

HUSBANDS AND WIVES

Robert Spicer

Editors' Note: This sermon was first preached in the Stadtkirche in Lutherstadt-Wittenberg, Germany, under the auspices of the Wittenberg English Ministry, as part of the annual celebration of the Luthers' wedding. The sermon first appeared on lutheranforum.org

When I was invited to come to Wittenberg for these two weeks, the fellow doing the inviting told me that this was by far the best weekend of the summer. I now know he's right! What a blast it's been to be part of all this!

There's obviously lots of stuff being celebrated here this weekend: beer, brats, and a free market economy. But at the heart of it all, what we're really here to celebrate is the gift of marriage. And not just the marriage between Martin Luther and Katherine von Bora. But also, for those of you who are married, your own marriages as well.

And for all of us, whether married or not, we're here tonight in this house of worship to celebrate the marriage described in our second lesson this evening; the marriage between Christ and his church.

I don't know if you noticed it or not, but our first and second lessons tonight are like bookends to the Bible: Genesis 2 and Revelation 21. One's at the very beginning, the other's at the very end. In between these two lessons, God often uses the image of a marriage to describe his relationship with us. And so one could easily say that the whole story of the Bible is the story of a marriage: the marriage between God and His people.

The story of Adam and Eve sets the stage for everything else to come. The Bible begins with the union between Adam and Eve and ends with the union of Christ and his church. And in the same way as Genesis tells us that a man will leave his father and mother to become one flesh with his wife, so then does the rest of the Bible tell the story of how the Son of Man left his Father in heaven to become one flesh with us.

In the same way Adam was made to sleep for a time so that Eve might be born, so too was Christ laid to rest for a

time—three days, in fact—so that we might be born again. And just as Eve was created out of the sleeping Adam's opened side, so was the church created from the open side of the crucified Christ.

After Jesus was dead, John tells us, a centurion pierced his side. And at once there was an issue of water and blood, the symbols of birth and life, the marks of the church, baptism and communion. Through these symbols, the water and the blood, Christ gives life to his church. Eve's life was given to her from the flesh and bone of Adam. Our life comes from the body and blood of Christ.

The joy Adam expressed in our first lesson this evening when he was finally united with his wife is a foretaste of the joy we'll experience as Christ's bride when the scene described in our second lesson becomes a reality.

When the bride and the lamb are finally and fully united, God will make His home among us. This is the great wedding feast—the great *Hochzeit*—we look forward to as the church. And in the meantime, the joys of marriage we experience now, including the joy we're sharing here together during the Luthers' *Hochzeit*, is just a foretaste of the joy to come.

But as we look forward to that feast to come, we must never forget the amazing sacrifice that's allowed us to be a part of it. For if the Bible is the story of God's marriage, then it's also the story of how we've been His unfaithful spouse, the adulterous bride.

Our relationship with the bridegroom was broken through our sin, but thankfully it's been fully and graciously restored through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And so as we celebrate the gift of marriage this weekend, let us do so with a sense of gratitude and humility, realizing that the only reason our marriage to Christ hasn't ended in a messy divorce is because he's remained committed to us even when we failed to commit ourselves to him. He remained faithful to us, even when we were unfaithful to him.

Just as Eve was created out of the sleeping Adam's opened side, so was the church created from the open side of the crucified Christ.

“You did not choose me,” Jesus reminds us in John 15:16, “but I chose you.” In other words, “You were a disobedient bride,” he tells us, “an adulterous wife. And yet even when you wouldn’t choose me, I chose you. I chose to sacrifice myself for you, so that from my opened side you may have life.”

And so the Bible tells us in 1 John 4:10: “This is love, not that we loved God, but that He first loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

God’s love for us is revealed in the choice He made for us. The choice to commit Himself to us even when we wouldn’t commit ourselves to Him. To sacrifice for us, when we wouldn’t sacrifice for Him. To die for us, when we weren’t even willing to live for Him. He chose to be the faithful bridegroom, even while we chose to be the adulterous bride. While we were busy seeking separation, Christ was busy making possible our reconciliation.

Which leads us to our gospel lesson where Jesus tells us: “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love... and love one another as I have loved you.”

Certainly that’s a general command for all Christians living together as Christ’s disciples. But it’s also a unique command for husbands and wives. Because more than in any other relationship, the marriage relationship allows us both to express and experience the fullness of God’s unconditional love.

In the same way Christ chose to commit himself to us, so too do husbands and wives choose to commit themselves to each other. You might even say that in marriage we commit ourselves to loving one sinner the way Christ committed himself to loving a world of sinners. And as we do that—as we learn to love another sinner—we begin to understand just how much grace it took for Christ to commit himself to loving us.

Because the simple fact of the matter is, if we’re going to stay married for any length of time, that is, if we’re going to take our commitment to our spouse as seriously as Christ takes his commitment to us, then we’re going to have to learn to love what, at times, may seem unlovable. And forgive what sometimes may seem unforgivable.

But as we learn to do that—as we learn to love our spouse the way Christ loved us—we begin to learn the true meaning of his suffering and sacrifice as we suffer and sacrifice for the sake of our spouse.

But now, before I make marriage out to be nothing more than a laborious chore, let’s shift to the flip-side of this equation. Because not only does marriage teach us how to *express*

*If the Bible is the story of
God’s marriage, then it’s
also the story of how we’ve
been His unfaithful spouse,
the adulterous bride.*

Christ’s love to a sinner, it also allows us, as sinners ourselves, to *experience* Christ’s love.

Because when both spouses take the marriage commitment seriously—that is, when both choose to love their spouse the way Christ first loved them—then not only do they learn through self-sacrifice to express Christ’s love, they also get to experience his love through the sacrifice their spouse is willing to make for them.

More than any other relationship, a marriage allows us to experience the humbling joy of having our spouse love and forgive all those parts of ourselves that we’ve always thought were unlovable and unforgivable. Because eventually all those dark corners that we try to keep hidden are going to be exposed in a marriage. And what grace we find when our spouse stum-

bles into those dark corners and loves us just the same! To experience that love is to experience Christ’s love.

But now the question we’re left asking is: is this kind of unconditional love between spouses really possible? And the answer, in good Lutheran fashion, is: yes and no.

No, it’s not possible for us. It’s not possible if we rely only on our own sinful efforts. But it *is* possible when the power of God’s Holy Spirit is at work in us. It’s possible when by His grace He enables spouses to love one another the way Christ first loved them. And as they grow in their love, and mature in their faith, something amazing begins to happen. They begin to look more and more like Christ. And ever so slowly his grace becomes their grace. His patience, their patience. His forgiveness, their forgiveness. And his unconditional love for them becomes their unconditional love for each other.

“Abide in my love,” Jesus tells us tonight, “and love one another the way I’ve loved you.”

To those of you who are about to renew your vows of marriage here tonight: I hope the Holy Spirit will be poured out for you in new and abundant ways. And I pray that Christ would enable you to love one another as he first loved you.

And for those of you who aren’t married, or who once were but aren’t any more, my prayer is that Christ would pour out his Spirit on all of you, too. So that where there are wounds, he’d bring healing. Where there is sadness, comfort. Where there’s doubt, faith. Where there’s despair, hope.

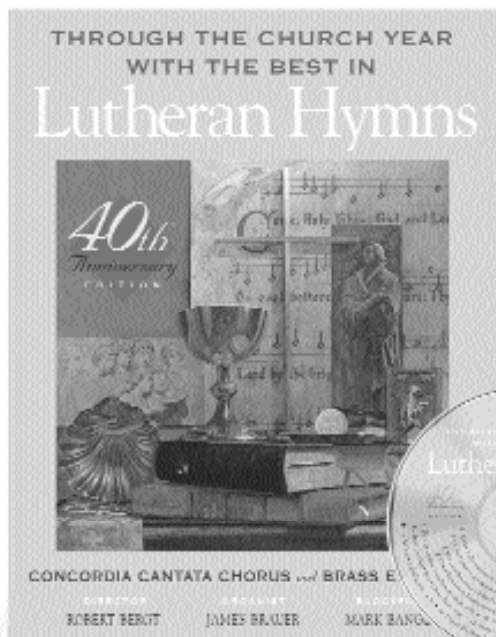
But most especially, I pray he’d allow us to abide in his love so that his love might prevail in all our earthly relationships. In Jesus’ name.

Amen.

LF

ROBERT SPICER is the pastor at Groveport Zion Lutheran Church in Columbus, Ohio.

Through the Church Year with the Best in Lutheran Hymns



40th Anniversary Edition CD & Hymn Guide

The CD offers 18 classic chorales digitally restored from the 1961 collection featuring the Cantata Chorus & Brass Ensemble of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

The Hymn Guide provides the original program notes, instructions for use, hymn texts and tunes for the following:

Savior of the Nations, Come • All Praise to Thee, Eternal God • Of the Father's Love Begotten • How Lovely Shines the Morning Star • May God Bestow on Us His Grace • A Lamb Goes Uncomplaining Forth • Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands • On Christ's Ascension I Now Build • We Now Implore God the Holy Ghost • In Thee Alone, O Christ, My Lord • Oh, Enter, Lord, Thy Temple • From Depths of Woe I Cry to Thee • From God Shall Naught Divide Me • Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart • In the Midst of Earthly Life • O Lord, We Praise Thee • Salvation unto Us Has Come • Wake, Awake for Night Is Flying

The hymns contained in this recording constitute a "little canon" of great Lutheran chorales coming to us from the period when storm and stress, persecutions from within and without, brought about orthodox expression of biblical truths in hymnody; a spirit of genuine Christian life; and a sincerity which rings true to life's problems and their solution in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

—Professor Robert Bergt, Choir Director



ORDER FORM

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State/
Province _____

Zip (+4)/Code _____

ELCA _____ LCMS _____ Other _____

Daytime phone _____

Quantity	Description	Total
_____	Through the Church Year with the Best in Lutheran Hymns 40th Anniversary Edition CD with Hymn Guide.	(\$10 each)
		Subtotal _____

Shipping:

\$2.50 for first 40th Anniversary Edition CD with Hymn Guide

\$.50 for each additional 40th Anniversary Edition CD with Hymn Guide

For Priority Mail or other faster shipping options, for information regarding orders to be charged or billed, or for orders outside the U.S., please contact Donna at U.S. (607) 746-7511 or by email: dkralpb@aol.com

Shipping _____

Total _____

PAYMENT OPTIONS

Order online at: www.ALPB.org

Or fax this form to Donna at (607) 746-7511

Or mail this form with your payment to:

American Lutheran Publicity Bureau
P.O. Box 327, Delhi, NY 13753-0327

Please make checks payable to: ALPB

Please complete the following to pay by credit card:

_____ Master Card _____ Visa _____ Expiration M/Y _____/_____

Credit Card #: _____ - _____ - _____ - _____

Signature _____

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ORDER