

A boy loved the great outdoors, his parents would take him on a hike through the forest every Saturday morning as one of their family rituals. The boy loved going on adventures with his parents, although they were busy, they were never too busy for him.

When they got to the halfway point of the hike, they stopped to eat some of the trail mix they packed, the boy heard the faint sound of crying. There couldn't be a baby in this wilderness, dad insisted, but the sound persisted. Using his survival skills his dad taught him, mom and dad trailed the boy through the woods humoring him, until they too heard the sound. At that point mom and dad broke out into a jog and picked up their son running faster than a boy that age could meander. They tracked down the sound to the side of a gravel utility road used only by the power company to do maintenance on the transmission lines.

What the boy saw shocked him, it was a newborn baby girl still covered in filth and blood. What mother would leave her daughter out like this to die? In all the hikes with mom and dad, nothing like this had ever happened. Luckily, mom was a doctor at the local hospital. She engaged in life-saving techniques to treat a baby with hypothermia, dad called the police and before long emergency vehicles covered the gravel road in the woods. This girl was given up for adoption and given the name Elizabeth.

Elizabeth—her friends called her Bets—grew up in the same neighborhood as this boy. Bets' adopted parents were powerful executives who had it all: cars, vacation homes, and a child was one more thing to add to the collection. Bets grew up in a household where she had everything she ever wanted, but rarely got what she needed. The local businesses knew her parents' checks would cash. But children need more than a blank check. With her parents' many business trips and long hours she was raised by racy television and inattentive babysitters. Bets learned to feed her appetite, but never her soul.

Nature abhors a vacuum, and without the love she needed growing up, other more sinister forces took residence in her heart and soul. Desperate for affection, she sought love in the wrong places: from strangers on the Internet, unkind boyfriends, and friends who just wanted a pony ride or a spin behind the Mustang. From this insatiable thirst arose body image issues, eating disorders, and eventually drug abuse. Her parents were too busy with the latest business venture to see their child who was struggling.

But the same boy who alone heard Elizabeth's cry in the forest those many years ago also was attentive to her cries growing up. He was a true friend to her, and he showed her a window into what life could look like as he invited her to family dinners and cheered her on at her soccer games. His mom was an addiction specialist at the hospital and saw the signs that something was amiss. She worked with Bets to get some of the treatment she so badly needed.

As time went on, this friendship grew. This boy was a young man with a bright future in sales. Bets dropped out of college yet managed to land a decent position at her parents' company. There was no picture perfect “meet cute” like you would see in the movies. The young man asked Bets out on a date, and the friendship turned into a relationship which turned into a marriage.

Now, there were a lot of fine young ladies in this man's business network, at his church, and in his social circles, but his compassion for Bets grew into a love that overlooked women who might have been better “marriage material.” In many ways, he was still that boy hearing that the cry in the woods.

And in those early years of the marriage, things were good. Bets finally experienced what it was like to have what you need, even if she didn't get everything she wanted. Life was luxurious, but not to the level of her childhood. What she did have was a loving husband who knew her needs were more than just items bought at the store or in a luxury car lot.

But as the years went on Betsy reverted to patterns she learned from her childhood. She fell off the wagon and got addicted again. She sold the car to feed her addiction when her husband took her off the accounts. She started seeing other men—men who really didn't love her. She was the only person who didn't see this.

If you were the husband, what more could you do? The same man who saved her life growing up knew exactly what she was up to, and it broke his heart. Even after the point of embarrassment, the husband kept trying to redeem the relationship. After the latest attempt to reconcile, Bets said enough is enough and divorced him.

Time went on, and the man remarried and had a son he named Joshua. Bets stumbled through the years; her parents had cut her off from their fortune. Eventually Bets gave birth to a daughter, Sophia. Given the way that Bets lived her life, it was impossible to know who the dad was, but given the timing of everything, this much was true: Josh and Sophia weren't related.

Josh grew up in a stable household with loving parents. He grew up with abundance, but he wasn't spoiled. He surprised his parents when He elected to go to the local college on a full ride rather than go to one of the big names like Harvard or Yale which also accepted him.

On the other hand, the school of hard knocks was Sophie's classroom. Childhood was difficult and she had to earn everything she received. After barely graduating high school, Sophie got a job as a custodian at the local university, but that's where she and Josh met.

Sophie worked third shift and it was almost time to punch out. Bags under her eyes, frizzed hair, and bleach-stained coveralls—that look isn't going to make the cover of Vogue anytime soon. She was running behind schedule and finished mopping and realized with horror class was about to start in thirty minutes. She

didn't even set out wet floor signs. She quickly ran to the janitor's closet to get signs but in her haste, she slipped and landed flat on the tile, just in time for Josh, to reach out a hand and pick her up. You could say that in that moment, he fell for her.

Josh's friends didn't get it. What was a classically handsome, valedictorian, high school soccer captain doing with a girl like that? His friends knew he could date any girl in his dorm. Why Sophie? Many of his friends left him in disgust thinking he was going for cheap until a better girl came along.

Josh gave himself up for Sophie. Sophia wasn't the smartest girl. She didn't have a supermodel body. She struggled with addictions and childhood traumas. But Josh was patient with her. Josh loved her and led her gently, and the surprising thing is Sophie followed. The thing is, Josh was unlike any other boy she dated. All the others just wanted her for the things she could give them. Often, she would be pressured to give more than she wanted to because she was worried she would be left unloved and alone. Not so Josh, he was a gentleman.

And so, as Sophie got to know Josh, her life improved. Because of his unconditional love, she had the courage to seek out counseling for the rough childhood she had. She joined a 12-step program to help with the substance abuse issues she struggled with—she even got her mom, Elizabeth, to come to a couple sessions.

A turning point for Sophie was when Josh got her going to his church's women's group. This group of godly women took her under their wings and were the mothers to Sophie that Bets could never quite be. They told her of the love greater than theirs, the love of a Savior who gave Himself up for her. After going through a new member class with Josh's pastor, Sophie came to saving faith in the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Sophie soon learned that **“...Christ loved her and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present [Sophia] to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”** Sophie was baptized, and her past of regrets, disappointments, and failures was washed away.

A few years later, Josh and Sophia got married. Josh's pastor who baptized Sophie conducted the ceremony. **““Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.”**

This mystery is profound, and the extended parable I just told you refers to Christ and the Church. God loves object lessons, and there's a reason God has hardwired us to enjoy love stories. God has made reality such that every love story of boy meeting girl is an extended parable of Christ's sacrificial love for the Church. Christ's life, death, and resurrection is the story of the perfect man giving

Himself up to cleanse and welcome in His bride the Church. Every marriage is an object lesson of this greater reality. Your marriage, imperfect as it is, has been a sermon to your children and to your friends and family of Christ's love for His Church.

The Old Testament and New Testament tell us two stories about the same God. The first half of this sermon about the boy saving Bets is a story from Ezekiel 16 that I had to censor and make PG-rated for all ages to hear at church. The name Bets is short for Bat-Zion (בַּת-צִיּוֹן) or daughter of Zion. Daughter of Zion is a nickname for the people of Israel. The Lord laments in Ezekiel 16 that he found Bat-Zion in a field left for dead in afterbirth. He saved her, provided her with everything, married her, and she still was unfaithful and left him. Just like Elizabeth, things didn't go well for the daughter of Zion from that point forward. Nonetheless, the Lord promised to remember His covenant with her.

The story of Josh and Sophia reflects the story of the second woman—the New Testament woman, the Church. Josh is Jesus Christ, who pursued Sophie, the Church, and gave Himself up for her to sanctify her, to cleanse her, and to make her holy. Christ's death for your sins on the cross and His third day resurrection is the turning point that sealed His relationship with you, His bride, the Church. God's covenant to Bat-Zion, the ancient Israelites, is fulfilled in His Son Jesus, who never forsook His people, and came to save the Jews as well as the Gentiles.

Now, I could take this text from Ephesians 5 and turn it into one of the endless “7 steps to a perfect marriage” that many preachers turn it into, but that's not what I'm here to do today. I'll leave it at this, husbands, you're not Jesus even though you're called to His life of love and self-sacrifice, but you are called to follow Him and look to Him for forgiveness when you fail to live up to His example. Wives, you're not the holy Church, but maybe on a bad day you can act like a local congregation that is at each other's throats over what color to paint the fellowship hall. All of us need forgiveness, and all of us need Jesus Christ, the one who washes and sanctifies His Church on Earth.

Whether you're married, single, or widowed here today, let us spur one another one with good stories. Don't believe the secular spiritual whose chorus is, “I fooled around and fell in love.” Don't go for the revisionist love stories of boy meets boy, girl meets gender-non-conforming androgynous young adult, or even the story of married man meets married woman who aren't each other's spouses. In this world that's lost its story, surround yourself in stories of redemption. Stories of love. Stories that ultimately find their genesis in *the story*, that is, the story of God's love for you in Jesus Christ. Look to Jesus, the one who reconciles all things to Himself, and in whom all relationships find health, healing, and hope.