

# SACRED CEREMONIES -- WEDDINGS

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A little boy's hamster died. He gathered some friends in the backyard for a burial. The minister father happened to be able to hear what was going on through the open window in his study. He was amused but then sat up when he heard the concluding words; "In the name of the Father and the Son and in the hole he goes." (Thump.)

Rituals are a part of our lives. They can be found in backyards with kids or in sanctuaries with adults. They can be found in the Bible; they are there from circumcisions to seders. They are in our lives – beginning, middle, and end. How many of you have seen a baptism, had one? How many of you have seen a wedding, had one, plan to go to one? How many of you have tasted the Lord's Supper, think you will? And funerals – been to one, think you'll go to one, might have one yourself?

Ceremonies have a way of nourishing us and directing us. But sometimes they get garbled, cut off from their intended meaning, and we end up with ceremonies we participate in but don't understand, like "Father, Son, and in the hole he goes." Then they cannot ground and nurture us. So, for a few weeks we will look at what God says about the sacred ceremonies of our lives in the hope of understanding them better.

Today I am glad you got to "church in time" because we are going to talk about weddings. In the Christian calendar we noted last week the baptism of Jesus, a commissioning of Jesus. The Gospel of John tells us that as Jesus began his work, his first miracle was a wedding. So today we talk about weddings and one in particular that is significant for every person in this sanctuary.

Let's pray.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit then, these words: Ephes. 5:31-33 *"For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will*

*become one flesh." [32] This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church. [33] However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband.*

*John 2:1-11 "1On the third day a wedding took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, 2and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. 3When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine." 4"Dear woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied, "My time has not yet come." 5His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." 6Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. 7Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim. 8Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet." They did so, 9and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside 10and said, "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now." 11This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed in Cana of Galilee. He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him.*

They can be simple, with maybe a garland of wild flowers around her head. They can be ornate with horse-drawn carriages and heads of state. They can be cheesy with a Vegas chapel rented for ten minutes. They can be outlandish like the scuba enthusiasts who did it at the bottom of the ocean. Weddings are in many forms, in many places, and have been in many times. (Isn't that interesting? Human beings have sensed something about a man and woman joining, something about it meriting ceremony and ceremony aiding it.)

In our culture and our century, weddings have been the stuff of little girls' dreams. It's been the fuel for an entire industry – dress manufacturers to specialized magazines and

photographers and even fairs set up in convention-type halls that display invitations and custom made chocolates with your names and date engraved on them.

One dream tends to be a wedding adorned with the candles and stained glass windows and a clergy person. It'll be beautiful and rarified with these. It'll be, and the way we put it is, a "*church* wedding."

It is a fact that weddings weren't always *in* churches. It's rather interesting, to me at least, that weddings were, in the early centuries of Christianity, simply left to the state. They were civil rituals regulated by civil laws. Some of the customs we have today continue from the way Romans did it in the Roman Empire (for example, the declarations of consent, the holding of hands, the wedding feast with cake). The civil ceremony eventually had an afterwards, postlude type of Christian blessing. That became a full service in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. However, it was conducted at the door of the church. The service didn't make it into the sanctuary until the Reformation era.

As a *service* ... *in* the church, it means something very, very important. It means something that is always a part of my first conversation with a bride and groom-to-be. I explain that a wedding is, in our tradition, a worship service. "Uhhh, okay," comes the reply. "Let me explain," I continue. "That means while you are both very dressed up and everyone is very excited for you, *you* are not the main event. God is. Everyone will stare at you. Smiles will come to faces and tears come to eyes as we all feel happiness for you. But in a Christian wedding, a service in the church, *you* are not the main attraction." Don't get me wrong. I want the wedding to be gratifying for them. I really do. But I care most to honor God.

Honoring God, worshipping God, means we affirm his existence and bless him for all he is and all his gifts. In this service in particular, we relish the gift of love, of male and female, of family, and of Christ being our most complete companion. We are saying that God is the backdrop behind you, the floor under you, the walls around you, the ceiling

above you. That as your hearts beat for one another, he is the heart beat in your heart beats. Being before God, we are sober about taking vows. He's in on it. We are not whimsical, but solemnly earnest. We express, if we are wise, our real need for his help to truly live the married life. So we adore him, fear him, ask of him. We worship and get rightly oriented to the way things are.

That the service is worship also means that the minister is in charge. So, for example, when the couple way back when I first started doing weddings wanted to have Jose Feliciano's song, *Baby Light My Fire*, I could direct that this music would be better at the reception. When the bride's mother tried to say that it was, after all, her daughter's wedding (and I try to listen hard here because I've met more than one mother who seemed to believe it was her wedding!), I could say that the church is not a wedding hall they had rented and I was not a hireling for the family. This is a church and I am a minister.

I also remember one wedding I did where this really young, strapping groom saw his bride at the end of the aisle and tears just started pouring down his face. He said later, "I was just so incredibly thankful to God for this beautiful woman that God was making a gift in my life." I remember marrying and it was like one of those movie cameras that seems to be on a carousel, everything moving but the lens just focused on my bride. Everything in me feeling, "Wow." The tears and the "wow" is the relishing of God's goodness. Those were tears of worship.

Jesus, at the wedding in Cana, saves the day turning water into the very best wine. There it all is – Jesus at another's wedding is really the star, and yet see him also in a supporting one, one who takes the ordinary and the empty and makes it the very best for that couple. That's how it is in Christian weddings – Jesus is there, to be blessed and to bless.

The central part a wedding is the exchange of vows. The rings exchanged are but tangible reminders of the vows exchanged. In the wedding service as I lead it, we say, that the rings remind the couple "of a time and a place when *promises*

*were made in sincerity and received in trust.*” Promises made in sincerity and received in trust. That’s what it comes down to – a marriage isn’t rings or license but promises made in sincerity and received in trust. Made in sincerity and received in trust before the eyes of God.

The promises we make are crucial and are part of what has made societies throughout time have a wedding ceremony. Percy and Lawrence Aerosmith, at 100 and 105 years old held the record for length of marriage at 80 years and the oldest combined age of a married couple until John died in June 2005. They said their long marriage (and maybe their long lives even) had to do with practicing the biblical principle of not going to bed angry.<sup>1</sup> Maybe they had nights when they didn’t go to sleep. I don’t know. But I bet that this practice did have a lot to do with the length and quality of their marriage. But it also had to do with what they vowed. They promised “to help and comfort one another,” to be “your loving and faithful *spouse*, in plenty and in want, in joy and in sorrow, in sickness and in health, as long as we both shall live.”

See, in the vows in the ceremony, a man and a woman define what they intend, express what they are committed to, establish the project they are undertaking. It isn’t without shape or direction or goal. The purpose is to be together in a loving way for life. It is more than just being together as long as we have romantic feelings.

This vow, being together in a loving way for life, is not just an assertion a couple makes. It is a submission as well. We do not have in weddings an endless stream of people getting up and saying, “I think that this is what’s needed,” or “this is what I think a marriage is.” No. The collected wisdom of society, of the church, says, “This is what you need and we need and this is what a marriage is” and we submit to *that*.

I say *we* need this because if everyone defines marriage their own way and that is happening next door to your house,

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<sup>1</sup> He didn’t say as some men I’ve met, “I’ve always been a little hard of hearing.”

who knows what comings and goings there are, what kids there are, how they are cared for, how the senior citizens are cared for, what is going on in the schools. This is a reason that the state is involved in marriages, the family is a building block of society.

So we fit into an idea of marriage. If we are writing sonnets, we fit into the structure of sonnets.

Earlier we said the Apostle's Creed together. This is an affirmation of not my personal, self-styled faith, but it is an assertion of the Christian faith. I am not commissioned to share my faith with you but to declare to you the Christian faith. In just the same way, in a wedding we don't dictate what a marriage is, but we hear what it is and enter into it. Percy and Florence Arrowsmith did.

What a great ceremony and worship a wedding is. And how great that Percy and Lawrence and many others find a life-companion. For some this hasn't happened. For some it has and it hasn't lived up to its billing. But I want you to see something in our text that is behind all weddings and that is Jesus. At one point Pharisees ask Jesus, "Why do your disciples not fast?" His answer to them, "Because the bridegroom is present and that is a time for feasting, not fasting." At another point John the Baptist's disciples comment, "Many people are going after Jesus." His response to them, "The bride is for the bridegroom." At the end of the Bible, in Revelation, we hear that the heavenly, holy city comes down as a bride for her husband." In sum, Jesus is a bridegroom.

No man or woman on earth will be the perfect bridegroom. And if we expect a human man or woman to complete us, we are putting too much freight on them. But, there is a perfect bridegroom for each us, who can complete each of us. His name is Jesus.

Why is this wedding the first miracle according to John? Why not a healing of blindness? Of paralysis? A rising from the dead? Because Jesus wants us to see something of great importance. He is our bridegroom and he doesn't want a

relationship that is just puppet to puppet master, or subjects to king, or sheep to shepherd. He wants a relationship of love. Where he can say to someone, “You can have all of me.” And they say to him, “You can have all of me.”<sup>2</sup> Heaven isn’t just a really long worship service. It is more like a really long marriage feast and honeymoon.

But how do sinful people come down the aisle to a holy bridegroom? How do they get to get married?<sup>3</sup> Jesus is at this wedding and says to his mother something like, “Why are you speaking to me?” Then he goes ahead and does it as if he simply changed his mind. “Oh, all right.” No, he’s in thought. Many attend weddings thinking about when theirs will be and Jesus is no different. But when he says, “My *hour* has not come,” the word “hour” means death. The wine for his wedding comes through his death. He’s thinking about that. That’s why he speaks as he does. That’s why John, in telling the story, makes very clear that the water is in stone jars used *for purification*. This bridegroom knows he will lay down his life in order to wed his bride. In order to wed, he will become dead. In order to have a marriage supper, it will be a marriage supper of the Lamb, the sacrificed lamb. He will lay down his life for his bride. That is what a bridegroom does. The blood inside him, which we in the supper call wine, will become on his cross, water and blood flowing from his side.

So go to weddings, thinking about the bride and groom to be sure, but think on Jesus ... who gave us life, love, and marriage, and is our eternal friend and bridegroom.

Never forget his love.

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<sup>2</sup> How would you like to married to someone who only gives you half their heart? How many of us are with Jesus that way? Or we have a prenuptial with him?

<sup>3</sup> Consider this also along the lines of what other cultures and times have had. What if you have become impoverished because of sin and cannot pay the bride price? What if in days of alliances making marriages you are from a low born family and he is from a high born one? What if you are Juliet and he is Romeo? How does a marriage happen between a sinful person and the holy Jesus?

You know, if you're thinking heaven is just one really long and boring worship service, I tell you to think again. It is a great wedding, a great wedding feast, a great wedding honeymoon. Bring it on.

Benedictory charge – relationships of dating hit a ceiling, but when a commitment is made between the two, one to another, a whole new depth of relating comes to pass. Our identity gets changed. Once I said, “I do,” to my fiancée, I didn't go and buy things like houses all by myself. I did that talking to her. What makes a Christian? It is when you hear Jesus proposing to you from across eternity and you say, “I do.” When you get done with going it alone, or just dating him, and when you say that you want to do life with him as your partner. If you haven't done that, do it today.