

Second Sunday of Lent

February 28, 2010

**SERMONS ON EXODUS XXVII:
THE COVENENT WORDS VII:
THE SACREDNESS OF MARRIAGE
(Exodus 20:14)**

Two weeks ago, after the sermon on the Sabbath commandment, one of you said to me, “I learned so much today.” My immediate response was, “I’m learning so much too.” The making of a sermon is not a matter of my putting together what I want you to know out of some great well of knowledge of mine, but rather of my wrestling to learn anew and ever more fully what the text says to me and thus to you. Learning must be an ongoing, never-ending process, engaging all of our faculties, emotional as well as intellectual. It is a spiritual process and can never be at rest. What we seek to do in a sermon is to hear the eternal but ever fresh word of God, a word that speaks of his heart and that speaks to ours. It presupposes on the part of both preacher and hearer a knowing in part that seeks to know more fully, a yearning for the absolute, a yearning for the eternal, a yearning for God--and a yearning for our own wholeness.

All right, you may acknowledge what I just stated in general terms, but what specifically does this commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” have to do with a yearning for God, except for the obvious, that adultery is a sin and all sin separates us from God. I think that the significance of this commandment is much, much more than that.

Note first what the commandment says. It forbids adultery, and adultery is a specific sin, namely a sin against marriage, as is seen, for instance, in Lev. 20:10, which says, “If a man commits adultery with the wife of a neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.” Adultery is thus to be distinguished from fornication, which is sex with a person who is single, and from sex with a prostitute (We’re an adult congregation.), both of which are serious offenses, to be sure, but are not included in the Decalogue and are not attended with so severe a punishment. John Calvin begins his 42 pages of commentary on this commandment by saying,

Although one kind of impurity is alone referred to, it is sufficiently plain, from the principles laid down, that believers are generally exhorted to chastity; for, if the Law be a perfect rule of holy living, it would be more than absurd to give a license for fornication, adultery alone being excepted. Furthermore, it is incontrovertible that God will by no means approve or excuse before His tribunal, what the common sense of mankind declares to be obscene; for although lewdness has everywhere been rampant in every age, still the opinion could never be extinguished, that fornication is a scandal and a sin.¹

That may be true. It is true. But that is not what is stated in this commandment. The commandment is specific and direct and succinct—and says what God wanted it to say. Why does it single out adultery from all the sexual sins which are included in the commentary on this commandment in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*?

Here it is helpful to back up and, once again, look at the text, which is specific, in the context, which is also clear. I explained last week that I was beginning to think that the Jewish tradition is right which sees the First Table of the Law as containing the first five commandments and the Second, commandments six through ten. This line of thought seemed to be confirmed to me this past week when I looked at the second record of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Words, the Decalogue, are given to us twice in the Pentateuch: in Exodus chapter 20, of course, and in Deuteronomy chapter 5. There are slight differences in the two, though both contain the same 10 commandments and in the same order. One difference is that, whereas Exodus gives as the rationale for the Sabbath commandment that God rested from his creative work on the seventh day, Deuteronomy commands observance of the Sabbath because God delivered the people of Israel from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. The first account focuses on creation, the second on redemption, and we, on the Lord's Day, ought to remember and give thanks for both, our creation and our redemption. I knew of that difference, as most theological students do, but what I noticed last week as never before is that in Deuteronomy the last five commandments are clearly linked together: "Thou shalt not kill; neither shalt thou commit adultery; neither shalt thou steal; neither shalt thou bear false witness; neither shalt thou covet" (Deut. 5:17-21). Each of the first five commandments stands alone and is structurally independent of the other. The last five are connected, almost as if in one compound sentence.

¹ *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, vol. III, pp. 68-69.

The resulting structure seems thus to confirm that the two Tables of the Law are divided thusly, five and five, and embody the two great commandments, to love God and neighbor.²

Furthermore, there we can detect a parallel between the two. We saw last week how the sixth commandment, which heads the Second Table, parallels the first commandment in the First Table, and how each is foundational for those that follow. We must first have no other gods if we are to honor and worship the one God as he is to be honored and worshipped. We must first understand that we must do no murder if we are to take care for our neighbor as the following commandments of the Second Table imply. The second and seventh commandments are also parallel,³ the one forbidding idolatry (spiritual infidelity), the other adultery (physical infidelity)—and anyone familiar at all with the contents of the Old Testament knows how often the straying of the people of Israel after false gods, committing idolatry with the deities of the heathen, is depicted by God and the prophets as adultery. This was acted out parable-like in the life of the prophet Hosea with his adulterous wife Gomer.

This mirroring of the First Table of the Law in the Second shows us how interrelated the love of God and neighbor must be. Not only must they not be separated, they are intrinsically related. When we bear in mind further that the context for the Decalogue is that binding in solemn covenant of God and Israel whereby he promises to be their God and they promise to be his people (*of which solemn covenant the marriage covenant is a reflection*), then we begin to see the full significance of this seventh word. All the requirements of the Second Table are reflections of our being bound to God in covenant, and of our needing to reflect his nature and his love in all of our relationships. We are not to take the life of another because God is the giver

² Nachmanides wrote, “Of the Ten Commandments, five are to the glory of the blessed Creator and five for the good of human beings. The honor of your father is also the honor of God, so that it is for the sake of the honor of the Creator that he commands us to honor our fathers, who are partners in creation. This leaves five commandments that are [purely] for human benefit” (*Present at Sinai: The Giving of the Law*, Commentaries selected by S. Y. Agnon, tr. Michael Swirsky (Philadelphia/Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 5754·1994), p. 247.

³ Some rabbis see a parallel between each of the commandments on the Two Tables (See Pasikta Rabbati, “Five Corresponding to Five” (*Ibid.*, p. 245).

of life. We are not to take the wife (or husband) of another because marriage reflects God's gracious and loving covenant with his people.

We further observe that the negative prohibition bears witness to a positive good, a good that is built into the very heart of creation itself. On the sixth day God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he them" (Gen. 1:26-27). In the second account of creation we are told, "It is not good for the man to be alone," so God made him a helpmeet, bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, and that henceforth a man must leave his father and mother (his former *unique* relationship) and cleave unto his wife, and they become *one flesh* (see Gen. 2:18-24). The man and the woman are one of the inseparable pairs of creation, like the heavens and the earth, the day and the night, the sea and the dry land. And note that it is not by themselves as individuals, but in their interrelationship as husband and wife, that they reflect the image of God ("In the image of God created he *them*"). And we surely cannot miss the fact that in these very verses which speak of the man and the woman being made in God's image God himself is spoken of mysteriously in the plural ("Let *us* make man in *our* image."), which points to that mystical interrelationship of love within God that we know as the Holy Trinity, and it is that divine love within the Godhead that is imaged in the human love of husband and wife. (Saint Paul, of course, tells us that the love of husband and wife embodies and reflects the love of Christ, the Bridegroom, for the Church, his bride (see Eph. 5:21-33), which he says is "a profound mystery" (v. 32).)

Now, having looked at the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, let us glance at the last chapter of the Book of the Revelation, which points to the marriage supper of the Lamb, of Christ and the Church, and, in all but the last words of Holy Scripture, we read, "The Spirit and *the Bride* say, 'Come.'" (Rev. 22:17). Thus does the whole of the biblical story, the whole history of humankind from its beginning to its projected end, center around the unique relationship of marriage.

We know that the seventh commandment, "Thou shalt not commit adultery," speaks in the negative, and that is often the only message that gets through, but the negative points to the positive, to what ought to be, as fully as the second commandment, forbidding idols, points us to the positive love and honor we owe to God alone. Furthermore, it states not only what we are to

do, but reflects what God does. He loves us with absolute fidelity. Abraham Heschel put it in and nutshell when he said, in a passage that happens to be in today's readings, "With the Torah [the Law] we have mitsvot [commandments] that utter God's acts."⁴ That's what marriage is to do, to utter the act of God, to reveal who he is, and to allow us to participate in that blessed unity. We know that we are speaking here of a goal, of an ideal that is never perfectly realized by imperfect beings such as we are, but this is what God calls us to and is the way of life and happiness.

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Fr. Voris G. Brookshire at the Anglican Catholic Church of Saint John the Theologian, Pompano Beach, FL, on the Second Sunday of Lent, February 28, 2010. Copyright © 2010.

⁴ *God in Search of Man*, p. 352.