

# The Bride, the Bridegroom, the Bridegroom's Friend

*Ephesians 5:21-32; John 3:22-30*

Well, we've spent a month of Sundays listening to and thinking about a hushed conversation in a darkened doorway that Jesus had with a man named Nicodemus, who had come there by night hoping to do some political business with this mystic carpenter from Galilee, a man who showed a sort of power and insight that Nicodemus thought old Israel really needed. But Jesus that night wanted no help, no allies among the authorities. All Jesus could focus on was the man in front of him, Nicodemus, a sincere, open, old soul who had come about as far as Moses could take him, but he needed a word of gospel from Jesus and a new birth from the Spirit before he could "see" or "enter...the kingdom of God."

So Jesus met Nicodemus where he was, talked with Nicodemus about "the Son of Man", whom Daniel had seen in a night vision some 500 years before. And then Jesus reminded the old rabbi about a story from Moses and old Israel out in the wilderness, where God's people were infested by snakes, snake-bitten, and the cure God prescribed was for Moses to fashion a bronze serpent and nail it to a cross beam of wood which Moses raised up in the center of the camp. And any desperate soul that day could look at the snake nailed to a cross and be saved from the venom of the snake bites.

The point? Jesus told Nicodemus that this was how God would love the world: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." It was an altar call to the old man, and an altar call to us if we have ears to hear what Jesus was getting at. Because we are all snake bitten. The Serpent's venom, from the moment we left the Garden, has left us in the dark, blinded us to the light that lives in God's heart, the truth that God speaks. It is the venom of Eden's snake in our souls that has put God's love beyond our reach.

So Nicodemus and us after him are left with a choice. Do we flee from Christ because his light painfully exposes just how much trouble we're in? Or do we face the hard truth and trust Christ to gain us forgiveness and the Spirit to give us power to start over. And for the moment, John's gospel leaves the question open. We never hear how Nicodemus reacts to the Son of Man in a darkened doorway. Instead, the scene moves on to the next day when Jesus brings his disciples out and down into the Jordan River valley. The text tells us that Christ "spent time with them and was baptizing."

Which is unusual because this is the only time in all the gospels that Jesus ever baptized people. And even more unusual, the gospel tells us that Jesus and John the Baptist were both active, both baptizing people just some miles apart on the Jordan River. None of the other gospels show Jesus

and the Baptist active in public ministry at the same time. And here in John's gospel, the sight of a carpenter baptizing people immediately leads to controversy. You see, John was the son of a priest.

And in old Israel, it was the job of a priest to pronounce someone spiritually clean after he'd taken a ritual bath. What did Jesus always say to lepers he had healed? Go to the priest and he'll declare you clean. So it was natural after a sinner bathed in the Jordan for the Baptist who was a priest to pronounce the man clean, forgiven! But Jesus was no priest, he was from the wrong tribe, he was a carpenter, in the wrong line of work to be declaring anybody clean. So some tidy Jew ran down river to John the Baptist to point out to John's disciples that an imposter was in play, namely Jesus.

Which was a conundrum because the disciples of the Baptist knew that Jesus was no imposter. They said to John, "*Rabbi, he who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you bore witness, behold, he's baptizing, and all are going to him!*" They knew Jesus was for real! The Baptist had taught them that! But they didn't understand how a non-priest could get involved in baptizing people and declaring them clean.

And John's response didn't directly answer the question. John said, "*A man can receive nothing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him. The one who has the bride is the bridegroom...'*". Now prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel had often pictured old Israel as a bride betrothed to Israel's God.

So what the Baptist is seeing in Christ is someone sent from God whose role entirely transcends what tribe Jesus was from and what Moses taught about baths and priests and forgiveness. We heard the Baptist say in the first story of the first chapter of this gospel, "*One comes after me whose sandal I am not worthy to untie,*" and then again a day later, "*I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove and it remained on him!*" So here John reminds his disciples that he had already taught them that Someone greater than him and Moses and tribes and rituals was on the way. "*You yourselves bear me witness,*" John told them, "*that I said, 'I am not the Christ, but I've been sent before him.*"

"*The bride belongs to the bridegroom...*" And God's people belong to God's Son. For all of old Israel's history, God's people had been engaged to the God who loved them and chose them. And now God the Son himself, the Bridegroom, had come to collect his bride and show her the way to the wedding and the banquet. So the Baptist saw himself as a best man, "*...the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him and rejoices greatly...*"

You see, old Israel had long experience with friends of the bridegroom going before a savior to prepare, sometimes a single bride, sometimes the whole people of Israel for a wedding, some

kind of covenant that would save them. Remember Eliezer of Damascus in Genesis, who journeyed 500 miles to find Rebekah and lead her home to Isaac, the bridegroom who would love and save her for God.

Next would come Samuel, who introduced David to Israel to be both king and savior in his day. So why should we think best man, friend of the bridegroom about Samuel helping David be king? Because when it came time for David to take the throne, the people of Israel would say to David words like what was said at the original wedding ceremony in the Genesis garden. Do you remember?

When God brought Eve down the aisle in the Garden, Adam said to his bride, “*You are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!*” And likewise when Israel made David their king, God’s people said to David, “...*we are your bone and flesh!*” In so many words, they were telling David, “You are our savior and we are your bride!”

But it was Samuel who was best man, the friend of the bridegroom who brought David to Israel in the first place. Which is why in this gospel John the Baptist sees himself as best man, “*the friend of the bridegroom*” arranging the wedding, introducing God’s new king, God’s own Son to Israel out on the banks of the Jordan.

Now the downside to being a best man is that Friends of the Bridegroom are only center stage for a fairly brief moment. So John explains to his disciples, “...*the friend of the bridegroom stands and hears the bridegroom’s voice and rejoices greatly. This joy which is mine is now complete. He must increase, and I must decrease.*” So the Baptist and Jesus are in different categories. Like Moses and Samuel before him, John is fallen, he can only take us so far, only point us toward the real bridegroom.

Because this whole chapter, really this whole gospel features what fallen men and women lack and what only God’s Son can provide. You’ll remember that weeks ago in this gospel we read about Jesus in Jerusalem, showing the power and insight that uniquely belonged only to him, and, the gospel told us: “...*many believed in his name when they saw the signs he was doing. But Jesus for his part did not trust them because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about a man because he knew what was in a man.*”

And, in the very next verse, along comes a man, Nicodemus. A good man really, about the best that Israel can do, willing to learn from Christ, wanting to deal with Christ. But what becomes instantly apparent is that Jesus wanted from Nicodemus something the old rabbi hadn’t come prepared to give him. His whole heart and life! The old man, Jesus said, would have to be “*born from above*” to “*see*” what Jesus was getting at, “*born of water and Spirit*” to even “*enter*” the kingdom where Jesus is king.

And the question is, other than at birth, is there another experience in life where we start a new life, give ourselves away to someone we love and trust? And the answer is, “Yes. At a wedding.”

So our Call to Worship this morning was about husbands and wives, Christ and Church. And Paul remembered the words God spoke at the very first wedding in Genesis: “... *a man will leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife and the two will become one flesh.*” And then Paul adds, strangely, “...*but I am speaking about Christ and the Church.*” And I think what Paul has in mind is what Jesus asked of Nicodemus, being born again, saying “I do” to that Bridegroom and Savior who alone possesses what fallen human parents and spouses and others can’t really ever provide us.

So, Paul teaches, it is our covenant with Christ, the love that exists between us and him that breathes life into any other covenant we make and try to keep with each other. And the first principle to take to heart is that the Church is “*subject to*” Christ because he loved us first. He “*gave himself over*” Paul says, unilaterally, unconditionally to secure us as his bride and prepare us for our wedding day.

So Paul teaches the early Christians in Ephesus to “*Be subject to one another out of fear for Christ.*” So why should we fear a Bridegroom who unconditionally, unilaterally loved us first and gave himself over for us? Because that’s how real love works. If we give our heart to Someone and our whole life starts to rearrange around that person. We need love from that person’s heart and light from that person’s eyes, and we begin to measure what we do and feel and say by the impact it has on the person who loved us. We really do fear hurting and disappointing that person who holds our heart.

So why should “*fear for Christ*” move us to “*be subject*”, to defer to and bend for and change our plans for one another at church? Why? Because the love Jesus has for us is not given to and cannot be taken by any of us alone. We are the Bride of the Savior together. Christ loves all of us, gave himself over for all of us, so what he’s given us is a love that cannot be hoarded but must be shared.

Love for Christ requires us to see what believers around us need, and to bend and change and do without so that they are nurtured and cared for. Love for Christ will lead us to do for each other what Christ did for us, to put their well being, their healing, the forgiveness they need, the patience they require of us over and ahead of what makes us happy, what makes us comfortable and safe.

Next Paul teaches women, wives, to “*be subject*” to their husbands in particular. The presumption which will become a command three verses later, is that a husband will have loved

his wife in some fashion that resembles the love that lives in Christ's heart for all of us. After all, love ought to be a two way street. But Peter, in chapter 3 of his first letter, will spell out in some detail how what Paul teaches about a wife being "*subject*" to her husband applies even if the man involved isn't a believer, isn't much at all like Christ. Peter teaches that, in a case like that, a Christian wife ought to be subject to the man anyway which is a tall order, I really do know. It only ever begins to seem reasonable if one really takes to heart what Paul goes on to teach Christian husbands is their duty.

Paul writes, "*Husbands, love your wives just as Christ also loved the church and gave himself over for her...*" So the question becomes just how real, how deep, how wide and total and selfless was the love Jesus showed to win for himself a bride to bring home, back to the Garden from which the original human couple was banished, snake bitten, blinded to truth and light, hardened to mercy and love. That is the love a Christian man owes his wife. The point being that, in a world without sin, love would be a two way street. We would all like marriages that are certain win-win arrangements.

We would all like a church where we can serve and give and love with some certainty that our service will be noticed, our needs accounted for and addressed. But the Fall has imposed on us the need to love first, to sacrifice for the people in our care, or to defer and serve and respect the people God places over us, all of it first, with no certainty that the people we give ourselves away for will even notice the gift, no certainty that the people we defer to will respect or appreciate our service. God calls us to love first, and to bend and serve first because that's what Jesus did for us.