

Weddings are wonderful, joyous occasions. They should be! They celebrate human love and a couple's promise to share that love for a lifetime. They celebrate God's love and a couple's commitment to trust that love for strength to keep the promise they're making to love each other.

Yes, there's much to celebrate. Yet, as most pastors would tell you, in terms of work load and job satisfaction, I'd rather do a funeral. Why? First, because the wedding industry has gotten really obnoxious and overbearing about persuading young couples it's all about being king and queen for a day. Then, there's the family and friends and all their opinions, often expressed at the rehearsal, after the plans have already been made. Finally, there's the poor success rate; in contrast to funerals, of which I can say with absolute certainty that 100% of those I've buried have remained buried, according to the national average, only about 50% of those I've married have remained married.

Then there's the reception. Food's always good, but unless I know the family really well, they're a bit awkward for me. Sitting and eating with a bunch of strangers can be a bit stressful. It's different if I've got some connections with the family and there are familiar people there. Yet, even with that, there's the dancing. I love music, and I like to watch people dance. Just don't ask me to do it myself; I'll run the other way. No, sense of rhythm or coordination, that's my problem.

So, I really admire Jesus, it really sets him apart for me, that in John's gospel, the first time we see him in action is at a wedding. Well, not even something as noble as a wedding, a reception, the party after the wedding. How odd of "God with Us" to show up at a party!

It's there, while he and his disciples may have been kicking up their heels on the dance floor, that his mom learns of a problem. So, she takes him aside and tells him, "They've run out of wine!" And after expressing a bit of irritation, perhaps at having his dance time interrupted, he fixes everything. He not only provides wine, but it's better than what the host had served.

The season of Epiphany is all about revelation, and this is another one. In Jesus, God is not with us as some solemn, austere "holy man." He comes to be with us where we are, as we are. Unlike us, he doesn't separate religious from secular, worldly from sacred. Here's Jesus at, of all places, a party.

But that's just the beginning! God intensely, passionately wants to be with us where we are. So, when we speak of the love God has for us, and has shown us in Jesus, we've got to speak of an active, seeking, searching kind of love. Who's the lover in the sensuous Song of Solomon?

Upon my bed at night, I sought him whom my soul loves;
I sought him, but found him not; I called him, but he gave no answer.
I will rise now and go about the city, in the streets and in the squares;
I will seek him whom my soul loves.
I sought him, but found him not.
The sentinels found me, as they went about in the city.
"Have you seen him whom my soul loves?"
Scarcely had I passed them, when I found him whom my soul loves.
I held him, and would not let him go, until I brought him home.

The church has taught that this Hebrew love song, which sounds like passionate adolescent longings, is actually an allegory of the love of Christ for his church. Is it scandalous to say these sensuous ramblings are an analogy for God's love for us in Christ? Maybe so, but that's what the church has said; that this image of passionate, consuming love expresses God's love for us. Apparently, God's got this thing for us. Can't stop thinking about us! Has to be with us! Amazing!

Amazing, too, that just before being hung by the Nazis, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that he'd been meditating on, you guessed it, the Song of Solomon, and was comforted by the thought that "nothing calamitous can happen" because we're loved by such an "ardent, passionate, sensual love." Nothing calamitous – even if imprisoned by the Nazis – can happen to one who's been claimed by such love.

It's scandalous, too, that the Bible dares to call the poor old church Christ's "bride." She's unworthy of such adoration by one so pure and good. Still, she knows that she's betrothed, spoken for by the Savior, who'll keep his promise to fulfill his passionate intention to pour out his love to sinners. Jesus looks upon the poor old church, looks upon us, as a groom looks upon his bride.

God intensely desires and boldly risks union with us. So God comes close enough to be not only God for us, but also God with us. God steps up, steps in, and steps out in an amazing overture of love. A young woman named Mary submits to be a fellow conspirator in God's dramatic, miraculous move on humanity. Swept up in God's love, she bears a son with the revealing name, "God with Us," his very name declaring an end to separation and the beginning of intimacy.

Think of all those images in John's Gospel where Jesus stresses intimacy. He not only comes to us but "abides" with us. He is the shepherd, we are the sheep. He is the vine, we are the branches.

God doesn't seek our agreement or correct thinking. God seeks us, all of us! God's goal for us is intimacy, indwelling. "It is no longer I, but it is Christ who lives in me," said Paul.

The Bible's image of God as the passionate lover is hard for us as modern people. Modern people see themselves as the center of reality, meant to be self-sufficient, self-made, and self-reliant, free of anything that binds or constrains, fully independent (not dependent on anything or any body).

But that isolated self we idolize is shrunken and hollow compared to what God intends. The modern "self," a creation of our individual choices, responsible only for itself, whose greatest project is itself, is a self shed of the very qualities which God says make us human. That's why a salvation tied to a God who connects, who's all about relationship and community, is bound to be a challenge for us.

Yet, if you've ever loved someone with every fiber of you're being, loved them deep in your soul, couldn't stop thinking about them, wanted the best for them, gladly gave all you had for them, longed for their presence, forgave their stupid, hurtful deeds, you know what the church is saying when it describes God's grace as passionate, unmerited, life-giving, life-transforming - gift.

Christian faith is faith in a person, a person who's shown us that God loves us with longing and passion, and so God gets personal and comes close to us. More than a set of cold, abstract principles, it's our response to a God who's with us. So Paul says, "I know *in whom* I have believed," not "I know *that* I believe," or "I know *what* I believe," as if he believed in a system of ideas. His belief comes out of a relationship; it's personal trust in a person – Jesus Christ.

Into our world, into each of our lives, wherever we are, God comes. That's the great truth, the vivid experience that gathers us today. A Christian is simply someone to whom God in Christ has turned.

So be careful, when you're alone with your thoughts. You're not alone. God's thinking of you, longing for you. And take note when you go to a wedding or the party after a wedding. Right there, while the toasts are being made, or the cake's being cut, or you're doing the Macarena, the Electric Slide, or even the Chicken Dance, Jesus might find you! Because we don't come to God, God comes to us. Isn't that good news? Thanks be to God!

Prayer

We thank you, God of light, God of glory, God of joy, for the signs we receive from Jesus.
We thank you that at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee it was your will that the party continue,
...that supplies did not run out, that the joy might be abundant.

Thank you for what this reveals about your love for us.

May this good news help us be open to your grace and salvation.

Lord Jesus, you slipped in to all the places of our lives that we have attempted to guard for ourselves.
You erased the boundaries between the “sacred” and the “secular.”

By your presence, you made all places “holy.”

We have demonstrated, time and again, that we lack the power to come to you.

We are guilty of avoiding you, of turning away from you,

...of erecting all sorts of defenses against the intrusions of your loving presence.

We thank you for the gracious way that you show up when and where we least expect you.

We celebrate all the ways that you seek us, even before we know how to seek you.

For your presence among us, your epiphanies to us, we give you thanks and praise.

Come, Holy Spirit, show your power in patient love,

...where there are empty tables, plates, and cups, for the empty stomachs,

...where there is death and grief, move, blow your breath of life,

...and move us to be your instruments of comfort, care, healing, and life,

free us to joyfully and generously share, so that others may be blessed as we have been.

Come, Holy Spirit, show your power in patient love,

...where there are empty spirits, empty hearts, and empty hands

...that joy may return, that revival may occur, that renewal may bear fruit among your people.

Gracious God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, reveal yourself to us, so we may show you to others.

Fill our cups, inspire our wills, send us forth to the work of your kingdom.

As those who seek to do your will we pray for those known to us with special needs.

We lift up first to you the suffering people of Haiti, who have borne so much for so long, and who now must bear an unspeakable tragedy. Bless them, comfort them, give them strength, and help us to do much more than share our prayers, help us to reach out, to give, and to act, so that they may know your love and care, through us.

We pray also for...