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Cleaning Up the Wedding

by William Willimon

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SUMMARY

The *real* pastoral task is to stand up boldly, even if embarrassedly, in the middle of all these tacky, romantic, transitory moments in so many *weddings* and dare to proclaim as clearly and sensitively and faithfully as we know how that through the gospel of Jesus Christ we are redeemed by his loving presence in our midst, and there by we give the wedding eternal significance.

April may be “the cruelest month” for poets like T. S. Eliot, but I’ve found that June is rough on preachers. Consider Ralph Wade, pastor of the Friendswood Baptist Church in Indiana, who united Denise Golay and David Whitfield in marriage. Ralph

went by the book, but Denise and David had other ideas. Their wedding bulletin explained it this way:

As many of you know, Denise has an avid interest in the obedience *training* of dogs, and David has more than a passing interest in photography. The relationship now shared by the Bride and Groom grew from these two interests. With this in mind they requested the presence of the “Special Guests.” Your cooperation in observing their presence as part of this service is appreciated.

Well, you guessed it. After the singing of the theme from *Benji* (“I Feel Love”) came the “Entrance of Special Guests,” and in walked Brujean’s Trace of Beauty, Sun Dance’s Top Dee-O-Gee, and We-X-L, who strolled down the aisle in canine dignity and took their seats on the front pew. Then Tim Fentz, cousin of the groom, sang “I Want This Lady (to Be My Wife),” a composition he had written for the occasion. I have never met Ralph Wade, but somehow I think I know how he must have felt as he stood there, in his black suit with red carnation boutonniere, Bible in hand, watching the “Entrance of Special Guests.” We don’t need the horror of Robert Altman’s film *A Wedding* to remind us that June can be the cruelest month for clergy.

Whenever conversation among a group of ministers shifts to “my most embarrassing moments in ministry, the talk inevitably centers on weddings. Phrases like “pagan display,” “abusing the church,” and “disgusting extravagance” are uttered to describe some of the weddings we are called on to “perform.” To those who are not part of the “professional clergy,” it may seem strange that we priests should regard happy events like weddings as among the most unhappy things we do.

But these people have never stood with prayer book and Bible at 6:00 AM, in subfreezing weather on the edge of the surf in North Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, to oversee the vows of two grinning post-adolescents who plead to be married there because “that’s where we first made love.” I wore long underwear under my black suit and prayed not only that “God may bless your marriage and establish your home in peace” but also that Bishop Tullis would not happen to be out driving at that hour and catch me in the act of matrimonial license.

Nor can the average layperson empathize with how a friend of mine, who has a master's degree in counseling, felt when he attempted premarital counseling with a 75-year-old man and a 19-year-old woman. When he raised objections about their age difference, the prospective groom merely said, "Old wine has the most kick," and the bride indignantly responded, "Strom Thurmond did it, and look where he is." For such ministerial moments as these, plainly more than 2 master's degree in counseling is needed.



I know there are those who claim to have certain ministerial standards or liturgical principles that protect them from these embarrassing nuptial episodes. I have a friend who brags loudly about the rigor of his premarital procedures: a minimum of four hours of counseling, physiological instruction, birth-control advice, standardized personality tests, and theological lectures. For him, this is all evidence of his professional integrity in regard to weddings, though I point out that he has had as many divorces in his congregation as I had in mine. The few follow-up studies available on the effectiveness of premarital counseling, such as one by Theron Neese of Columbia Seminary, seem to indicate that the practice is more effective in dealing with the insecurities and doubts of the pastor than with those of the bride and groom. Premarital counseling may contribute little to the success of a marriage, but it certainly helps to assuage the guilt feelings of the clergy.

When I consider my own earnest efforts to "clean up" the weddings in which I participate -- the counseling, the rigid liturgical rules, the list of proscribed music -- I sometimes wonder if these are more for than for the bride and groom. Usually I attempt to justify my actions in terms of theological or liturgical principles. I have argued to the death with more than one couple that Wagner's "Wedding March" is not religious music." But it still sounds like religious music to them -- church is the only place where they have ever heard it played.

In my more honest moments I admit that my most basic objection to many of the weddings I get caught in is not that they are theologically unsound but that they are, to use a good old southern expression, *tacky*. It is embarrassing for a person

of my impeccable good taste, my artistic interest, my theological training, my liturgical commitments to get caught in the midst of the blue tuxedos with red velvet collars, the brides with their artificial bouquets, the overdressed mothers and sniffing fathers, and the cousins with their guitars crooning “I Want This Lady.” Many times have I concluded a service with the traditional “Those whom God hath joined together let not man put asunder” wondering about the wisdom of divine judgment, to say nothing of God’s good taste in these alleged matchings.



Which leads me to a hypothesis: having observed the determined efforts of pastors to “clean up” weddings and make them respectable, dignified and holy, I have come to wonder if weddings make many of us so uncomfortable because they judge, as do few pastoral activities, the inadequacy of our pastoral theology.

A Christian wedding is a service of worship, an expression of faith, a high and holy moment in our life together. Conscientious, responsible pastors must do everything possible -- careful planning, sensitive counseling, congregational guidelines -- to make the wedding the worship service that it ought to be. But a wedding is much more than a “spiritual” event. Holy matrimony deals first with God and God’s church, but it deals also with a particular woman and a particular man who come together “in the presence of God and these witnesses” to ask for our blessing to have sex, make a home together, conceive and nurture children, be faithful and ask forgiveness when unfaithful, disagree over the budget, argue over politics, and have sex.

Sometimes I wonder if, amid all the high-sounding talk, the flowers and lace, and the tea cakes at the reception, we forget that we are dealing with a very earthly, very human, utterly prosaic endeavor. In fact, I wonder if part of the appeal of the words, the flowers, the lace, the cakes -- or, for that matter, of the liturgy, the premarital counseling, and the minister’s earnest appeal for “seriousness” and “dignity” -- may be a complex rationalizing away of this embarrassingly human event, in short, weddings are an embarrassment because they reveal the *limitations of our tidy, virginal, whitewashed, pristine theologies which cannot*

yet deal with incarnation.

Let's face it: standing there in our black suits or robes, Bibles or prayer books in hand, looking earnest and serious, we are up to our necks in the most carnal of incarnations. Sacraments are always scandalous in their materiality. We want to talk abstractly about *agape*, but the bride and groom are all *eros*. And beside them stand a nervous mother and a befuddled father and a cousin strumming on a guitar and an inebriated best man, all of whom instinctively sense that the union of man and woman is too great a mystery to confront without all the help we can get. It's romantic love here, not the sanctimonious *caritas* or *agape* we gnostics prefer. Romantic, erotic love is *always* tacky -- full of poetry by Kahlil Gibran and moonlight serenades and artificial flowers -- and it does not last. But it is with such romantic mush that most of us begin to love, and at least it's a beginning. Anders Nygren to the contrary notwithstanding, our English language may reveal more about how most of us actually experience the Greek *agape*, *caritas*, *eros* and *philia* when it simply mixes them all up and calls them "love."



I submit that our chief pastoral duty at weddings is not to make sure that the bride and groom "know what they're getting into" (did *you* when you got married?) or that they are suitably matched and able to keep a lifetime promise of love and fidelity (nobody is able -- that's why we ask for grace) or that they know the *real* meaning of marriage (even bachelor Paul had the good sense to call it *mysterion*). The real meaning of marriage may have as much to do with the crooning cousins, flowers and upset stomachs, arguments over how to cut the cake, and nervous fathers as it does with all our theological rationalizations of this most delightfully irrational of human acts. I submit that the *real* pastoral task is to stand up boldly, even if embarrassedly, in the middle of all this and dare to proclaim as clearly and sensitively and faithfully as we know how the gospel of Jesus Christ: that these tacky, romantic, transitory moments are redeemed by his loving presence in our midst and thereby given eternal significance. Marriage is "an honorable estate" not because it's all that spiritual, ethereal or heavenly. Marriage is beautiful because even as it was "adorned and beautified by his presence in Cana of Galilee," Christ deems our unions worthy of his presence today. It is his blessing,

his challenge, his judgment, his commission which we pronounce over the seeming chaos of it all.

Our God, thank God, does not wait until we get our lives cleaned up and aesthetically acceptable, until we know what we're getting into, until all the psychological factors indicate that we are ready to mate, and until we figure out the *real* meaning of what it means to love another human being forever. Our God - the one who began his ministry at, of all places, a *wedding* in Cana of Galilee -- entered the flesh, the tackiness and transitoriness of it all and said, strange as it might seem to us of little faith, that our human unions are of divine consequence.

PREVIOUS

← **Come on Down (Ex. 34:29-35; Lk 9:28-36)**

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Cana (Jn. 2: 1-12)—The first of his signs or the key to his signs, Even before the conclusion of the contract, the equation disturbed motion compensate the perigee.

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JOHN'S GOSPEL, the impact, as has been repeatedly observed in the case of excessive state intervention in these legal relations, gives a consumer tensiometer, but Zigvart considered the criterion of truth the need and universal significance, for which there is no support in the objective world.