

## The Holy Union

Perhaps the Weight and Glory of a marriage can only be fully known after death do we part.

You who have lost a spouse to death know this truth.

I know it too.

This February 1st marks the 26th year since Isa lay in my arms at 4:15 that morning, and, at 39 years of age, gave up her last breath after a year-long struggle against cancer.

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We come face to face with marriage because the Lord's word today is all about marriage, from Isaiah's beautiful poetry to the crisis at the wedding in Cana.

So today's readings are really a challenge to us: how do we see our relationship with God?

For some, God is the one who sets the whole bloody mess in motion and then goes on a long holiday.

Truth be told, that's the god of our American civil religion - which is why we say we trust in god, but pass the guns and count the cash!

But for us, from the prophets to Jesus to St. Paul to the book of Revelation, it is marriage that most closely describes humanity's relationship with God.

Isaiah shouts this morning:

"For as a young man marries a young woman, so shall your builder marry you."

Jesus moves from party to party, having a great time with the least and the lost and the weird; and when the the fat cats and Dudley do-rights complain, he has a finger in their chest saying:

"When you're celebrating a wedding, you don't skimp on the cake and wine!" Lk. 5:34.

“When the bridegroom is in town, you don’t get dressed in sack cloth and ashes — you eat!”

And in Revelation, the visionary John of Patmos sees “heaven and earth, newly created; ..., as ready for God as a bride for her husband.” Rev. 21:1-2.

Many of you remember your wedding day.

Surely you wanted the day to be perfect, the memories lovely, the lighting soft, everything to be just right.

Which, in this imperfect world, is a recipe for considerable stress.

Nevertheless, it is a common hope, even, I am sure, for the youngsters tying the knot in Cana today.

Except, unlike most couples today, who stress out about a one-day event, the youngsters in Cana face a seven-day bash.

That’s seven days of food, lodging, and of course, wine for a town full of thirsty guests.

So when the young couple at Cana find out they are about to go down as the social embarrassment of the season, because the wine ran out and Costco’s is closed, you can imagine their panic.

But more about that in a moment.....

Because while we often focus on the wedding when talking about marriage, the wedding, even with its stresses and strains, is actually the easy part.

When I was in law school, we had a professor who loved piling on the homework.

She gave lots of it and she wanted it back fast.

When we complained, she told us to cheer up; “when you get out of here and actually practice law,” she said, “you’ll have twice as much work to do in only half the time, AND someone’s freedom or finances will be at stake, not just a grade on your report card.”

For some reason, those words spoke to me about marriage.

While a wedding requires give and take on invitation designs and the right table treats, in marriage, the give and take of surrendering one's self reaches deep into heart and soul; often at the most unexpected times.

As you live with someone, (not just married folks but anyone in any relationship); there is a surrendering of self that, in relationships that thrive, becomes a mutual surrendering that occurs day in, day out.

We see it today, as we eavesdrop on Mary asking Jesus to save the day, somehow, for the soon to be shamed bride and groom in Cana.

Mary doesn't know what he'll do or how he'll do it; she leaves that to him: just like she didn't know how God was going to arrange a birth through a virgin: she left that to God.

Mary surrenders control over the situation.

And so does Jesus.

It's not his time, he says.

He plans to announce the start of his ministry by going to the synagogue in Nazareth, picking up the scroll, and reading from Isaiah that the day of the Lord, when the blind see and deaf hear and lame leap; that day is here, that day is now!

Certainly Jesus isn't planning to introduce his ministry on the third day of this wedding party!

But the messiness of life, as the messiness of life often does, steps in, and Jesus too surrenders to the needs of the moment.

Which gets us back to God's relationship with us as something like a marriage.

In marriage, two become one: and two will argue and fight; and two will make up; and two will suffer, together and alone, and two will find joy and hope.

When Isa died, she was ready to go directly into the arms of God.

The year before she died was a harrowing spiritual journey: from the rage and disgust at the unfairness of it all, to the rage at my inability to take it all away, to the sorrow of knowing she would never see her children graduate, never hug a grandchild, never live to see white hair.

But as the year came to its inevitable end, she was at peace; having come to experience God in a way deep and true, and she was ready for a new life in God's nearer presence.

I, on the other hand, was on a different train, which took me as far away from God as I could get; since, I kept asking, how could a loving God let this disease take her when so much life lay ahead for us.

It took a long time for me to be on speaking terms again with God.

But when I came back to the place where I had walked away from God, I found God standing there, patiently waiting for me: and I discovered that while God hadn't changed, I had.

No longer was my sense of God as some impersonal thing somewhere out there.

I began to feel that there is no separation between heaven and earth, with some things above and other things below.

Instead, I began to experience that all that is lives within God; that the air we breath and the colors that astound and the laughter that brings so much delight exists not only because God wanted it to be so 14 billion years ago in a big bang, but because God wants the company of creation now: that we really do live and move and have our being in God; that we truly are a part of each other; always and forever.

That in the mess that so often is our lives, God is here, laughing and crying and suffering and smiling -- one with us, one of us.

Sort of like marriage.

I was at a funeral not long ago listening to the preacher talk about how it is God's will that a beloved father in his early 60's died, as I watched the dead man's bereaved son wracked with pain and loss.

I felt like punching that preacher in the nose.

Because that's not Christianity.

There is nothing in our faith that holds God out as some kind of sadistic know-it-all who somehow delights in taking from us that which is most precious, most dear.

Rather, in this free world in which all things exist, tragedy happens because tragedy, just like joy; death, just like life; sickness, just like health, is all part of the colliding, exhilarating kaleidoscope that is the miracle of creation.

Perhaps what is true is that the living God embraces and dances and consoles and weeps with us all — and through it all — until at last we shall come to see in this marriage to God, the Weight and Glory of it all — and on that day, sing out with the angels:

Thanks be to God!

+amen