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“Faithfulness and Freedom”

Text: Jeremiah 31:31-34; John 8:31-36; Romans 3:19-28

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The estate of marriage is not what it used to be. It is being attacked by those who want to change the definition of marriage so that it is no longer a union of one man and one woman. It is being attacked by those who see no use for it, and simply choose to live together. It is being attacked by those who see it as unnecessarily binding and restrictive – just a piece of paper ruining the relationship they already have. . . . But while marriage is being attacked from the outside in all of those ways, *far more damaging* is the attack on marriage from the inside – from those who are married; from those who have taken marriage vows with no intention of keeping them; from those who say “until death parts us,” when they really mean, “until I grow tired of you;” or, “until someone better comes along;” or, “until I fall out of love with you.” And so rampant is divorce these days that you don’t even have to show cause anymore – just tell the court you don’t want to be married anymore and the deal is done.

And so for many in our world today, being married no longer carries with it the security it used to. Now, many married people no longer live with the security and confidence that their spouse will always be there for them, but now live in constant fear, that if they don’t look good anymore, their marriage will end; that if they do something wrong, their marriage will end; that if they don’t please their spouse, their marriage will end. And the stress of everyday life is simply added to when they go home at night . . . having to fulfill the desires and expectations of others now by day and by night. There’s no rest, no relief, no security.

Now I bring that up not as a social commentary, but because in the Old Testament Reading from the prophet Jeremiah, God talks about Himself as a *husband* – a husband to His people, Israel. They had taken vows, as we heard: **“I will be their God and they shall be my people.”** God promised to be faithful, and His people promised to be faithful. They had a covenant. And what a wonderful thing for Israel, for they did not have to worry about God changing His mind, or falling out of love with them, or leaving them for a nation that was bigger, or better, or more glamorous. He had promised to be

their God, and they had security in that promise. That even when they messed up, God would still be their God.

And that's a good thing, because they did mess up. We heard in Jeremiah that Israel broke the covenant, even though God was a faithful husband. And actually, "broke" is a kind word there, for in earlier chapters, Jeremiah describes Israel not just as unlovable, but as *adulterous* – leaving God to worship false gods – and even more than that, as *prostitutes* – selling themselves to these false gods in order to get favors from them! And you could hardly have blamed God if He sought a divorce for such wanton unfaithfulness. . . . But even in the face of such sin, God remained a faithful husband – in fact, not only keeping His promise to Israel and remaining their God, but even going beyond that and, in a sense, *renewing His vow* to them! For after His people broke the first vow, God says, ***"Behold the days are coming when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah."*** A new covenant, a new promise. It is as if God is saying to His people, *"Yes, not only will I keep my promise, but I will marry you all over again."*

And that is the promise that has been made to you and me, when in Holy Baptism we are brought into the family of God and into the Church, the Bride of Christ. We have God's promise of faithfulness, that He will be our God, our Saviour. And when we are confirmed into the Church, we make that same vow back to Him, saying that we will remain faithful unto death. And in that promise of God we have tremendous freedom, knowing that God is faithful, and that even when we break our vow – as we always do! – when we are filled with sin, and unlovable, and stubborn, and adulterous, and ugly . . . God will not divorce us or leave us, but forgives us, and restores us. And when we hear His absolution, as we did again at the beginning of this service, it is as if God were saying to you, *"Yes, not only do I keep my promise and forgive you, but I would marry you all over again."* And what wonderful words they are to hear! Just as a spouse cannot hear "I love you" often enough, so we get to hear those words of absolution over and over again, each and every week we gather here in God's house!

And it was this understanding of God's faithfulness that was at the very heart of the Reformation.

For the Church at the time of Luther misunderstood, and had corrupted, the truth of God's forgiveness and love and faithfulness. Instead insisting that forgiveness and restoration for the believer back into God's good graces was dependent on what you did – in effect, the bride making herself desirable to her husband again. And so in order to merit forgiveness, you had to buy your way back into God's favor, or work yourself back into God's favor, or show by your actions that you were really, really, really sorry and plead

for God to take you back. Or another way was to get one of God's friends, the saints, or Jesus' mother Mary, to plead for you and convince God to take you back. And God, generously and condescendingly, would take you back once you proved you really meant it, and were really worthy!

And, you know, we ridicule that attitude sometimes – or a lot! – and wonder how they could think such a thing! . . . *But we do it, too . . .* only in a little different way. But we too, if you're honest with yourself, think that we can make ourselves lovable, and that we can *mostly* keep the Law, and improve, and do better, and show God that we're *worthy* of His forgiveness and His taking us back. And perhaps we think that because of what we heard from Romans, that ***“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,”*** and we think that doesn't sound so bad! For ***“falling short”*** means that we almost made it, right? Just fell a little short; just need a little help . . . But try telling that to your spouse! That you were just *a little* adulterous; that you *almost* kept your vow; that you're improving . . . Would that make it all better? And even if it did, the first time, what would happen when you fell again, and again, and again? . . . What would happen if our relationship with God depended on us?

But thankfully, it doesn't depend on us! On us making ourselves worthy, or improving ourselves, or proving that we're lovable. That's not what God is like at all. The Scriptures speak of God as a loving, forgiving, and faithful husband. Not a demanding tyrant of a God, of whom we have to be afraid and wonder whether we're good enough for Him, but a husband who takes care of and makes His bride glorious and radiant and clean. A God so dedicated to His people, that rather than lose us to sin and death and the power of the devil, He instead came to take us all over again, and to (in a sense) renew His vow to us at the altar of the cross. And in Jesus Christ, He did. Not demanding repayment for our sins, but making payment for us. Not shaming us for our spiritual adultery, but taking that shame upon Himself. Not divorcing us for our unfaithfulness, but being forsaken in our place. And because our Groom laid down His life for us – for us tainted brides, stained full of sin – we are forgiven. We did nothing to deserve such a gift, our Saviour did it all. It is as we read in the book of Ephesians, ***“Christ loved [us] and gave Himself up for [us], that He might sanctify [us], having cleansed [us] by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present [us] to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that [we] might be holy and without blemish.”*** (Eph. 5:25-27)

“Yes, not only do I keep my promise and forgive you, but I would marry you all over again.”

And when you understand that, you understand the meaning of Jesus' words in the Holy

Gospel that we heard earlier, when Jesus said, ***“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*** For the Word of God and His Truth tell us that He is a faithful husband to His bride, the Church, and therefore we know that His vow to us is certain and good. We have the security of knowing that when we approach Him in repentance as broken and sinful beings, He will not send us away in shame or divorce us, but will forgive us and welcome us back. And so we are free. Free of the burden of having to prove ourselves worthy; of having to earn His love and forgiveness; of having to make ourselves acceptable to Him. No, He has set us free from that, so that rather than earning His love, we can return His love. To Him, and to each other.

Once Luther realized that, and once you realize that, it changes your life. It started a Reformation. And just think – every week, you get to hear it again! That you are forgiven and made clean. Your wedding gown made white in the blood of the Lamb. The love of God for you. Joining in the wedding feast He has here prepared for you, as He feeds you and rejoices in you. . . . Can we even begin to comprehend the love of God here for us?

And realize even more, that this has only just begun! Because of the resurrection of Jesus and our resurrection in Him, you are in His love and feast with Him not only here, but even forever, in Heaven. His resurrection means that not even death can part us from Him, but that we can look forward to the feast and celebration and love that has no end!

That’s what this day is all about. A day we celebrate not ourselves, or a man, or an event, but the wonderful Gospel that has set us free. ***“And if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed!”***

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.