

Why Gender Matters 6: Heavenly Bodies

Every Sunday I am blessed by a young family of six who typically sit in the pew in front of me. Far from being bothered by the squirms, yawns, and fights that erupt in the service, I relish them. I marvel at the two parents who patiently adjust attitudes and seating; through this prism of life, I behold the Cross and the communion meal and realize this is what is all about—a man and a woman submitting to each other out of reverence for Jesus (Eph. 5:21) and making a way for younger lives to do the same.

I think of our grown children scattered throughout churches in Kansas City and trust that Annette and I did something similar for our family.

Gender difference--and harmony in that difference--points beyond itself; it offers us a glimpse of heaven. Rightfully ordered, the dance of maleness and femaleness—desire and restraint, initiative and response, fruitfulness and frustration—gives us a window to our cosmic destiny.

Let me explain. We are made in His image as male and female. Biblically, we don't know much more about that 'image' except that it is a gendered reality. God chooses to represent Himself in the duality of man and woman together, unity within difference. After we discover this gendered image of God in humanity (Ge. 1 and 2), God is imaged throughout Scripture as essentially masculine in that He initiates relationship with His people (Israel, the Church, etc.) and is likened to a father/husband/lover to His people who are primarily defined in feminine terms--as responders to His love.

So Scripture highlights divine initiative and human response. The latter is not inferior to the former. Both are essential to revealing the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus is responsive, and in that sense 'feminine' in relation to His Father—He does only what the Father says and does (JN 8: 26-29). And Mary's 'yes' to God is heroic, the courageous response that sets in motion Jesus' saving love for all.

Jesus takes this to a new level by defining Himself as a bridegroom to a bride (MK 2:19), a reality that St. Paul capitalizes on in Eph. 5: 22-37 when the apostle likens a man's servant initiative toward his wife—and her respectful response—as a window to the spousal love that Jesus possesses for His church, a consummation that is a future reality—the feast where the Lamb unites Himself wholly to those He loves (Rev. 21: 1-4). That's why Christopher West says that marriage is the trailhead to the 'summit'. That summit is heaven—the wedding feast--our ultimate union with Jesus.

Here we enter into sacrament—in this case, the fusion of body, soul, and spirit in lifelong communion between a man and woman. Marriage helps make concrete and tangible something real but unseen; as a sacrament, it points beyond itself and helps us apprehend an otherwise mysterious spiritual reality.

I marvel at the power of holy and harmonious love between a man and a woman. We are all aware of the power of broken marriages to shatter faith and true spiritual sight. How much greater is the power of faithful love, with all of its frustrations, between husband and wife? Annette and I grow more appreciative of each other as the years pass. We laugh more and bristle less at each other's quirks and are grateful for the constant 'yes' we give each other in season and out. The Spirit helps us in our weakness. Through our reliance upon divine advocacy, I pray that our human love becomes a clearer window of heaven for others.