

Homily for the 19th Sunday after Trinity - October 22, 2006

Preached at St. Bartholomew's Anglican Parish, Redmond, WA

THE DECALOGUE: THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.

by Fr. Daniel McGrath

The 7th Commandment, and the topic of today's Homily is, "Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery". The prohibition of adultery presupposes two basic principles found in Holy Scripture: the Sanctity of Holy Matrimony and the Sanctity of the Human Body. In the most basic sense, the word "adultery" means unfaithfulness to one's spouse, but let us first attend to the principles behind this Commandment, before addressing its meaning and its application.

Let us begin with Holy Matrimony: it is the lifelong, monogamous union of one man and one woman, united before God in solemn vows and blessed by the Church, for the purpose of establishing a home and nurturing children. Human society depends upon the stability of Marriage, yet every generation has to be reminded to keep it sacred.

Because of our frailty, and because we are inclined to substitute illicit or destructive relationships instead of what God intended, he reminds us through Holy Scripture, of the way things were meant to be. Our Lord asks, *Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.*

In creation God made mankind male and female and also gave us the desire to be one flesh. This is a good and holy desire that is to be directed toward husband or wife in Holy Matrimony, in which the two are now thought of as one flesh. The relationship of a man and a woman begins in desire, defined by the Greek word *ερος* (eros, or erotic love). But matrimony does not end in *ερος*, for physical attraction does not remain constant over the course of a lifetime. Rather *ερος* invites and leads husband and wife into a higher form of love, and this form of love is best defined by the Greek word *αγαπε* (agape), the Latin word *caritas*, or our English equivalent, Charity. Holy Matrimony provides a safe place for this special kind of divine love to develop between a man and a woman, a love that is expressed in self-giving for the sake of Another. The lifelong union of husband and wife does not exist merely for the sake of developing their own romance, but for the procreation of children and for their nurture.

Let's take a look at the Order of Service for Holy Matrimony, provided in the Book of Common Prayer: here, a bride and groom solemnly vow to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony...to love, comfort, honor and keep one another in sickness and in health...forsaking all others, keeping themselves only for each another, as long as they both shall live. This ideal of lasting love, is not expressed only in the Church, but also in most popular love songs and ballads (just turn on your Radio and listen for a few minutes on a Friday evening!).

Adultery then, is a serious injustice, for one who commits adultery fails to keep a solemn and holy covenant made in the marriage bond. Adultery is a transgression against the rights of the other spouse; it undermines the marriage, and it causes instability for the children and ultimately for society.

The 7th Commandment upholds the sanctity of Holy Matrimony as we have just described it: although in the Old Testament an exception was made for polygamy, in the New Testament Christ restored the original intent of marriage as being between one man and one woman for life. He also raised a very formidable barrier to divorce and remarriage. For a divorced person to remarry in the Church, the Bishop must first find that no valid marriage already exists, in order to avoid adultery.

The 7th Commandment upholds the sanctity of the Human body by requiring Chastity outside marriage. Being “chaste” means that we will not get involved in casual or illicit sexual relations, whether in the course of dating or ‘living together’; we won’t be involved in prostitution, sodomy (also called homosexuality)...and a host of other things that I won’t mention, that the Church has always regarded as violations of the dignity of our bodies.

Regrettably much that once was held sacred has today been forgotten or is now despised: that which is bad is called ‘good’, and that which is good is called ‘bad’. In the 19th century, Sigmund Freud began to claim that it is healthy to express oneself sexually however one pleases (what better illustration of the excesses of the Romantic Era?), while to channel one’s desire according to pre-determined rules (or even to abstain, God Forbid!) would be unhealthy. Incredibly, Freud’s way of thinking is still prevalent, even after HIV and other diseases have killed millions!

The standards of behavior that the Church sets before us are very high standards indeed in today’s world, but they should be considered ‘normal’ by us. Our bodies are created for Holiness, and our relationships must be Holy. The good desires that have been given us by God are to be used rightly within God’s design. When we do otherwise, then we do that which is evil in God’s sight; we engage in self-destructive behaviors and bring upon ourselves much sorrow, broken heartedness and even sickness.

In the Anglican Catechism a child is taught “To keep my body in temperance, soberness and chastity”. Why? (Certainly not because we are ‘puritanical’, unable to enjoy life, or because we enjoy telling others what to do). The 7th Commandment should not cause us to point our finger at others, but it should remind us of our own sinfulness, in order that we might repent and do better. It is our duty to teach our children the right way, so that hopefully they will be spared the devastation and heartbreak that is the fruit of disobedience to God’s law. As we receive the 7th Commandment, let us pray to the Lord to have mercy upon us for our failings of the past and to give us grace to keep his laws in future, to our health and happiness and to his Glory.

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