

## Human Glory and Honor

October 8, 2006

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

The Psalm appointed for today, Psalm 8, is a hymn of praise for God's majesty in the exaltation of the human creature. The real impact of the little psalm comes when the smallness of human beings is compared with the majesty of God in a rather bold declaration: *Yet, you have made them* (meaning humans) *a little lower than the angels, and crowned them with glory and honor* (v. 5). After hearing such an endorsement of human nature, we all ought to feel a little better.

Perhaps, and I mean *perhaps*, the place where human *glory and honor* is best displayed in the sacrament of marriage. First, because marriage is a state of life established by God in Creation: *It is not good that man should be alone*, we can read in Genesis (2:18). A very good God ordains a very good state of life out of love for humanity, and so, Christianly speaking, marriage is more than a relationship, it is a union.

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Jesus speaks with authority about marriage and he does so out of the richness of the Hebrew tradition. For Jews, and Jesus, marriage was a sacred joining together of two lives, a point Jesus makes to the Pharisees: *God made them male and female. For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh* (Mk. 10:6-8), and this from the beginning of Creation. Marriage was intended by God to be a blessing. It was, in the truest sense, a *sacrament* for all humanity, a relationship intended by God to be a means of grace in its own right. A relationship of unconditional, unbreakable love that mirrored the unconditional, unbreakable love God has for the world. So, marriage served for the faith community as a living symbol of the Divine Covenant, a sacred *pair bonding* intended to be as edifying as it was enduring.

The Book of Common Prayer makes a similar point: *The union of husband and wife in heart, body and*

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*mind is intended by God for their mutual joy; for the help and comfort given one another in prosperity and adversity; and, when it is God's will, for the procreation of children and their nurture in the knowledge and love of the Lord* (BCP, 1979, p. 423).

Notice the order of blessing: 1<sup>st</sup>, mutual joy, 2<sup>nd</sup>, mutual help, and 3<sup>rd</sup>, procreation. Bliss, Belonging, Biology, these three, but the greatest of these is *bliss*. Such a union fulfills both partners as nothing can.

Seen in the light of human nature that is *a little lower than the angels*, marriage constitutes the Mount Everest of relationships, God's intended way to bring humanity joy and banish human aloneness. Yet, tragically, as we all know, what God created for our mutual joy, like the rest of Creation, has become twisted and distorted in the *Fall*. Even the best marriages, at times, go through rough seas.

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We can look at couple and think, *My, they've had smooth sailing all their lives*, but when we get to know them, we find out how deep and storm-filled were some of the waters they crossed. How large a storm they can handle and for how long, depends on the character of *both* people, for one cannot do it alone. Real fulfillment comes only with a real promise and a real commitment and all the sacrifice and suffering and pain that go with it. The work of those becomes the reality of a fulfilling adult relationship. Christ's unconditional love for us undeserving, and often ungrateful, people should serve as the example upon which a marriage union is based.

The reality of our broken world, the *tragic* reality of it, is that the microcosm of Christian community called marriage, this lavish and generous promise to love another unconditionally and exclusively forever, sometime fails.

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The early Church, remembering Jesus' words against divorce and believing that the power of sin had been done away with in Christ, would not sanction divorce, as Moses had done, to make allowance for hard-heartedness. And yet, even in the early Christian community, exceptions were made. There was the *Pauline Privilege* which allowed a Christian to remarry if the non-Christian partner divorced her or him (I Cor. 7:15). Matthew changed the unqualified prohibition of Jesus to permit divorce on the grounds of the wife's unchastity (19:9) Mark extends Jesus' proscription against divorce on the part of the husband also to cover divorce initiated on the part of the wife, adapting Jesus' prohibition to *Roman* law (10:11-12).

So, what does all this mean? Well, first we tend to accept as dogma anything that is not contrary to our life experience. Principles may be held rigidly until reality convinces us otherwise. Issues such as abandonment or spousal abuse in its many and varied

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forms have caused many who oppose divorce to see that, sometimes, divorce is the only way out. *The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath* (Mk. 2:27) was Jesus' response in a situation when human need was made a priority over doctrine or dogma or principle.

Another point is that, while upholding the sanctity of marriage, we must also embrace the sanctity of grace. Gospel grace supersedes all human frailty and fault. Although we believe it to be God's will that marriage is indissoluble, it is also God's will that we have life abundantly without crippling shame or guilt.

To those who are convinced that divorced people live outside the Biblical norm, I would say this: *we all do!!* Next week, Jesus tells the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions, give them to the poor and follow him (Mk. 10:21). Who of us has done that? Elsewhere, Jesus tells his disciples to turn the other cheek when

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struck; to give to the one who sues you for your coat, your cloak as well; to go two miles when you've been asked to go one; to give to everyone who begs from you or wants to borrow from you (Mt. 5:39-42). Who of us has been perfectly faithful in doing all of that?

God meets us and embraces us as we are, *not* necessarily, as we ought to be. Let us pray that both the married and the divorced and everyone else will experience the unconditional love and the unrestricted power to become *new* people, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

**AMEN.**