

7th Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 20, 2011
Fr. Tom Elliott

Celibacy for the Sake of the Kingdom of Heaven

Leviticus 19:1-2, 17-18

Psalm 103

1 Corinthians 3:16-23

Matthew 5:38-48

We get a lot of spam at the church office. Daily, we get offers for prescription drugs, invitations to disclose our bank accounts, correspondences from lonely Russian women, etc. One day, I opened an e-mail that my spam filter didn't catch. The e-mail, which was selling some sort of enhancement drug, explained that celibacy leads to "disease and death." I laughed until I had tears streaming down my face! Wow—disease and death! They didn't tell us *that* in seminary!

There are all sorts of misunderstandings about celibacy in our world today. For the last two weeks, we have been exploring the two states, or vocations, in life that Jesus mentioned in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter nineteen—marriage and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Last week, I preached specifically on the Sacrament of Marriage. This week, we are going to look at Christian celibacy. Our approach will be to look at some of the common questions regarding celibacy.

What is Celibacy?

Before I explain what celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is and is not, let's look, once again, at chapter nineteen of the Gospel of Matthew. After Jesus had explained the permanence of the Sacrament of Marriage, He explained celibacy in these words—

[Jesus'] disciples said to him, "If that is the case of a man with his wife, it is better not to marry." He answered, "Not all can accept [this] word, but only those to whom that is granted. Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it."

-Matthew 19: 10-12

Jesus explained in this passage that there are three different types of people who do not get married. The first group consists of those who have been born incapable of marriage. We live in a broken world where we experience physical, emotional, and mental irregularities or uniqueness that might cause a person to not be capable of or desirous of the Sacrament of Marriage. This is no one's "fault," it simply is what it is, so to speak.

The second group Jesus mentions includes those who have been *made* incapable of marriage through the sins of another person. In light of what we know today about psychology, it would be appropriate to expand Jesus' explanation to include everyone who is incapable of or does not desire marriage because of something that happened to them, whether it was physical, mental, emotional, or sexual abuse.

The last group that Jesus mentioned includes those who choose not to marry for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. In other words, they are physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually *capable* of marriage and sexual relations, but choose to live celibately for a purpose greater than themselves—the kingdom of heaven. Before I define Christian celibacy, let me make a brief comment on the first two groups of people mentioned by Jesus.

We have the tendency in our current culture to define “freedom,” as the ability to have anything we want. Because of this definition, we might be tempted to look with pity at people who fall into the first two categories—those incapable or un-desirous of marriage due to birth irregularities or the sins of another person. Additionally, those who fall into these categories might find themselves feeling robbed of freedom and happiness. However, freedom is not the ability to have whatever we want; but rather, it is the ability to accept what is good in any given circumstance. Therefore, those people who fit into the first two groups of people that Jesus mentioned can choose to live in anger and bitterness, or they can choose, in freedom, to let their celibacy be for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Having said that, let’s now look more closely at Christian celibacy.

Most people understand celibacy to be a *lack* of something—namely, marriage and sexual relations. To minimize the gift of celibacy in this way is a grave injustice. Before I explain what celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is, let me explain what it *is not*. It is *not* sexual repression. It is *not* an escape from intimacy or marriage. Rather, celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven is the renouncing of marriage and sexual relations as a way to foreshadow the spiritual marriage that is to come in heaven. Such celibacy reminds the world that we all long for and desire a heavenly marriage with God. Jesus explained this heavenly reality in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter twenty-two, saying, “At the resurrection [people] neither marry nor are given in marriage but are like the angels in heaven” (Matthew 22:30). The Book of Revelation further explains this nuptial reality, referring to Jesus Christ as the Bridegroom and the Church as the Bride.

Why Does the Church Require Priests to be Celibate?

Jesus never demanded that priests be celibate. Therefore, we find in the Catholic Church, both married and celibate priests. There are very few married priests in the Roman Catholic Church because it has been our tradition for many centuries to have a celibate presbyterate. However, there are many other branches of Catholicism that have both married and celibate clergy. Will we ever see the option of married priests in the Roman Catholic Church? Maybe, but before that can happen, it will be important for the Church to grow in a deeper appreciation for the *spiritual charism* of celibacy. Right now, the great majority of the interest in having married priests is due to a lack of appreciation for and understanding of the gift of celibacy. Therefore, such a move would only further denigrate this charism, or gift.

How do Celibacy and Marriage Complement One Another?

The Sacrament of Marriage and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven are complementary. Both vocations challenge us to move beyond selfishness and lust in order to truly love. Both vocations require a healthy understanding of sexuality. In both of these vocations, a man is called to be a husband and a father and a woman is called to be a wife and a mother, but in different expressions. They complement one another in that, the Sacrament of Marriage reminds us that the fulfillment of love is *nuptial love*, and celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven reminds us that the fulfillment of that nuptial love in heaven is not with one particular person, but with Christ and His Bride, the Church! Both vocations are radical, but

different, invitations to love! These two vocations are so intimately connected that when a society no longer appreciates and respects one of them, it soon does so for both.

What are the Fruits/Purposes of Christian Celibacy?

The primary fruit, or purpose, of Christian celibacy is what I just mentioned—it reminds the world that our deepest longing is nuptial union with God for all eternity. Another fruit or purpose is what we might call *apostolic availability*. Saint Paul describes this availability in his first letter to the Corinthians, writing, “An unmarried man is anxious about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord” (1 Corinthians 7:32b). Celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven frees a person’s time and energy so that he or she can focus more specifically on the Lord.

What is a Priest’s Nuptial Experience of Celibacy?

For those of us who are living Christian celibacy, it is essential that we experience the nuptial meaning of celibacy. This experience is two-sided. It means that we must experience giving ourselves away in love—spending ourselves for the sake of others, more specifically, for the sake of the Bride, the Church. It also means that we must experience being loved by the Bride, the Church, and not simply in a theological way, but in practical, tangible ways.

As a priest, I have found it important and necessary to consciously make the connection between the demands of ministry and my love for the Bride of Christ, the Church. In other words, when I get a call in the middle of the night to go to the hospital and anoint someone who is dying, it’s not enough to go out of obligation. It’s essential to my vocation that I go out of love for the person who is dying and for their family. Only love can give us the strength we need to do the things that we don’t have the strength to do.

I have also found that it is just as essential for me to connect parishioners’ specific acts of kindness as experiences of the Bride of Christ loving me. For example, when parishioners invite me out to dinner, it is the Bride of Christ loving me. If I minimize it to simply some food or conversation, then I rob myself of an experience of being loved. Another example is the ministry of sacristan. Some of our sacristans, who set up the church for Mass, put warm water in the bowl that I use to wash my hands. They don’t have to do that and I’ve never asked them to, but it reminds me that I am loved by the Bride of Christ. It adds nuptial meaning to my priesthood and celibacy. Those are just a couple of examples, but there are hundreds more.

Conclusion

I personally believe that one of the reasons for the high divorce rate today is because many people get married simply because they feel like it is what society says is “normal,” when, in reality, they were called to celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. It is our responsibility as Christians to foster in others a deep understanding and appreciation for both of these states in life, so that they might be free to make a good decision regarding their vocation. We can only begin to do that by first deepening our own understanding and appreciation for these two states in life.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

✚ Reread Matthew 19:10-12, Matthew 22:23-30, and 1 Corinthians 7:25-35 and share with God your thoughts about Christian celibacy. Do you see it as a gift? Has your perception of it changed through the reading of these Scripture passages? What is your opinion about the tradition in the Roman Catholic Church to have a celibate priesthood? In what ways have you experienced the complementarities of Christian marriage and Christian celibacy?