

This reading from the Gospel of St. John is such a beautiful summary of how the church understands marriage: “Love one another as I have loved you – the way that God has loved me – and in this way my joy will abide and your joy may be complete.” Falling in love is an incredible gift. A deepening gift of grace is learning to love with the love that Jesus gave. And part of the church’s role is to help newlyweds to acknowledge and nurture that love.

The Episcopal Church blesses a couple on the anniversary of their wedding by saying: “Holy God, lover of all souls, you have so consecrated the covenant of marriage that in it is represented the spiritual unity between Christ and the Church.” A year from now, I hope to be asking God’s blessing upon Wes and Paul so that, as our anniversary prayer goes on to say, “they may so love, honor, and cherish each other in faithfulness and patience, in wisdom and true godliness, that their home may be a haven of blessing and peace.”

The church hears a yearning in the words of John’s Jesus. We hear God’s desire for wholeness and happiness for all God’s children. We presume that what God revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ was universal servanthood, inclusivity, peace and justice. And the command that motivated the life and ministry of Christ is still our command: to love God and love each other.

There is no more complete lesson to offer, especially as we celebrate a marriage that God has granted two of our friends and fellow parishioners, and through them a gift to all faithful people. In her effort to follow Jesus, this church sees the sacred nature of marriage in ways that run counter to secular culture.

In her better moments, the church has put love at the center of all relationships. From her Jewish roots through the early days of Christianity right up to this moment, the church has transmitted love as the energizing life-force of our relationship with God, with each other and with our families.

Against that background, the definition of specific relationships as marriages has evolved over the centuries. In his own day, Jesus was at odds with the Greco-Roman culture that surrounded the ancient Middle East. The first century pagan world defined marriage as a legal arrangement designed to create legitimate sons who would maintain the family name and household, and daughters who could be given to other families in return for financial gain.

Courtesans were available for pleasure and concubines for “bodily needs,” and a man could divorce his spouse for any reason.

Alternatively, Jesus understood marriage to be the uniting of two equals. Jesus upheld Mosaic law by insisting that a marriage could not be dissolved except in cases of adultery, for the neglect of either person to provide food or clothing, or for withholding love.

But Jesus also challenged his religious community by emphasizing the spiritual nature of the union. Hebrew teaching of his day referred to marriage as a property agreement rather than a religious event. The union of two people was intended to strengthen both of their families materially. Israelites consequently accepted polygamous marriage because that arrangement produced more sons and daughters.

Jesus grew up hearing the stories of Jacob, who married both Leah and Rachel – stories of Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Jesus knew about the children that Abraham fathered with both Sarah and Hagar, and he certainly knew of King David, who had seven wives, and David’s son, Solomon, who had 700 wives and 400 concubines.

You see, the Biblical forms of marriage focused on what were essentially business arrangements that supported a father’s authority to maintain his position and bloodline. The hope was that love might follow for the children being married. But Jesus undermined that expectation by putting love, the intentions of each person and the equality of each in the image of God at the center of the marriage.

The church has taken centuries to catch up. In the 4th c., St. Augustine was still insisting that the purpose of marriage was to produce children. As late as the 12th c., celibate monastic writers began returning love to the center of the church’s understanding of marriage. Even so, we held marriage to be primarily a property agreement between families until the 13th c. when the church made marriage a religious sacrament.

That perception is not universal to this day in the secular world or in the church. During the Protestant Reformation in the 16th c., Martin Luther removed marriage from the sacraments. While love was a consideration, property and population concerns remained at the foreground.

Those of us on the Catholic side of the house who did retain marriage as a sacrament have had to sharpen our pencils. For centuries, there was no specific

ritual for marriage in the church. Two Christians simply expressed their mutual love in the church and received God's blessing on their union, which was then sealed in the holy Eucharist. Through the church's formal recognition of the couple's unity, and its incorporation into the body of Christ, the marriage became Christian; that is to say that it became the created image of the divine love of God, which is freely given, indivisible and unending.

When the church finally did create explicit rituals for the sacrament of marriage, we patterned them after the sacrament of baptism. We question the couple like we would an individual in baptism. They express their consent and make a covenant before God. Then they listen to God's Word, we pray over them and bless them. Finally, they fulfill their marriage, as all sacraments are fulfilled, by their reception together of holy communion.

You see, a "sacrament" for the Catholic side of the house, as it was first described by St. Augustine, is "an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace." In other words, the grace of the Holy Spirit operates in the heart. To say "yes" to God's movement in the heart is an act of faith through which we consent to enter more deeply into the absolute equality of God's love.

Like baptism, our marriage rituals celebrate the gift of grace God has brought to life in the hearts of two friends who have chosen to say "yes" to God. To be for each other, with all their strengths and all their shortcomings. They have chosen to make each other's lives their own, to share each other's joys and shoulder each other's burdens. And we are here to help them persevere.

Isn't this what we celebrate God doing with us in Bethlehem? God gave us Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, to share our humanness, to live and die as one of us, to reunite us with God. To fully contemplate that reality is the wisdom way of radical simplicity that teaches us over time how to celebrate diversity rather than fear strangers and how to mingle rather than separate.

The gift of grace that God has granted in this Christian marriage and in every Christian marriage reflects the light of the Holy Spirit back into the community as the joy of God's self-giving expression of love.

John's Gospel describes the inward and invisible grace of God at work transfiguring all people who consent to God. Not so that God can create more respectable, conventional and predictably perfect spouses, but so that God can transfigure each of us and all of us into vessels conveying God love. Instead, John's Jesus names the action of God's love that rejoices in all creation, drawing

us out of barricaded isolations into a unity that we can only barely imagine. To abide in the love of Christ is to recognize the need for Christ in every aspect of human life.

And so through the grace and presence of Christ in the church, we joyfully celebrate God's joining of two Christian lives into one union by placing that unity into the eternity of the Kingdom of God through the sacrament of marriage.

To do so is to love one another as Christ still loves all God's children, so that his joy may be in us, and that our joy may be complete.