

# WEDDING SEASON

Revelation 21:1–5a NRS  
July 18, 2010; 16<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary time, c  
Casey Thompson  
Idlewild Presbyterian Church

I'm going to talk about something dangerous: I'm going to talk about weddings. And when you talk about weddings, it's inevitable to talk about marriage, and when we talk about marriages, we recognize sadly that not all marriages bloom. Marriage is hard. Divorce is harder. There are a thousand reasons marriages fail, and many of them break our heart even more so because we are incapable of stopping them. Ultimately, though, our text deploys this metaphor of marriage not as window to a human relationship but as a lens to a divine one. And so, here we go with a flawed metaphor to talk about a perfect love:

Our scripture lesson is from Revelation, chapter 21:1-5a. Listen to the vow God has made:

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home<sup>1</sup> of God is among mortals. He will dwell<sup>2</sup> with them; they will be his peoples,<sup>3</sup> and God himself will be with them;<sup>4</sup> <sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."<sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new."*

The Word of our Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

It's the season for weddings, and I have a few coming up. So, they've been on my mind lately. I love a good wedding—but some pastors I've known actually prefer funerals. I think they're crazy. Of course, I haven't had one of *those* weddings yet. When they say this, they look knowingly at each other and laugh, a secret society of the waylaid.

It's true. The stories pastors hand around about weddings are legion. I've heard about the groom getting married for the third time who had trouble with a certain part of the vows.

“Repeat after me. I vow to be true and faithful...”

“I vow to be true and [mumble].”

The pastor repeated it, enunciating carefully, “I vow to be true and faithful.”

“I vow to be true and [mumble].”

He couldn’t say it, but the pastor couldn’t let it go.

“To be true and *faithful*.”

“To be true and [*mumble*].”

You’re right, if you suspect his first two marriages ended because he had trouble being [mumble].

Nor have I witnessed the sabotage that family members unleash as a last effort to derail a wedding—including one wedding a friend officiated where the parents showed up ninety minutes late because “lunch ran long.” Just in case their son didn’t understand the subtext, the mother then wanted to drive home across town because her shoes weren’t comfortable. You know, I’d feel a little better if we all agreed to stop for a moment and offer a prayer for that couple. “Lord, help them ‘cause their family ain’t going to.”

My weddings have been easy affairs, from the premarital counseling to the post-ritual banquet. I love sitting with two people in my office to talk about the goods of marriage. The church names three. Marriage is good for the procreation of children (the practical side of the church coming out—though marriages don’t need to produce children to be good—don’t read that backward), to help stabilize society (more practicality), and for intimacy between people (ah, finally, the dreamy romantic side of mother church).

Intimacy is compelling, especially incipient intimacy. Watching two people knit together, developing a common life in a way that honors each, you can see them physically orient to one another, like a moon to a sun, or a metal shaving to a magnet. Before the wedding, couples start to move in synch, telling each other’s stories, opening the labyrinths and negotiations with ease because of the enormous goodwill they have for each other. Before a wedding, that goodwill will envelop almost anyway, including those one or two friends you’d never spend time with if they weren’t your beloved’s best friend from high school. But when you’re in love, their suspect friends become part of the family.

I love that they know that they will celebrate their love in a church on their wedding day, but every day after they will celebrate it in their hearts. I love watching them flush with excitement at the possibility that their love now will be an embarrassment to the love they will feel next year.

Of course, it is my job as their pre-marital counselor to ruthlessly destroy those expectations. (But I don't do it with relish. And they don't listen anyway, so it doesn't deter my enjoyment of it that much.) My job is to tell them that the promises they are about to make, to stick with it through everything, is a promise they can't expect these feelings of excitement to undergird for a lifetime. Instead, they will have to work at it. Commit to it. Irrationally stick it out. In short, that even great marriages are demanding chores, that goodwill takes good work. That something else will emerge that is even greater than this rapture. Of course, that's overstating it, but you have to cut through the bleary-eyed mooning somehow. Or else, they're going to wake up in eighteen months and wonder why they married that thing beside them.

My favorite part of the wedding: the bride's entrance, slow, controlled promenade down the aisle with a smile of glee so grand it works like an environmental Zoloft. I know, you now have all the evidence you need to label me a sentimental prat, but so what. I love it. Love is beautiful.

God agrees. I can't count how many times God gets married in the bible. Sure, it's always to the same partner. "And I saw the Holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "behold, the home of God is among mortals." That's the wedding announcement. Now, listen to the vows: "He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." This is a God who will irrationally stick it out, even if it means marrying us over and over.

I can't count the number of times God get married, nor can I count how many times Jesus uses the wedding banquet to describe what the kingdom of God will be like. The kingdom of God will be at the Holiday Inn. God will serve finger sandwiches made of bacon and pimento cheese. The kingdom of God will be at the Botanic Gardens (weather permitting; of course the weather will permit) with ice sculptures of the apostles and a champagne fountain. The kingdom of God will be held at the Peabody, where strawberries will be drizzled with three types of chocolate and a large raspberry cake will reach to the ceiling, decorated with and by cherubs. The kingdom of God will be in the grand ballroom and the dancing will be lead by the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, a raucous number where we spin in circles and forget our cares. The Heavenly Host will provide a short selection of meditative psalms during the toast, but then the Beatles will re-unite. (The Beatles will have to work because of that blasphemous crack Lennon made about being bigger than Jesus. Huh, what do you think now?) The kingdom of God will be at La Quinta. (Yes, La Quinta). Jesus

has gone ahead to prepare a room for us. Every one is invited—indeed compelled to come and celebrate, where Israelis and Palestinians, and Iraqis and Americans, and Hutu and Tutsi, the Rich and Poor, the Republican and the Democrat, the educated and the not, the housed and the homeless, the insured and the un-, the illegal and the native, the psychologically aware and the corseted mind, the angry and the joyful, the fearful and the free, male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, the Black and Brown and White, will *all* eat and sing and dance together in a way that our fears made impossible for us when we were alive. Except for when we went to weddings.

I love a good wedding. It's a taste of what God intends for us.

I love a good wedding, but it's the marriage that matters.

Marriage as an institution is the most lovely and most harrowing gift God has rendered to us. As the intersection between two imperfections, it is riddled with moments of comfort or damage, and this is what sells or sours people on it. We've always known this. Genesis warns us, 'the two become one flesh,' but it's not only one flesh, it's one mind, one history, one everything. 'One' is shorthand, of course, it's more like one and a half. Like a Venn diagram, marriage includes an overlap, which represents the one flesh, the one mind, the one history that arose from two but has mutated to one. That overlap is a third thing all-together—different from its sources. You get married and something new emerges. This is why divorced people talk about feeling like part of them has been ripped away. Part of them has, in fact, been ripped away. But while you are married, if you attend to its health, the overlap enlarges you.

So, a rather stolid example: I sat down at the breakfast table one morning and unfolded my wallet. Sharon looked over from the counter, where she was buttering her biscuits and said, "You only need your driver's license." At which point, I folded my wallet up and walked out of the room.

With my mother, the conversation would have gone like this:

"Do you need any money?"

"No, I'm just looking for my voter registration card."

"They'll accept your license."

"Really?"

"Yes. Do you know where to go?"

"Yeah, it's right around the corner here."

"Here, have a biscuit before you go."

“I don’t want a biscuit, mom.”

“What? Is there something wrong with my biscuits?”

With my father, the conversation would have gone like this:

“I’m not giving you any money so don’t even ask.”

“I don’t want any money.”

“I’m not giving you my biscuit so don’t even ask.”

“I don’t want your biscuit.”

“Then what the heck are you doing?”

“I’m looking for my voter registration card.”

“Who are you going to vote for?”

“You know who I’m going to vote for.”

“How could you vote for that fool?”

“Here it is.”

“They’ll take your license too. Why don’t you know that?”

“It’s been a pleasure, dad.”

Actually, that’s my fictional father, exaggerated to sound surly and illustrate a point—a conversation with my real dad would have sounded like the one with my mother; after all, their Venn Diagram just celebrated forty four years. With my wife, she knew, instinctually, what I needed. And I knew, instinctually, that I didn’t need to confirm it with her. She knew it because our lives overlap. And this is what I think scripture is after when it deploys this metaphor.

In our marriage to God, our lives start to overlap his holy life. We begin to knit together, to physically orient to God, like a moon to a sun, or a metal shaving to a magnet. We begin to sense his thoughts. We hear the still small voice of our beloved. Feed my sheep, we hear, and we wonder where that came from. We find ourselves here on Thursday night with a plate of food and a kind word for a stranger. Let the little children come to me... and suddenly we’re tutoring at Idlewild elementary. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink... and now you’re half way around the world making sure someone has clean water. We begin to trust that even if we don’t know where life will take us that we know we’ll go there with God. No, it won’t always be easy, because God has some enormously suspect friends, people we would never spend time with if it weren’t for our beloved, but if we make the vow, make the promise to be faithful, then we get married to God and something new emerges,

something wonderful, something that allows us to be more of who we already are, more grounded, more generous, more compassionate, more loving, more alive. We become flush with excitement at the possibility that the love you feel for God, for the whole world, will deepen so radically that the love you feel now will be an embarrassment.

Hear the truth of the gospel: God is committed to us. Wedded to us. God loves us. Whether we are beautiful or ugly. Educated or not. Rich or poor. Whatever. This is the vow God has made. I will be with you. I will wipe every tear from your eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more. I am yours and you are mine.

This is a God who will stick it out. No matter what.

And to celebrate this union, the Kingdom of God will be at Idlewild today. Everyone is invited. There will be bacon and pimento cheese sandwiches and the best cookies you've ever tasted. And a multitude of people who surround you who are as besotted with God as you are.

Today, we celebrate the kingdom of God at Idlewild. Tomorrow, we celebrate in our hearts. Amen.

© 2010 Idlewild Presbyterian Church, Memphis, Tennessee