

The Second Sunday after the Epiphany – Pr. Faugstad sermon
Romans 12:6-16: “Hold Fast to What Is Good.”
January 13-14, 2024 | Saude, Jerico, & Redeemer Lutheran Churches

In Nomine Iesu

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Almighty and ever-living God, bestow a special measure of Your grace upon our homes. As our Lord favored the marriage feast in Cana with His presence and first miracle, and manifested His power and glory amid the scenes of family love, grant that He may be the heavenly Guest in every home and the Guardian of its faith and life. Bless, we pray You, all who live together in the bonds of holy matrimony, so that in obedience to Your Word they may serve one another in love, hold each other in honor, and acknowledge Your goodness and grace in one spirit even as they are one flesh; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one true God, now and forever. Amen. (adapted from *Altar Prayers for the Church Year*, p. 30)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. (Rom. 1:7, etc.)

The sermon text for today is taken from the twelfth chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. We read as follows in Jesus' name:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. / Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. / Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. (ESV)

These are Your words, heavenly Father. Sanctify us by Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen. (Joh. 17:17)

In Christ Jesus, from whom all blessings flow to His holy bride, the Church of all believers, dear fellow redeemed:

I was surprised to learn that there are twelve couples in our parish who will celebrate fifty or more years of marriage this year. Thanks be to God for this! It is an example and an encouragement to the rest of us, as we live in a culture that places less and less value on marriage. I wish I had compiled these anniversary lists sooner, since there would have been more couples to recognize in years past.

When married couples reach their seventieth or seventy-fifth anniversary, that seems to be high enough for an article in the local newspaper. And the question is always asked, “How did you make it work for this long?” Or, “What advice do you have for other married couples?” The

advice is often something like: “Never go to bed angry.” “Communicate with one another.” “Compliment each other every day.” And that is all good advice.

The couples among us who have been married a long time would agree that marriage takes work—and sometimes very hard work. But I think they would also acknowledge that it wasn’t so much their “being good at marriage” that got them through. It was the grace of God covering over their faults and forgiving their sins that brought them to this point.

This is what we emphasize at our marriage ceremonies, an emphasis that you won’t hear in many other places. We keep the focus on Jesus, and the love He has for us. For many others, the focus is only on the love the married couple has for one another. In some cases this mutual love is treated as the foundation of the marriage, and the vows are accordingly changed from “until death parts us,” to “as long as we both love each other.” That’s a problem, because the love one might have for another is not a constant. It is changeable, and it often does change in a marriage.

The Epistle lesson before us today is not specifically a marriage reading. It is instruction and encouragement to be who we already are in Christ. The reason we need the instruction is because sin clings to us, and we continue to think, say, and do things that are not right. We need to be taught what is right before God. We need to learn how He wants us to be as His people.

Marriage and family are wonderful ways to put these teachings into practice. What marriage wouldn’t benefit from outdoing *“one another in showing honor,”* or being *“patient in tribulation,”* or never being *“wise in your own sight”*? And think of how peaceful a home would be where siblings *“love one another with brotherly affection,”* where they *“live in harmony with one another,”* where none are *“haughty, but associate with the lowly.”*

The home is the testing place to see whether we will succeed outside the home. If a child does not respect his parents, what other authority will he respect? If siblings do not learn to get along, who else will they get along with? If Mom and Dad don’t model love and sacrifice in their marriage, how likely will their children learn these things for future relationships outside the home? So much depends on the home!

But the home is not perfect—no home is. I expect there is much you are thankful for about the home you grew up in, especially if it was a Christian home. But you also remember hard times, arguments, fights, impatience, anger. And you probably weren’t an innocent bystander in all of that. You remember the part you played in that discord. You remember your sins.

The home Jesus grew up in was no different. Probably Joseph and Mary worried about money like most couples do. I’m sure their tempers got short. You can imagine how Mary fretted when they lost track of their twelve-year-old Son in Jerusalem. When they finally found Him in the temple, Mary blurted out, *“Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress”* (Luk. 2:48). We see more worrying from Mary in today’s Holy Gospel when she brought the problem of a wine shortage to Jesus at a wedding they attended.

But one thing was different about the home of Mary and Joseph that made it like no other home. Jesus was different. He actually was an innocent bystander. He did not contribute in any

way to the sin of the household. He was perfect. He submitted to the authority of Mary and Joseph (Luk. 2:51). He showed perfect love toward them and the neighbors around Him, and they noticed. The evangelist Luke writes that *"Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man"* (2:52).

That perfect life was for you, to cover over all your transgressions and unkindnesses toward the people God placed in your life to love. Everything in today's reading that you fall short of time and again, Jesus fulfilled. He was genuine in His love. He held fast to what was good. He loved and honored all the people around Him. He was not slothful in zeal; He was fervent in spirit; He perfectly served the Lord God. He rejoiced in hope; He was patient in tribulation; He was constant in prayer. He was humble, kind, gracious, and helpful in the best possible ways.

This perfect life that Jesus lived, He freely hands over to you. Like a husband and wife who agree to share everything with each other, Jesus says, "Everything that is Mine is yours." In fact, marriage is exactly the picture God uses to explain what His Son did for you. But it is not like our marriages, which we enter into by mutual consent as equals. The union between Jesus and His bride the Church was totally by His prerogative, and it was nowhere near balanced like we expect the marriage relationship to be.

Jesus, the perfect Bridegroom, chose for His bride the world of sinners. The only-begotten Son of God, God from all eternity, chose to join Himself to our human flesh and become a Man, so that He could make everything that is ours His, and everything that is His ours. He accepted our pride, our anger, our bitterness, and our self-centeredness. He accepted our unkind words, our manipulative actions, our unfaithfulness, and our lies. He let all of our sins be placed on Himself as though He were the straying spouse, as though all the stains of our wrong-doing belonged on Him.

And in return, He gave us what is His. He gave us His perfect obedience to His Father, His kind actions, His gracious words, His righteous thoughts. He gave us His eternal life, His everlasting peace, His heavenly kingdom. All that He accomplished by His holy life and His sacrificial death on the cross, He poured over us in Baptism (Eph. 5:26).

He joined His life to yours at your Baptism. There He promised to remain faithful to you at all times and in all situations—"for better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish." But not until death parts you, because death cannot part you from your Bridegroom who rose in victory over your death and lives forevermore. By faith, you cling to Him. You trust that He will not break His baptismal vow to you no matter what you have to face in your marriage, in your home, or in your life.

Jesus our Bridegroom is perfectly true. Our side of things is the side that is less certain. Like a discontent spouse, sometimes we try to blame Jesus for not doing more for us, for not addressing our wants and needs, for not making us happier. But Jesus hasn't changed toward us. It is we who change toward Him. It is our love for Him that falters. It is our confidence and trust in Him that are lacking.

When things get bad for us it is because we get this verse backward. Instead of *"Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good,"* we often abhor what is good and hold fast to what is evil. That's

when we have problems with Jesus. We ignore His powerful Word, while giving way to our own bitter thoughts and sinful actions. We forget His love, while wallowing in self-pity.

But if we are going to **“Hold Fast to What Is Good,”** there is no other way to do this than to hold fast to Jesus, because it is Jesus who is good, whose mercy endures forever. The word for “holding fast” is the same word that Jesus used when quoting from Genesis 2: *“Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh”* (Mat. 19:5). Or if you prefer the old translation, *“a man shall leave his father and his mother and shall cleave to his wife.”*

We “hold fast” to Jesus, we “cleave” to Him, by gladly hearing and learning His Word, and trusting that He is here to bless us through the means of grace He instituted for His Church. We should have no doubts about what His Word can do. If it could turn water into wine and bring gladness to a wedding at Cana long ago, it can change bitterness to love, curses into blessings, and sorrows into joys in our hearts and in our homes.

So whether you are married or single, whether you are looking forward with excitement to unknown joys and challenges, or looking back with sober reflection and contentment, remember that Jesus’ vow toward you has not changed. He joined Himself to you and will never leave you. He is your salvation, your comfort, your strength.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost; as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.

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