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THE CHURCH IN YOUR HOME

“.....to the church that meets in your home.” Philemon 2c

Have you heard the story about the barber who had a negative attitude about everything? This barber was always whining, always complaining, always grumbling. He was just cynical and negative about everything.

One day a man came to his barbershop to get a haircut. The man got into the chair. He said he was so excited because he was going to make a wonderful trip to Europe and would be leaving the very next day.

The negative barber asked, “Where are you going?” The man said, “First, we are going to London.” The barber interrupted him and said, “London? Oh, that’s a terrible place. It’s dirty and noisy and way too expensive. You won’t like it there in London. Where else are you going?”

“Well, we are going to go over to Paris.” “Oh my goodness. Paris is worse. The people there are really very rude. You won’t like it in Paris. Where else are you going?”

“Next, we are going to fly to Rome.” “Oh, Rome is the worst of all. The food is terrible. And whatever you do, don’t visit the Vatican. The lines are too long. And don’t think you are going to see the pope, either, because the pope is not accessible. And even if you do see him, you won’t understand a word he says, because he doesn’t speak English.”

Well, the next day the man went on his trip. Two weeks later he returned to the barber for another haircut. The barber asked, “How was your trip?” The man said, “It was absolutely terrific. London was great. It was the most exciting city, and we found the prices really quite reasonable. Paris was a beautiful city, very hospitable. Everyone was kind to us, and Rome was the perfect climax to our trip. Everything was wonderful. We went to the Vatican and even had an audience with the pope. There weren’t any crowds there at all. It was like a private audience with the pope, and he spoke to each of us personally, in English. He had me kneel,

placed his hand upon my head, and gave me a blessing. Then, he leaned forward and spoke into my ear, in perfect English, these words: ‘You are a very handsome man, but I have to tell you: you have the worst haircut I have ever seen in my life!’”

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Now, that old story teaches us two things: first, a negative attitude is not a pretty picture; and second, our negative attitudes can come back to haunt us. Sometimes a negative, cynical, critical, complaining attitude is just irritating and annoying, as we see in that negative barber. But sadly, sometimes such an attitude gets pushed too far in some people, and destructive things happen. Marriages are dissolved and families are torn apart.

These kinds of negative experiences not only push people into divorce court, but they also remind us graphically how important it is, how essential it is that we get back to making Christian marriage and the Christian home a top and urgent priority. The Christian home should be the very first place where we learn not to be negative, but to celebrate life as a precious gift from God. The Christian home should be the very first place where we learn the difference between right and wrong.

The Christian home should be the very first place where we learn how to share and how to respect others. The Christian home should be the very first place where we learn how to pray and where we hear the stories of Jesus. The Christian home should be the very first place where we learn to be loved and to love. And the Christian home should be the very first place where we learn how not to be hostile and negative, but rather to say yes to life, yes to other people, yes to the church, and yes to God.

But sometimes we forget that. Sometimes in our rush to succeed, we put that on the back burner and neglect our marriages and our home life.

Jesus warned us about this. He said, “What will it profit a man” – or a woman, or a family, or a nation – “if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” The point is clear: we must get back to emphasizing and cultivating Christian marriage and the Christian home. And that’s something to think about on this Valentine’s Day.

In our scripture for today, we find Paul writing a letter to his Christian friend Philemon, and in the letter Paul sends greetings “to the church in your home.”

Isn't that a fascinating phrase, "the church in your home"? That's the way they had to do it in the early church, through the "house church." They didn't have gothic cathedrals; they didn't have church buildings at all. The early Christians met in homes. And you know, that's still relevant for us today, because every Christian home should be a "house church," and every Christian marriage should be a relationship rooted in God.

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With that in mind, let me ask you: What does the church in your home look like? What are the things that define a Christian marriage and a Christian home? Let me suggest three.

FIRST OF ALL, A CHRISTIAN HOME IS A PLACE WHERE THE TRUTH OF CHRIST IS EMBRACED. When we know the truth, it will indeed set us free. However, the problem is that sometimes it is very difficult to sort out what is true. This is particularly the case in our time. How do we tell what is true and what is propaganda, or what is a blatant lie?

There's an old Native American legend that sums up the situation powerfully. It tells of a Native American boy who climbed to the top of a tall mountain to prove his manhood. When he reached the highest peak of the mountain, he was very proud of what he had accomplished. He looked out far and wide and felt as though he was on top of the world. But then the boy heard a sound at his feet. He looked down and saw a deadly snake. Before he could move, the snake spoke to him. "I am about to die," said the snake. "It's too cold for me up here, and there is no food. Put me under your shirt and take me down to the warmth of the valley."

"Oh no," said the young boy. "I know your kind. You are a rattlesnake. If I pick you up, you will bite me, and your poisonous bite will kill me." "Not so," said the snake. "I will treat you differently. If you do this for me, I will never harm you. I'll be your best friend."

The youth resisted for a while, but the snake was very persuasive. At last, the young boy gave in and tucked the rattlesnake under his shirt. He carried it down to the valley, and there he laid it down gently. Suddenly, the snake coiled, rattled, and struck, biting the boy on the leg. "But, you promised!" cried the young man. "You knew what I was when you picked me up," said the snake, as it slithered away.

That's a powerful parable for us, isn't it? The point is clear: we can be tricked. We can be confused.

If we pick up the serpent of aggression or ruthlessness, it will eventually bite us. If we carry the serpent of hate or prejudice, ultimately it will poison us. If we embrace the serpent of selfishness, it will strike us and bring us down.

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But how do we know what's right? How do we keep from being taken in? With all of the conflicting ideas bombarding us today and vying for our allegiance, how do we know the truth?

Well, we need a fixed point for truth. We need a measuring stick, and that is one thing Jesus Christ does for us very well. He is our measuring stick for truth. We need to measure everything we see or read or hear by the standard of truth we see in Jesus Christ.

If we hear someone speak words that are mean-spirited, shout words that are hateful, scream words that are cruel, mutter words that are prejudiced, and spew out words that are profane, then we can be sure that they don't measure up to the test of Jesus Christ.

That's number one. The truth of Christ is a major emphasis in a Christian marriage and in the Christian home. The Christian home is a place where the truth of Christ is embraced.

SECOND, A CHRISTIAN HOME IS A PLACE WHERE LOVE IS EXPRESSED. Love is another fixed point in the Christian home that we can always trust. Jesus taught that in word and in deed. In the way he lived and in the way he died, he epitomized the power of love.

If we in our marriages, in our homes, and in this world could somehow capture the spirit of Christ, if we could all learn to live together in love and goodwill, just think what we could do, just think what we could accomplish.

Babe Ruth was one of the greatest baseball players of all time. He hit 714 home runs during his baseball career. But unfortunately, he played too long. He continued to play when he had gotten older and his ability had waned, both at bat and in the field.

During one of his last games as a professional, Babe Ruth had a terrible day. He made several errors. In just one inning, his errors were responsible for the five runs scored by the opposing team. As Babe Ruth walked off the field after that disastrous inning, a crescendo of boos was directed at him by the angry crowd. It was a painful and humiliating moment for this great athlete, who had been the number one star of baseball for so long.

But just then, a little boy in the bleachers couldn't stand it. He couldn't bear seeing Babe Ruth hurt like that. So, the little boy jumped over the railing, onto the

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playing field, and with tears streaming down his face he ran toward Babe Ruth. He knelt before his hero and threw his arms around the player's legs. Babe Ruth picked the little boy up and hugged him tightly.

Suddenly, the noise from the stands came to an abrupt stop. There was no more booing. In fact, an incredible hush fell over the entire ballpark. The boy's love for Babe Ruth had melted the hearts of that hostile crowd. Love happened in right field, and suddenly the outcome of a baseball game didn't seem that important anymore.

Where did that little boy learn to love like that? Probably at home and at church. Love is another fixed point for the Christian home and for Christian marriage in this changing world. It's something we can always trust and always count on.

FINALLY, A CHRISTIAN HOME IS A PLACE WHERE GOD IS HONORED. God, of course, is the most important fixed point of all. God is the one constant that we can always depend on in our marriages and in our homes and in all our relationships.

Years ago, the great preacher Phillips Brooks used to lean over the pulpit at Harvard and say to those young students: "Young people, commit your life to God, believe in him, lean on him, and in the last analysis nothing will ever overcome you."

An older couple was facing a very difficult challenge. The husband, who had been so strong for so many years, had been injured in an automobile accident. His legs were injured severely and he was given the news that he would likely never be able to walk again and might be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life.

It was a very hard pill to swallow for this dedicated couple, but they never wavered in their faith and in their trust in God. As he sat up in his hospital bed in obvious pain, but still with a smile on his face, he patted his wife's hands and said, "Honey, don't you worry now. We have been through a lot together over the years and God has been with us every step of the way, and God will be with us in this inconvenience. I'm going to do everything I can to get up on my feet and walk again, and I truly believe I will with God's help, but even if I don't," he said, pointing to his wheelchair, "I've got wheels! Don't worry. God will see us through!"

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Let me ask you something. Is your faith that strong? Do you trust God like that? That couple had experienced the presence of God in their life together many times before, in times of joy and sorrow, in good times and in hard times, and they knew that God would be with them again in this new and difficult situation. They were confident of that.

The Apostle Paul said to Philemon, "Greetings to the church in your home." I hope and pray that your marriage will get better and better with each and every passing day, and that the church in your home is a place where the truth of Jesus Christ is embraced, where love is expressed, and where God is honored.

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