refrigerator, my picture would be on it. If he had a wallet, my photo would be in it. He sends me flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning...Face it friend, he is crazy about me!"

Dr. Sue Johnson, in her book, argues that our relationship with God gives us the deep connection we long for, it gives us a safe haven to find comfort, and it gives us a secure base on which to build our other relationships. It gives us the love we need in order to be generous to our significant other.

But this God relationship isn't general, it's specific. It's so specific that Jesus invites us to see him as our bride groom. We're awaiting, with great anticipation, our wedding day. A day so full of joy and celebration, that we can live in the anticipation of it today.

Jesus Christ is our first and ultimate source of love – a love so powerful that makes the challenge and difficulty of marriage make sense. A relationship that at times will require more of us than we receive. But in the giving we find our life's deepest meaning and purpose.

But only in so much as we abide in him. As the great hymn says:  
*Abide with me, fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide.  
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, oh, abide with me.*

Thanks be to God, Amen.

## ***"Made for it: Bridegroom"***

*November 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023 — Selby United Church — Scripture: Ephesians 5:21-32  
By Rev. Mike Putnam*

I didn't grow up dreaming about my wedding day; I suppose most boys don't. And so, I suspect many Christian men have trouble connecting with the biblical image of the church as the Bride of Christ.

We might more readily resonate with the image of Jesus as our king or our friend, but I suspect we aren't so eager to think of Jesus as our groom.

Yet this image is given to us as a glorious biblical image of the church. And I wonder if it's possible that even the manliest men in our church here today could be longing for the "marriage of the Lamb" by the time we leave here this morning?

If the number of times an image is used is a gauge of its importance, then the images of weddings and wedding feasts are central to scripture. They are used repeatedly in the Old Testament and in the New.

But I tread into this territory carefully because speaking about marriage and marriage roles in this day in age is tricky. There is no cultural consensus on this anymore. And this is a diverse group – married people and unmarried people. People who once were married but have lost their spouse. There are people who are single but hope to be married one day. There are people who are divorced, separated, and those thinking about divorce or separation. And understandably, there may be some tender feelings here this morning about all of this.

But rest assured that it is not my intent to poke at any of that this morning. In fact, I hope that what you will hear here this morning is good news from Jesus for people

in all of those circumstances.

But there's no doubt that many an abusive husband has quoted texts like Ephesians 5 in order to gain coercive power over their partner. But that's not only an abuse of a partner but it's an abuse of God's Holy Word. I hope it's obvious that Ephesians 5 is not only asking wives to "submit to their husbands," but it is also calling husbands to do the same.

What I want you to notice is the very first line from our text. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ." This is the image we're given for marriage. But do you see how shocking this line would have been two thousand years ago? I mean, we think this passage is borderline offensive today, but to tell a husband he must submit to his wife was culturally absurd two thousand years ago. But this is exactly what happens when Jesus is Lord – things start to turn upside down.

But again, rest assured that this sermon isn't about how you should structure your household and who should be the head of it. This sermon is about the good news of Jesus Christ as our ultimate spouse.

And as strange as this theme sounds to our ears, it may be the best news yet. We've heard that Jesus is our good and better friend, we've heard that Jesus is our good and better brother. But Jesus is also our good and better bride groom.

Again and again in scripture we are told that Jesus is the bride groom and the church is his bride. And one day there will be a wedding banquet to usher in the arrival of a new age in which our love and experience of God will be fully and finally

complete. What a curious image. What a funny way to speak about God.

But the reason I chose this difficult text about our human marriages for today is because of what Paul says at the very end. He says, “This is a profound mystery – but I am talking about Christ and the church.”

Wait, what? So, all that stuff that sounded like marital advice from another era was first a statement about who Jesus is and how we should relate to Him?

This text is mostly talking about Jesus, who is the head of the family and who is preparing his bride for the day when all of creation will be re-made, and heaven and earth will come together without the power of sin and death dominating it. And how will that creation operate? Not with power and coercive control but with mutual submission when we are wed to Christ.

But now let’s come back down to this earth. In this time when we wait in hope for that day, I hope there’s something we can all agree on – marriage is good. It’s not necessary – the Bible says singleness is good too. But marriage has much to offer our society. It gives structure and stability, and it creates the most solid and secure place for children to grow and flourish. Marriage is yet one more way that God can transform us in his image. It’s a tool in God’s tool box for making the world better. Marriage is good.

But I’m sure we can also agree that marriage is hard. Sometimes impossibly so. Marriage never seems to quite live up to our lofty hopes and dreams for it. We think it will be one thing and it turns out to be another. It’s a slow process of letting go of our expectations and settling into what it really is and what it truly has to offer us.

But marriage is still good. It was God’s idea. It’s part of how God has ordered his world in love. But in a fallen

world its bound to be challenge.

So in our time, more and more people say marriage is simply outdated. Others say it’s too restrictive. Others say it’s too patriarchal and needs to change. While others say marriage doesn’t fit with contemporary values anymore.

And yet, marriage endures. People still do it. It happens less and less in the church, but instead people hire officiants and rent out venues. But little girls still dream about the perfect wedding dress, couples still agonize over the details, parents fork over great wads of cash to see their children get married.

And so, we live in a time of two competing narratives. There are some who say marriage is good and my marriage will make me happy. And there are others who say marriage is old fashioned and it can never make me happy.

Well, as a Christian minister I obviously have a preference for marriage, but I also uphold the importance of singleness. Both are viable and good options according to scripture.

But I have to ask, who ever said that the purpose of marriage was to make us happy? Now, it may well do that...at times. But marriage is far too hard to simply be a vehicle for happiness. No, marriage isn’t primarily about us feeling happy its primarily a platform for emotional security – something we all desperately need.

Tim Keller says, “Modern people make the painfulness of marriage even greater than it has to be, because they crush it under the weight of their almost cosmically impossible expectations.” It just can’t be everything we try to make it. And it can’t make you happy all the time.

But you see, this is why so many people today are disappointed in their

marriages or walking away from the institution of it all together. We simply have lost the vision for what it really is or why it’s so important.

I’ve been reading a book by a Canadian Clinical Psychologist named Dr. Sue Johnson, called Created for Connection. It’s actually where I got the idea for this sermon series, and I’ve been pondering the implications of her book for months now.

She says that the basis of a viable marriage and the questions we ask ourselves every time our spouse does something wonderful or something downright irritating is threefold:

1. Are you accessible to me – can I reach you when I need you?
2. Are you responsive to my needs – can you respond to me emotionally?
3. Do I know you will value you me and stay close to me no matter what?

These three things are what makes for a good marriage (or a bad one). It’s not happiness. It’s not making all my dreams come true. It’s accessibility, responsiveness and engagement upon which we can build a truly wonderful life together. We can put up with a lot of other frustrations in our marriages so long as these three things are true for us.

Dr. Sue Johnson happens to be a Christian although she works in a secular field of study. And in the book, she looks at how Jesus offers us exactly the kind of deep marital connection that we desperately need in our human marriages.

She says, “Scripture often refers to the accessibility, responsiveness and active engagement that make up a secure bond. In John 15:7, Christ explicitly tells us, “If you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon.””

Notice the mutual submission that Jesus requires. But also notice the way that Christ offers a model for the kind of receptivity and responsiveness that is essential in a viable marriage.

But here’s the problem – so often in our marriages we’re so focussed on our own needs that we fail to be in touch with our spouses’. So often one person is doing the majority of giving and the other is doing the majority of the receiving. Rarely is there an equal split of energy and resources.

This may be for a variety of valid reasons. There may be greater career demands for one, there may be sickness or injury, there may be mental health issues or even just personality quirks. But rarely does a marriage look like a perfect 50/50 split. Someone is always investing more than the other.

So, what do we do? Is it time for divorce? Go on the hunt for someone who can do it more fairly? No, because as Christians we’re called to fidelity to one another just as Christ is faithful to us. But it is in these situations that Jesus says lean on me. Because for us Christians, married or unmarried, our relationship with our spouse Jesus Christ can be our ultimate and primary source of accessibility, responsiveness and engagement.

And this relationship with Jesus can be our secret weapon in our marriages. Because His endless providence and nurturing love is more than enough.

Tim Keller, in his book on marriage, talks about “love economics.” It’s the idea that you can only afford to be generous with someone if you have love in the bank to give. But if your marriage gives you 25% of your love resources but it requires 55% of your love resources, now we have a love deficit. What are you going to do? Where’s the difference coming from?