“The Common Sense of the Human Race”

John 2:1-11

A Sermon Delivered by

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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

One of the ongoing points of controversy in our nation today is the question of what it means to be an American. What values or ideals best express who we are as a nation? Or perhaps more to the point, what should America look like? We hear our nation talked about in terms of Red states-Blue states. We hear the question of economy, of laws and the role of judges, of states’ rights versus the federal government. And of course there’s the discussion about church and state. What’s the proper relationship between the two? If you could create the ideal nation, one that would reflect everything you hold dear - what would it look like? What would be the most important thing to consider? And where would you start?

All of this was the subject of a lively discussion among three weary travelers many thousands of years ago. The story takes place on a dusty road in the ancient world, and although it’s a fiction, it’s one of the foundational works in all of Western Civilization. It comes from the Dialogues of Plato and it’s the story of three pilgrims who find themselves walking together on a road on the island of Crete. The first is a man named, Kleinias. He’s a Cretan. The second is Megillos, a Spartan. And the third, is a stranger from Athens whose name is never revealed. As the three journey along the road together, one of the men, Kleinias, reveals that he’s actually on a mission. He’s been commissioned to establish a new colony, and with it, to write a new constitution and a new set of laws to govern the people. Well this intrigues the others that he should be given so lofty a task; so to pass the time the three travelers decide to talk about what would make the ideal city-state or nation. They talk about a lot of things. They talk about its location, about its source of income and revenue. They talk about neighboring cities and the
prospect of enemies and war – the list goes on. Well after some time the un-named stranger speaks up and asks an important question, “If we’re going to establish the ideal city,” he says “then we’ve got to come up with laws. So what in heaven’s name should be the first law we establish for this new city?” Without waiting, the stranger answers his own question, “Surely,” he says, “the first law will be the one that leads to the birth of children in the state: the union of two people in the partnership of marriage.” To which the others heartily agree – “yes,”…marriage must be established first because it is crucial to the survival, nurture, and education of future citizens.

One the of the greatest works in the history of Western Civilization written by arguably the greatest philosopher in the history of Western Civilization declares the establishment of marriage to be the single most important law in the founding of a people. As marriage and the family go, so goes the nation. You don’t even need to be a Christian to know this.

To begin with, marriage ensures the survival of the populace. Now some of you are saying “Chaplain Cash, you and your wife are certainly doing your part along those lines…” Perhaps it’s a truism to say but only men and women can biologically have children together. This doesn’t mean everyone who has kids gets married, but wherever marriage is honored and esteemed in a culture, generally more children are born. And the converse can also be true. For example in Europe today, because fewer people are getting married, fewer children are being born, such that the birth rate among Europeans is now lower than the rate of death or the rate of replacement. Europe is killing itself. It’s dying a slow death - a free peoples’ suicide.

But marriage is also the primary means by which children are taught and nurtured to know right from wrong and to be prepared for life. When I was a boy growing up in my home, my father - as I’ve shared before - was a naval officer and my Mom was home with my sister and me. One of the things that I saw as a youngster was that Mom and Dad always seemed to be on the same page when it came to the big life decisions. No matter where Dad’s career took him, there was always a seamless front with my parents. That was my normal. Whether they were actively trying to impress that upon me or not, I don’t know, but it was the rock upon which I leaned - this reality that Mom and Dad are on the same team. No competition or bitterness, just
love, mutual support, and respect. This was my normal and because of this, my expectation in life as I grew to be a man, was that at bottom, life is undergirded by commitment and trust, loyalty and faithfulness.

You see, it’s marriage and the family where these things are taught and where children learn to be either trusting, hopeful, peaceful people…or fearful, troubled, and anxious. Just last summer, the Washington Times ran an article that put the brakes on the popular notion that children raised by parents in alternative lifestyles fare just as well as those who are brought up in traditional mother-father homes. The article published the findings of a study done by the University of Texas called the New Family Structures Study. It’s considered the gold-standard in its field. The study looked at the lives of 3,000 children who’d grown up in a variety of different settings, and it looked at their lives through 40 measures of social, emotional, economic, and relationship outcomes. Children who were raised in settings where alternative lifestyles were practiced saw negative results in up to 24 of the 40 categories. On the other hand, children brought up by their Moms and Dads living together in a loving committed marriage fared much better across the board. The study concluded by saying, “that children appear most apt to succeed well as adults when they spend their entire childhood with their married mother and father, and especially when the parents remain married to the present day.”

As marriage and family go, so goes the nation. This is why marriage is one of only three institutions in the Bible that are considered ordained of God in that they perform a special and sacred role in all of society. And what are those three? The government, the church, and marriage or the family - and not necessarily in that order. In fact, marriage and family are actually foundational to the other two. Remember government arose as a result of sin and to check the evil and vice of men. The Church or God’s people began with Israel, but didn’t come into being as we know it until Pentecost. However, marriage and family was there from the beginning, and throughout history has been the foundational stone of every tribe, nation, and culture. Wherever cultures honor and esteem and lift up marriage, the culture does well. Wherever they devalue or dismisses or trivialize marriage, they do poorly. That Athenian stranger, who by the way scholars will tell you was really Plato himself…he was trying to tell us something wasn’t he?
It’s along these lines that our Gospel reading from John is so fraught with meaning. It is not insignificant that on the threshold of His public life, Jesus chose to perform his very first miracle at a wedding. The church has always attached great significance to this, that Jesus’ first public act was done at a wedding: a confirmation of the intrinsic goodness of marriage and the proclamation that forever marriage will be a visible sign, a picture of God’s intent. But marriage and family have always been a vehicle through which God’s plan unfolded. I could go down the list for you. It began with Adam and Eve, then Noah and his wife and their families preserving the world, Abraham and Sarah and their descendants. One could say that the whole history of Israel was set against the backdrop of God’s spousal, marital love for His people, such that whenever Israel sinned against God it was always likened to the sin of adultery. In fact, there’s a whole book in the Bible about this – the prophet, Hosea.

Understand then that Jesus didn’t just happen to stumble onto this wedding in Cana. He wasn’t just out looking for good friends and good times. Christ, who does everything by purpose chose this occasion to pronounce for all time the fundamental truth of the sacred value of marriage for life and godliness. And if you’re still unsure about this, in the Gospel of Matthew, he speaks directly to the issue: “And Jesus answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning MADE THEM MALE AND FEMALE, and said, ‘FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH’? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man tear asunder.” (Matthew 19:4-6)

I don’t think anyone here would disagree with me that marriage is being torn asunder today. Marriage is in crisis. And the crisis is not just the high rate of divorce. It’s not just about casual sex or a casual view of marriage. Deeper even then the crisis of divorce is the conceptual crisis of what marriage is. You see it’s really a crisis of reason. This may sound strange, but the truth is marriage, at bottom, is not really a religious question at all. It comes to us from nature. We can look at the anatomy of men and women and the human functions and conclude how it’s all supposed to work and what the intent is. It’s part of what Father Francis George has called the common sense of the human race - that men and women were designed for one another was
true before the existence of either church or state, and it will be true when there is no state of Maryland and no United States of America.

There’s a powerful scene in the Lord of the Rings when Gandalf, the good and saintly wizard, realizing that his old friend Saruman has turned to evil, says to him, “Tell me friend, when did Saruman the wise abandon reason for madness?” This could be the verdict of our nation on this issue. When did we abandon reason for madness? Now, there may be some here that take great issue with what I’ve said. And that’s OK. Or some may question why we really have to speak about this in the first place. I would just say that we of all people being at a training environment where the nurture of young people is paramount - we have an obligation to teach and nurture the coming generations. From an institutional perspective, remember the mission of the United States Naval Academy– it’s written in stone all over this Yard: To develop Midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically, and to imbue them with the highest ideals of duty, honor, and loyalty [that they might embark on a career of naval service and leadership.] To speak to the salient moral issues of our times, issues that our young people are making life decisions about, is to fulfill our mission in the truest sense.

On a deeper level however, is our responsibility as Christians to present a faithful example in times of trial and to preach the whole counsel of God, not avoiding issues and settling for false peace but engaging where truth is on the scaffold. Martin Luther said, “If I profess with the loudest voice and clearest exposition every portion of the word of God except that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ…Where the battle rages, THERE the loyalty of the soldier is proved; and to be steady on the battle front besides, is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.” Brothers and sisters, the battle is here. It’s not the only battle, but it’s a crucial one. And I’m not talking about disputing any policy or undermining the decisions of others, but rather having the courage to speak the unchanging truth of God in love - to at least file a protest against the foolishness and folly of this world and its ways. If we don’t speak where the battle rages, if we subscribe to the conventional wisdom that says such topics are off limits, not only is it flight and disgrace, but we cause these young ones, for whom we are charged with teaching, to stumble. And that is a dire and desperate thing. Silence on this front is a message, and one that will result in squandered lives.
and irreligion where the best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity. This can only bode ominous for our nation and her leaders.

Now it needs to be said in all fairness, that I don’t necessarily speak for all our chaplains. As you know each of us come from different faith traditions, and we had a wonderful conversation about this together; and in the chaplain corps we respect those differences. These differences are protected by the Constitution, the DOD, the U.S. Navy, and the Naval Academy, and I’m very thankful for that. However, I do speak as a Christian and one who accepts the broad historic and biblical consensus on this issue of marriage. The assertion that marriage is between a man and a woman is not a new or novel idea; and if holding this belief in this day makes us outliers, then so be it. The Church has walked through similarly difficult times before. And we know that we do not walk alone. As the Lord told Joshua: “Have I not commanded you be strong and courageous, be not afraid, for I the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.”

You see in the end, as Christians, we don’t have to lose heart because God wins. God wins. His law stands. And as hard as people try, they really don’t break God’s law, they break themselves upon it. We love our nation. We want the best for our nation - and I do more than most. But nations come and nations go, kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall, evil has its day. But the kingdom of God - and that’s what this is really about, the kingdom of God and His word, have no end. “The grass may wither and the flower may fade, but the word of the Lord abides forever.” America may decline and be no more one day; and we ought to face that. But as Christians we can still rejoice, for our hope is not in this nation or its ways or its laws. We don’t trust in princes or chariots or mortal men in whom there is no salvation…No. Our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus and His righteousness – you know the hymn! I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus’ name. On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand. All other ground is sinking sand.

They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.