

Crowning of Matthias and Natalie
May 5/18 2015. Sixth Sunday of Pascha

I want to take advantage of a unique opportunity.

I can speak as a father and a priest and a friend.

I have some things I want to say, and I am going to do my best to say them. I may be clumsy sometimes, but my prayer is that your heart will understand mine.

I want to say some things to Kevin/Matthias and Natalie, and all my children, and to all of you.

There are different things for each, with a lot of overlap, and some things some of you may not understand because you lack context.

I am going to break a few rules because the prime directive of giving a sermon is to

- tell the people one or at most two things that you are going to say,
- say them,
- and then tell them what you said.

I am going to say too many things for that.

I want to tell you about

- **Christian marriage,**
- and **talk to all my children**
- and of course, **have a chat with Matthias and Natalie.**

This chat, and all of these words are kind of my "card". I never know what to write in a card, but I do know what to say in person. Your mother, Natalie, wrote a beautiful card, and I will speak my card.

I call the man most of you know of as Kevin, "Matthias", because that is his baptismal name, and because that is the most important thing in his life, that has happened or will happen to him, including, even what is happening today.

I also call Natalie Natalia much of the time for obscure reasons that even I do not understand.

I am constrained to tell my children, all of whom I love fiercely, things that must get out.

- I am able to speak freely to Matthias and Natalie and all of you because I am free.
- I was not always as free.
- There have been tough times in the past 20 years of my priesthood.
- So I start with some regret, because I would have wanted to have my A game for those previous crowning ceremonies

- I have served two weddings for my children, do not remember them so well.
- I was not as free as I am now.
- I will remember everything today.

Please, my children, do not take it personally.

I used to tell Natalie that Jenny and Christina and Tim got a better deal because I was not a priest during much of their growing up years.

- The priesthood is the most terrible and wonderful thing I have ever done.
- It has costs, and my children have paid some of them, as a kind of collateral damage,
- but they also, by the grace of God are benefiting from my priesthood, because the only thing that really matters to me is
 - to pray for them
 - and all my flock,
 - and bring them into my heart,
 - and I do that a lot, every day.

It took time to develop this skill.

- Anything important is hard, and if it aint hard, you aint trying hard enough.
- The problem is, you can only do what you are capable of, at the time you are doing it.
- The mistakes you make, if you have an open and zealous heart, will make you able to do more than you were capable of the next time.

I see this principle play out in my life daily, and it is the first thing I want to tell you two.

- You are both capable of much good,
- but not everything that is good.
- When things are hard, do the best you can, with faith and humility, and **fire in your belly**, and you will always get better.

You know that song that says "**I Love You More Today Than Yesterday, but not as much as tomorrow.**"? It is a great song when the dancing begins at a wedding.

You have already and are going to continue to experience this, for each other, but that is not significant compared to **how you will learn to love God by loving each other.**

You both really have **no idea how much**

- each will live in the others heart
- and how much God will live in your hearts
- and warm you and illumine you
- and bring you the only joy and happiness that is true and permanent.

You are starting a great adventure.

This leads me to the purpose of Marriage. I will tell you first the things that are tangential to this purpose. They are all nice to have but they are not the purpose.

- Romantic love
- Compatibility of personalities and interests.
- Desire for children.
- Having children.
- Sexual attraction.
- Making a life together.

All these things are tangential to the purpose of marriage.

The purpose of marriage is plainly this - it is to fulfill your purpose in life - that is union with God.

It is to **learn to love as God loves, and to become as God is**, as far as it is possible for the created to be like the creator.

This purpose is the same purpose for monasticism, or living a chaste single life.

We all have the same purpose, and follow the same truth, Jesus Christ, but there are different paths in life that can accomplish this.

For you two, it is honorable marriage and a bed undefiled.

Salvation is properly called and is many things:

- Union with God,
- Stillness,
- Perfection and purity of the soul,
- To know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent,
- To be a human being unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ (Eph_4:13)

I want to tell you how this monumental achievement is attained.

Let us talk about the most important verse, in my opinion, in all of scripture.

- It tells us why we were made,
- how we are made,
- Who made us
- and our destiny, that is, our purpose.

"And God said: let us make man in our own image and after our likeness". Gen 1:26

God speaks of himself in the plural. This is an explicit reference to His being a Trinity of persons.

Before we unpack this verse, let us speak of God, as much as deaf and dumb clay is able to describe the potter.

All we know about God, He has revealed to us.

We are intellectual and material beings, as well as spiritual, but our intellectual abilities can confuse us. We too often feel confident that we can figure something out, because of our intelligence.

- This is not possible with God.
- He alone has chosen to reveal Himself to us.
- Without his desire to share of himself with us, we would know nothing about him, like an ant on a log knows nothing of what is above him.

So our first principle is that God

- is totally transcendent and unknowable,
- and yet, we can know him because He chooses to reveal himself to us.

We know only a little about Him,

- but we definitely know the path to learn of him and achieve union with Him.
- In the Orthodox Christian faith we call this theosis.

Here is what we know.

God is a Trinity of persons, united in essence. The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit are three persons or hypostases of one God.

We know very little about how they differ. We know more about how they are the same.

- The Father is wholly and completely God.
- The son is wholly and completely God.
- The Spirit is wholly and completely God.

These persons, or hypostases of God are one in essence and indivisible, and all that we know that is different about them is that

- The **Father is the eternal source of the Son**,
 - who was begotten of the father before all ages, and is light of light, true god of true god, and is one in essence with the father, and begotten, not made,
- and that **the Holy spirit proceeds eternally from the father**,
 - and is God in all respects as the Father is God and the Son is God.

Why am I saying these things?

- Many people have their eyes roll to the back of their heads when they hear this stuff.
- It is not relevant to them.
- They are mistaken .

The unknowable God created us in order to make himself known to us. The only important question in the entire universe is WHO HE IS.

Be patient, because I am coming to the punch line, that is what the purpose of marriage is and how it is achieved.

It takes time to say anything that is important, and effort in listening to understand it.

We have said a little bit about Who God is. Let us learn three more things.

- Why He created us,
- How He created us (the attributes he gave us)
- How we will learn all about him that He wills us to know.

The answer that most people would give for why they got married and the reason why God created us, is superficially the same. It is love.

Let us talk about love.

- I do not want to talk about the demented way the world loves.
- This is not the love of God, because it is conditional and imperfect, and selfish.

Love is a verb. That means it has an action and an object.

The scripture tells us that God is love.

- That means that this action is eternal, since God is eternal.
- This action is perfect, since God is perfect.
- God loves, and he has loved "from the beginning", which is a scriptural way of saying, without beginning or end, forever. There was never a time that God did not love.
- **Whom did He love? He loved himself.**

- The Father loves the Son & the Spirit, eternally.
- The Son loves the Father and the Spirit, eternally,
- The Spirit loves the Father and the Son, eternally.

Therefore, love is the primary attribute of God, and is eternal.

What is love? It is complete cooperation, and freely giving of oneself to another.

This pretty much describes how to have a successful marriage, doesn't it?

Love is participating in the inner workings of the unknowable God, whom we know through love.

- Love is the only way to know God.
- There is no other way.
- There is no work, or achievement that will help us to know God.
- Only love will achieve this, because,
 - by grace,
 - as we learn to love as God loves, not as the world loves,
 - we become like God and achieve union with him.

Therefore, another way to state the purpose of our life is

- to learn to love as God loves,

This is exciting stuff.! It is all I ever want to talk about. It is all that matters.

We were made in the **image** of God. Since the scripture tells us that through Jesus Christ, we have the capacity to become sons of God, it stands to

reason, that as sons and daughters, we will have some of the attributes of God, just as we pass on our attributes to our offspring.

This capacity to become like God is **because** we were fearfully and wonderfully **made in the image** of God.

The attainment of these attributes,

- such as love,
- stillness
- wisdom
- and complete freedom from compulsion of any kind, that is, perfect free will,

is to have the image of God MATURE into the likeness of God in us.

- We were born with the capacity for all these things,
- and because the son of God became man and strengthened human nature, we can completely attain them.
- Our life in Christ is the path to this attainment.

Let's recapitulate. I am saying really important things and they are complicated.

- God is totally transcendent, and unknowable.
- We can only know Him because He has chosen to reveal Himself to us.
- God is love. and He loves perfectly and eternally.
- The way God loves Himself is by all 3 hypostasis giving of themselves perfectly to each other.
- He created us because of love,
- Since love always want to give the best to its beloved, God created us out of love to give us Himself, because He can give us no greater than Himself.
- We attain all the attributes God wants us to enjoy, by learning to love as He loves.

If you give something to someone who is not mature enough for your gift, he will not understand it or appreciate it.

So it is with the gift of God, which is Himself.

- We cannot understand Him and accept His gift until we become like Him and love as he loves.
- This make us competent, and able to know Him and have union with Him.
- Of course, we cannot do this,
 - but God can,
 - but He will not accomplish this good work in us, by grace,
 - unless He sees our effort.

Let's bring this conversation back to marriage, since that is what we celebrate today.

Marriage is all about - not partially about - it is all about learning to love as God loves.

Let us discuss the primordial words God gave about marriage and its purpose, from the mouth of Adam.

By the way, the sacrament of marriage was mentioned first in the Bible, and even before baptism, the Eucharist, the incarnation, or anything else was prophesied. It must therefore be very important.

After God had created Eve, Adam was overwhelmed and in ecstasy and understanding the significance of this action, cried out:

"This is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh. for this cause shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife, and the two shall be one flesh."

Paul, after quoting Adam's words tells us: **"This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church."** (Eph 5:32)

That is why I tell you the purpose of marriage is the mutual salvation of your souls.

- Marriage is a way of imitating God;
- it is a school to teach us how to love.

- God has one will, perfectly shared by the three hypostasis,
- but in marriage there are two discreet wills that learn to become one will.

This process teaches us by experience about the inner, mystical workings of the Holy Trinity.

It is the fulfillment of the high priestly prayer of Jesus: "**And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, and Jesus Christ, Who thou hast sent**"

(John 17:3)

By becoming one flesh, that is, each giving the fullness of their heart to the other, and being United in achieving their purpose, the man and woman become like God and therefore know him.

This is because it is impossible to truly know someone unless you become like them.

A man cannot understand

- a humble person,
- or one who is chaste,
- or lives compassionately,

unless he acquires, to some degree, these virtues.

This, by the way is why God has given us commandments.

- They are not arbitrary, externally imposed rules.
- They reflect who God is, and the things we must do to learn of him.
- God only is capable of revealing Himself to the human soul, but this soul is not capable of understanding his revelation without growing in the virtues.

- I have finished two parts of my objective. Now comes the part I have most looked forward to.
- I want to tell you two stuff from the heart.
- I will try my best.
- It will be all mixed to together as a natural father and a priest, because I can never stop thinking like a priest.
- It is 24 7.

I am very happy today.

You two are a good match. Anybody with half a brain can see that. They see how compatible you are, how much you love each other, how much each gives way to the other.

Natalie, I am very proud of you. You have more patience at your age than I had. You believed in Matthias, you recognized his virtue, and prayed for him and did not push too much.

Matthias, I am very proud of you. You have a father in heaven and a natural father, and now, I, without trying to usurp any of the prerogatives of your two fathers, am privileged to have you as another son. You were open to something that was very different, and you pursued an answer to your questions with seriousness and integrity.

I am privileged to have 5 sons, or perhaps one would want to be called a pre-son, but I will dispense with that formality. All are good men. I am proud of all of them.

- I want to remind all of you to always live according to your high purpose.
- Only one thing matters in your life, and that is who you become.
- Who you are determines what you do.
- It determines if what you do lasts into eternity or is swept away into the sea.
- Matthias and Natalie, I congratulate both of you on a wonderful achievement, remaining chaste until your marriage.
- This is a big deal, precisely because in the fallen world, it is not a big deal.

I commend both of you for the momentous event that you both participated in before or on your second date, if I remember Natalie correctly. This is important, and is a great example, so I am going to say it out loud. Natalie told you early on, that she would not sleep with you unless you got married, and you responded as a true Christian and man, by saying something like "I am very relieved, because that is exactly how I feel as well" . I say again, this is a big deal.

Your marriage is built on a rock, on mutual love, a shared ultimate purpose, and chastity. **You will succeed.**

- I say you will succeed, but that does not mean you will not also fail.
- You cannot help but fail, because the purpose of your union together is to achieve perfection, and the journey to perfection is one of many imperfect steps.

I say again: the purpose of your union, and your shared love for one-another is union with God, and perfection. That is a very high bar.

- I am going to give you some advice.
 - It is the best that I have to give you.
 - You may have heard some of it before, but I will not apologize about this.
 - Besides, I am a bit of a one trick pony.
 - I only care about one thing. I can only talk about one thing.
-
- You two are well matched, you fit together.
 - You will have a happy life in all the usual things a usual person thinks about concerning marriage.
 - However, Christianity is **not the usual thing, lived by the usual people.**
 - It is the narrow way, and a way that is foolish to the world.

I pray for you both every day, and the prayer is simple, because God is simple, and I do not presume to know more about what you need than Him, but today I will tell you how my heart feels when I pray.

I want you to have a transcendent union,

- where everything you do,
 - every shared goal,
 - every disagreement,
 - every moment of loving one another,
 - and mutually ceding your individual will to the other
- teaches you to love God perfectly.

- Live every day,
- do everything,
- give way to the other,
- ask forgiveness,
- plan together,
- live in each other's hearts for one reason only,

to love God above all, and to be saved together, along with your children if God grants them.

Do something I did not do well when I was young. Nobody told me this, I learned it the hard way. I hope to spare you. Pray, a lot, in your closet. Not just in church together, not just the morning or evening prayers, but also, and especially, prayer when physically alone, with sighing in ways that cannot be described by human language. Use your prayer rope, and say the prayer of Jesus. **Consider this task to be as important and indispensable as a morning kiss, as breathing.**

- Be aggressive about finding time to do this.
- It will often be very hard.
- If you work at it, you will find that your time apart from each other praying for each other, **will be more intimate than any embrace.**
- You will by actualized the prophesy of Adam, in that you will become one flesh. Each will live in the others heart.

These are my biggest two pieces of advice. Live according to your purpose, and pray.

The other things are peripheral to that.

Consider a day when you have chosen without a compelling reason (there are not many) to not come to the temple for a scheduled service to be a tragedy, a choice of something dead instead of life. That may seem extreme, but life is extreme, and the kingdom of God is being won by violence.

Read the Gospels regularly. Of course I would tell you to do that. You already have the good habit of reading the Scriptures together, and I am sure you will continue it. There will be many days you will need to fight to keep your family tradition.

I will not dare to give you advice about being a parent, or, you Matthias, about being a husband. Everything I have already told you, combined with your mutual integrity and bountiful love for one another will make your martial union fertile ground for God to teach you ALL things needful.