At baptisms I often say that the sermon is the baptism itself. Today is much the same as we witness and bless the marriage of June and Mark Hutson this morning.

We have known these two as members of Epiphany for some years now, and we know they have faced a number of difficulties, including their divorce almost two years ago. So today is not merely a renewal of vows but a marriage—a return to their marriage of 23 years. During the recent past they have dealt with a number of issues, including serious medical conditions—both June’s and Mark’s.

Please understand that I mention this to you not as gossip or idle talk, but as part of the sermon these two present to us this morning.

In today’s Gospel Jesus offers the image of a wedding by way of illustrating preparedness for whatever God has in store for us. That reading is merely the one appointed for this day and had no part in the selection of this date for the Hutsons’ wedding. Serendipity—or grace, as we Christians call it.

In his letter to the Hebrews the unknown author speaks eloquent of who we Christians are, reminding us that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” This is the real text of today’s sermon. Any relationship founded on utter trust in another human being—is a risky undertaking. Even holy matrimony, a relationship we believe to be blessed and supported by God’s grace. If we—the Church—didn’t believe that, why would we prayer “For the honesty to acknowledge when they hurt each other, and the humility to seek each other’s forgiveness and yours”? Because we know—and God knows—that it is impossible for anyone to live in such a relationship without hurting each other.

So what we pray for—for all of us, not only the couple being married—is not the absence of such inevitable hurt, but the means for dealing with those injuries we inflict on each other, seeking God’s grace and strength not to repeat them. In fact our prayers include one “for the strength to keep the vows each of us has made,” reminding us that all who make up this parish family and this Body of Christ need to renew our reliance on God to help us faithfully fulfill the vows we made (or others made on our behalf) at baptism and at other points in our lives.

The letter to the Hebrews goes on to remind us that “what is seen was made from things that are not visible.”

Friday I was speaking with Abbey and her husband Mark and their children about the children’s upcoming baptisms. At one point I was describing (explaining, I think, is too ambitious a word) to Jaxon the nature of a sacrament, telling him that there is always an outward, visible part and an inward, invisible one.

Whether it is the couple in a marriage or the water in baptism, there is always a part we can see, and usually feel and hear, and sometimes taste (as in Holy Communion). Those visible elements, as much as we cherish them, are mere signs of the spiritual reality, God’s grace, that underpin them and give them life. Those elements are “made from things that are not visible.”

God’s grace and love defy the limits of human language. Our Lord used image after image in his parables to paint verbal pictures of what that love is like. The author of Hebrews, speaking of Abraham and Sarah and using such imagery, speaks of us as well: “If they had been thinking of the land they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return.”

The author tells us too that God called our forebears in the faith, and calls us, to what he calls “a better country, that is, a heavenly one,” meaning not just something that we will encounter when we die, but, especially, an eternal life that has begun in us now. Trying to recapture—or run from—the past (usually distorted by memory) vanishes in our Lord’s many reassurances that the kingdom of God has come very near us, is here and now. It is a corrective, I think, to living in the past.

We celebrate today with Mark and June that divine presence in this and future moments in their lives. And we thank them for helping us to reflect on God’s presence with us in all our lives, here and now *and* forever.

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