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NOTE: Due to the nature of the topics discussed, this homily was delivered in various forms at the different Masses due to the general age of the crowd present.

Sometimes as I go around and visit the religious ed classrooms the First Lights kids have all sorts of questions about the faith. Because the kids are young, grades K-5, the questions are often the cute types of faith questions that kids ask. The other day I was asked, “Father, in the Garden, did Adam and Eve ever have a date?” I said them, “No, they had an apple.”

Today we hear from Christ some of the most challenging words in the Gospel. They make many people uncomfortable because we know that marriages do breakdown, and people often feel feelings of guilt, anger (even more so if the break-up was not mutual), or even that they have failed. They might feel judged or alienated from the Church or God because of this verse. I am not going to spend the entire homily on this, but it does need to be addressed: While taking fully seriously the words of our Lord and the importance of the performance of matrimony, I would like to reiterate what I said in July about those who for whatever reason feel alienated from the Church.

We see in the Gospels that Christ excludes no one based on their past. Time and again he looks at them and welcomes them. He does this by asking us to repent of our past, and sometimes this might require great personal sacrifice, but what he asks of us is to look at our life and see where Christ, the light shining in the darkness, is inviting us to live in his grace now.

Priests and deacons are here for the purpose of spiritual accompaniment, to ask ourselves, “What is God asking of me in this situation I find myself in now?” What was done in the past can always be healed by grace.

Today what I’d like to focus on is the deeper point that Christ is trying to make about love and marriage. I want to give a brief catechesis on marriage according to Scripture. As Christ was dying on the cross, he cried out, “it is finished,” or, “It is consummated.” The marital language is intentional. God had promised to come and make his people his bride. Jesus constantly referred to himself as the Bridegroom.

This wedding proposal from God takes place on the cross where Christ gives himself freely, totally, faithfully, and fruitfully. These four characteristics are the same ones that are promised in the wedding vows. Let us look to see how Christ demonstrates that this is the true nature of love.

Jesus spoke of his own death, a total gift of self, as being something done freely. “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again.” We know that love cannot be compelled. In marriage, husbands and wives are asked by the minister, “have you come here to enter Marriage without coercion, freely and wholeheartedly?” This is essential to the wedding rite, and it remains to this day why the Church only permits authorized ministers to witness weddings, along with two other witnesses, to protect

the woman from the possibility that a man might kidnap her and claim that she professed vows at a private ceremony in the woods that no one attended. While this may seem a silly requirement of the Church today, in our age of human trafficking, it is not. The witnesses are there to ensure free consent. Even the secret marriage in *Braveheart* has a priest attending.

Christ's love is total. Look at the cross. He gives himself completely. I already spoke about the ultimate man film, *Braveheart*. Now I want to speak at the ultimate chick flick. In 1997, audiences made *Titanic* the highest grossing film of all time, only later to be surpassed by *Avatar*. Fans loved the story of the Jack and Rose. When the boat sinks, they find a door they can float on, but when Jack tries to board it, the weight is too much, and it flips. Jack puts Rose back on, and he freezes to death, an act of total self-sacrifice. Because we know that love takes sacrifice, this relationship spoke to audiences. Couples are also called to do this for one another. True, we do it in all types of love, we sacrifice for friends, for example, but marriage is total in an exclusive way: they are welcomed into each other's families, the couple shares a common life, they share their finances, and the most intimate moment of their lives, the marital embrace. The marital embrace is a physical re-enacting of wedding vows, and this is why the act is reserved for those who have already committed themselves to that relationship.

Such free and total love must also be faithful. Christ's love is also faithful, in that, if we sin, he always forgives us. It is who he is to be loving and forgiving. He cannot deny who he is. 2 Timothy tells us, "If we are unfaithful he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself." A married couple is called to be faithful to one another.

This free, total, and faithful love bears fruit. Christ's love is fruitful because it is the means of our salvation. When he died on the cross, blood and water poured forth from his side, giving power to the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. We pray in the Mass, "raised up high on the Cross, he gave himself up for us with a wonderful love and poured out blood and water from his pierced side, the wellspring of the Church's Sacraments." Marriage is fruitful by being open to receiving children lovingly from God.

Both Jesus in this passage and the author of Genesis teach us that in marriage man and woman become one. When Christ espoused himself to the Church, Christ and the Church became one flesh. As St. Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians, "Now you are Christ's body, and individually parts of it." Christ's love for the Church is a one-flesh union just like Adam and Eve's love was.

Today's readings point us back to marriage as God originally envisioned it before sin. When God made everything, we hear in Scripture, "it was good." Today in Genesis 2 we hear about something that is "not good." It is not good for man to be alone. When Creation is complete, God says creation is not "very good." My sisters in Christ, that means that women make creation "very good." This is because Adam cannot be who he truly is meant to be, made in the image and likeness of God, without a suitable and equal partner. Adam cannot be self-sacrificial for the animals because animals cannot challenge us to grow. An animal cannot complete us. Only another person can complete us by bringing us out of ourselves. Have you ever seen the motivational posters about how your dog thinks of you? "When you think you are a nobody, just remember your dog thinks you are a total boss." While mildly helpful in reminding us that even on bad days we are loved, only another person can respond to our love in a sacramental way.

It is true that all true love is self-sacrificial. For the celibate, it is the sacrificing of one's will for the sake of the Kingdom, the being ready to meet the needs of others. The selfishness of the priest or vowed religious dies a slow death in other-centered love. For a single person, they have many relationships: other relatives, friends, neighbors, co-workers. You know when someone asks you to help move and it is inconvenient? The same happens in marriage. The personality of the husband or wife is completed and corrected by being at the service of another. True love, to paraphrase C.S Lewis, calls the man or woman to sacrifice for the other, to make adjustments to one's personality, to give up one's vanity and selfishness for the sake of another. Love which requires no such sacrifice, which affirms the person in the prison of selfishness into which we are all born due to Original Sin, is not the love described in the Gospels. This is the problem with fantasizing and with the epidemic of pornography in our day today. It locks the person in a prison of their own ego instead of being centered on truly loving and sacrificing for another. If you are struggling with this, addicted to this, please seek help for the sake of yourself and your spouse or future spouse.

Such sacrificial love is not easy, and when we fall short, we should not merely reproach ourselves but repent. Because we suffer from Original Sin, it is only possible by God's grace and the sacraments flowing forth from the side of Christ. We do well to frequent the confessional and Holy Communion that we might be filled with God's grace and transformed from within. May God bless you.