

Wedding Season
by Casey Thompson
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It's the season for weddings. I love a good wedding, but the pastors I work with actually prefer funerals. I think they're crazy. Of course, I haven't had one of those weddings yet. When they say this, they look knowingly at each other and laugh: a secret society of the waylaid.

It's true. The stories pastors hand around about weddings are legion. I've heard about the groom getting married for the third time who had trouble with a certain part of the vows.

"Repeat after me. I vow to be true and faithful..."

"I vow to be true and [mumble]."

The pastor repeated it, enunciating carefully, "I vow to be true and faithful."

"I vow to be true and [mumble]."

The pastor couldn't let it go.

"To be true and faithful."

"To be true and [mumble]."

"Seriously?"

"To be true and [mumble]."

Nor have I witnessed the sabotage that family members unleash as a last ditch effort to derail a wedding, including one wedding a friend officiated where the parents showed up ninety minutes late because "lunch ran long." Just in case their son didn't understand the subtext, the mother then wanted to drive home across town because her shoes weren't comfortable. I'd feel a little better if we all agreed to stop reading for a moment and offer a prayer for that couple.

My weddings have been easy affairs: a young doctor and nutritionist headed to Africa to work in an AIDs clinic; two people entering a second marriage who are so easy going it is hard to imagine either had passed through a divorce; a couple who would elope if given the opportunity; and two young lovebirds so into each other the wedding was secondary. These are not the sorts who cause problems.

I love a good wedding, and thus far these weddings have been good, from the pre-marital counseling to the post-ritual receptions. I love sitting with two young people in my office to talk about the goods of marriage. The church names three. Marriage is good for the procreation of children (the practical side of the church coming out), for the stabilization of society (more practicality), and for intimacy between people (ah, finally, the dreamy romantic side of mother church emerges).

Intimacy is compelling, especially incipient intimacy. Watching two people knit together, developing their own overlap in a way that honors each, you can see them physically orient to one another, like a moon to a sun, or a metal shaving to a magnet. Before the wedding, couples start to move in synch, telling each other's stories, opening the labyrinths of conversations and negotiations that they now manage with ease because of the enormous goodwill they have for each other. I love watching them flush with excitement at the possibility that their love now will be an embarrassment to the love they will feel next year.

Of course, part of my job is to destroy those expectations. But I don't do it with relish. And they don't listen anyway, so it doesn't deter my enjoyment of it that much. My job is to tell them that the promises they are about to make, to stick with it through everything, is a promise they can't expect these feelings of excitement to undergird for a lifetime. Instead, they will have to work at it. Commit to it. Irrationally stick it out. In short, that even great marriages are demanding chores, that goodwill takes good work. Of course, that's overstating it, but you have to cut through the bleary-eyed mooning somehow. Or else, they're going to wake up in eighteen months and wonder why they married that thing beside them.

My favorite part of the wedding: the bride's entrance, slow, controlled sashay down the aisle with a smile of glee so grand it works like an environmental Zoloft. I know, you now have all the evidence you need to label me a sentimental prat, but so what. I love it. Love is beautiful.

God agrees. I can't count how many times God gets married in the bible. Sure, it's always to the same person. "And I saw the Holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "behold, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." This is a God who will irrationally stick it out, even if it means marrying us over and over.

Nor can I count how many times Jesus uses the banquet feast to describe what the kingdom of God will be like. The kingdom of God will be at the Holiday Inn. God will serve finger sandwiches made of bacon and pimento cheese. The kingdom of God will be at the Botanic Gardens (weather permitting) with ice sculptures of the apostles and a champagne fountain. The kingdom of God will be held at the Ritz, where strawberries will be drizzled with three types of chocolate and a large raspberry cake will reach to the ceiling, decorated with and by cherubs. The kingdom of God will be in the grand ballroom and the dancing will be lead by the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, a raucous number where we spin in circles and forget our cares. The Heavenly Host will provide a short selection of meditative psalms during the toast, but then the Beatles will re-unite. (The Beatles will have to work because of that blasphemous crack Lennon made about Jesus.) The kingdom of God will be at La Quinta. Jesus has gone ahead to prepare a room for us. Every one is invited—indeed compelled to come and celebrate, where Israelis and Palestinians, and Iraqis and Americans, and Hutu and Tutsi will all eat and sing and dance together in a way that our fears made impossible for us when we were alive. Except for when we went to weddings.

I love a good wedding. It's a taste of what God intends for us.