

John 2:1-11

January 17, 2010

South Plains

Weddings, Wine and Beulah Land

Weddings and baptisms are by far the most joyful routines in the life of the church. There is something about weddings, however, that makes them inherently stressful for the couple and their parents. To misappropriate a line from a Christmas carol, "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." I remember one wedding that we almost couldn't finish. The couple were not members of the church, but I quickly became very fond of their honesty and obvious attachment to each other. All went well in the ceremony until I started to pray. The bride began whispering under her breath. I kept my head bowed and was glad that the Book of Common Worship kept my attention on the prayer. Surely, I thought, these people know it's rude to talk during a prayer. When I said, "Amen," and looked up I found the groom white-faced, leaning on his bride for support and on the verge of fainting. We sat him down on the front pew until he regained his composure and could stand up for the benediction. The stress of the occasion was just too much. My benediction from Jude 24 seemed to fit the day: "Glory be to him who can keep you from falling and bring you safe to his glorious presence, innocent and happy.... now and forever."

For all the stress around these occasions, scripture likes weddings. And even the most secular

family is likely to pour untold energy into a church wedding because we seem to know instinctively that marriage is not only the idealized relationship between two persons; marriage is also the idealized relationship between God and humanity. The prophets saw in marriage a kind of parable, a positive parable for the faithful love of God for the chosen people. They also saw it as a negative parable for the infidelity of believers who so often are accused in the Bible of whoring after other gods.

Jesus loved the image of the wedding feast of the Lamb of God. Maybe that's why his first miracle in the Gospel of John takes place at a wedding. It's a picture that reaches a climax in the book of Revelation with a wonderful description of the church as the bride of Christ at the wedding feast of the lamb. The Holy Spirit and the bride say to the wedding guests and to anyone who wants the water of life, "Come." And, the last words before the benediction that closes the Bible are, "Come, Lord Jesus (Rev 22:20)!" That's a wedding reception we're all invited to attend.

How many remember the old gospel song "Beulah Land?" The chorus goes like this.

I'm living on the mountain, underneath a cloudless sky; (praise God)

I'm drinking at the fountain that never shall run dry;
Oh yes! I'm feasting on the manna from a bountiful

supply,

For I am dwelling in Beulah Land.

One of the favorite questions for a Bible quiz is “What does Beulah mean?”

When Isaiah announces the end of the Babylonian exile, he says the land won't be called “forsaken and desolate” any more. Instead, “your land shall be called married.” “Beulah” is the Hebrew word for married. In other words the ultimate blessing is to live in Beulah Land, a place married to the Lord.

Now, as soon as we start using this language in 2010, we have to make a couple of clarifications. In the first place, when scripture refers to God as a husband, it does not mean to imply that God is male. If we allow ourselves to think of God as male, we put ourselves in opposition to the Old Testament prophets. They railed unceasingly against the Baals and fertility cults who gave their gods gender.

In the second place, we should not assume today that married people have preference in the kingdom of God over single people. In biblical times it was better for women to be married because economically they were almost totally dependent on the men in that society. I don't think anyone seriously wants to go back to buying and selling women as brides. We have to disentangle biblical culture from biblical faith.

With these two clarifications in mind, the Bible's imagery of weddings and marriage and the hope of Beulah Land can tell us a lot about faith in God. Think of Beulah Land as another way of talking about heaven, about that perfect peace when swords will be beaten into plowshares and we will live in harmony with the Lord.

The imagery of marriage tells us first and foremost that relationships are at the heart of the Christian faith: relationships between persons and the relationship between us and our Maker. Faith is not an idea, but an active, loving, personal, honest, holistic relationship. It's important to keep the commandments of God because they define a healthy relationship. Worship is important because it nurtures and sustains an ongoing relationship with God. Service to our neighbors is important because that service imitates the Lord to whom we are attached. And, service is one way we connect with each other. In the adult Sunday School class we're studying the Psalms because their words keep us focused on the one and only Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Going to church is important because this is where loving relationships happen. All these components are critical because they keep Christians related to our Lord and to each other.

I have two friends from 40 years ago. We occasionally exchange Christmas letters. However, years of separation and poor letter-writing on my part have stretched those relationships very thin. Forty years ago, I could call them my best friends, but I cannot in

good conscience say that today because we have not maintained the relationships.

When we put a priority on a relationship, we spend time with that person; we communicate freely and often; we monitor our interaction in order to enhance the quality of what we say and do. The all-purpose word to describe these holy relationships is “love,” or to use biblical language, “loving kindness.” Loving kindness pushes us to balance being and doing, who we are as a friend or lover with how we act as a helping neighbor. At the heart of the Christian faith is a web of relationships centered in God who is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. Of course, when we say “God revealed in Jesus” we have already begun talking about the Trinity, another set of relationships.

The quality of all these relationships is both incredibly joyful and very different from any other. We hear the joy in Adam’s exclamation: “At last, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” The wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee symbolizes the exuberant celebration of Christian faith. We Presbyterians have a reputation that is sometimes well-deserved for rationing exuberant joy in a way that is almost miserly. It’s hard for some Presbyterians to even smile, much less whoop and holler. I’ve had the good fortune to sit next to Presbyterian elders when UVA wins a football game. I can report that they did not hold back their joy in victory. We could stand a little more expressive joy in worship when we’re blessed by God. That’s why I like the letters

JOY on the rear wall of our sanctuary. It’s good to be happy in the Lord.

I enjoy reading first-hand accounts of revivals. They are happy occasions. Early in the 19th century a revival stretched from Hampton Sidney College to Cane Ridge, Kentucky, a revival that brought many people to faith. Witnesses described people “slain in the Spirit.” This meant among things that people had fits of holy laughter, uncontrollable chuckles. A relationship with God can come with a joyful quality. That old hymn, “Dwelling in Beulah Land,” sets our joy to music.

The difference that holy relationships make in our lives is like the difference between water and wine. It’s the difference between scarcity and abundance on the order of 120 gallons of fine wine that Jesus miraculously produced at that wedding. You heard that right. 120 gallons of the best wine appeared that day. The Gospel of John wants us to know that Jesus was giving notice in his first public miracle that he could make a difference. And what a difference! The healing miracles changed one life at a time. By turning water into wine at the wedding, the life of the whole party changed. Those who celebrate with him experience a relationship both more demanding and more rewarding than any they have ever known.

Like you I have been watching the news about the earthquake in Haiti. The day after the quake, live television reports showed people distraught with grief and

suffering in the streets of Port au Prince. In the background we could hear Haitians singing. They were singing hymns and songs of praise. I'd like to think that if I suffered some terrible disaster, I'd be able to still sing hymns of praise.

Genesis tells us that human beings are made for each other. Marriage is perhaps the most universal symbol we have for a loving relationship. The stress of the relationships does not stop, of course, just because the wedding is over. The evidence for stress and pain in marriage is overwhelming. Last week, we went to see the Meryl Streep romantic comedy, "It's Complicated", about marriage and divorce and dating again. We left the theatre laughing. For all the serious issues around human relationships, in the end we may understand them best as comedy.

The joy of Adam and Eve in the story of Genesis does not last long enough. We learn a lot about sin and misery in their story. But when the tragic lessons of sin have sunk in, maybe the best we can do is to smile at the foolish couple, standing naked before God, with one hand pointed fingers of blame at one another and with the other hand trying to keep those silly fig leaves in place.