Tying knots: A pastor's wedding adventures

by Lawrence Wood in the March 25, 2008 issue

The bride wore a white dress with pearls, a veil and a big red nose. The groom had a rainbow wig, and instead of patent leather shoes, floppy brogues as big as boats, which were coming apart at the toes. All around them a raucous band of clowns held forth on tubas and big bass drums.

“Do you, Gilbert, take Glenna to be your wife?”

“I sure do.”

“Do you, Glenna, take this clown to be your husband?”

“I do,” she smiled, and someone honked a horn.

About 70 clowns had gathered around a motel swimming pool as passersby stared in wonder. One little girl, wrapped in a towel and dripping on the green carpet, wanted to know if someone was putting her on. The preacher said a few words that she couldn’t quite catch, and then she got a signal that it was all in earnest.

A big cheer went up in the motel courtyard, drums thumped, and the great machinery of music ramped into choruses of “When You’re Smiling” and “When the Saints Go Marching In.” To which the bride and groom danced, not waiting for any formal party. A few clowns even jumped into the pool to punctuate the song.

I’ve done a lot of questionable weddings for poorly matched couples with doubtful taste. Yet I look back on that wedding fondly. It may have been utterly pagan, but it was joyous, and Jesus was there.

To be honest, most weddings are pagan. Very rarely does a ceremony today put God front and center, and when it does, the guests mutter how impersonal it was. Weddings are, for the most part, unserious but highly expensive affairs far removed from the values of a church. Will Willimon speaks for many ministers when he says,

“Happy events like weddings are among the most unhappy things we do.”

Maybe that requires some explanation. But you would understand if you had come with me to a lakefront home awash in thousands of dollars’ worth of flowers, with a magnificent trellis that the hired man had just finished. BMWs and Land Rovers filled the driveway, and cases of Moët champagne were stacked by silver buckets of ice. More resplendent than the wedding party, and more dignified, caterers in starched white smocks arranged tables of meats, cheeses, fresh fruit and ice sculptures.

All was not well, however. The bride was over an hour late and the groom was plowed. He stewed outside the garage, fished in a cooler for another beer, and mused about her. “A princess in her own mind,” he said, among plenty else that was more colorful.

But she showed up before the guests gave up, a little unsteady on her stiletto heels, balancing herself with a bouquet, assuring everyone that the shrimp would wait. All the cautions raised by months of premarital counseling seemed to have melted in the hot sun. Everything had been paid for, so what else was there to do except get them married?

As the bride’s ten-year-old daughter processed glumly down the grassy aisle between the rented chairs, wearing a dress too small for her, a boom box played Axl Rose’s “Sweet Child o’ Mine.” Then the bride herself appeared on the arm of her maid of honor—maybe not the traditional way to do it, but they made it down the aisle.

Pointlessly earnest, I did indeed speak of marriage as a holy and honorable estate, not to be entered into lightly. I reminded them that there would be hard days when love would be tested, when the vows they spoke could be kept only by God’s grace. “Please repeat after me,” I told the groom. “‘I give you this ring . . .’”

“I give you this ring,” he said uncertainly.

“‘As a sign of my vow . . .’”

“As a sign of my vow.”

“‘And with all that I have . . .’ ”

“And with all that I have . . . except my boat. She doesn’t get my boat!”

For just a moment, I think, the shrimp stopped thawing. The bride's daughter froze. And in the stunned silence, the bride laughed as if her man had said something so characteristically asinine that now everyone knew just what she was marrying, to hell with us all.

But I figure weddings have always been a little pagan. Even at the wedding Jesus attended in Cana, the party mattered most of all. A crisis came when the wine ran out, and Jesus' mother, Mary—you know, the sainted figure in blue—pressed him to do something about it. "Woman, my time has not yet come," he said. Really, did she think his first miracle should be something as worldly as helping the guests to get drunk? But he relented. And this typified much of his earthly ministry. He was willing to be used.

> On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." Now standing there were six stone water jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:1–11)

From here the story goes into the riotous wee hours, as intrepid partyers dance under the stars and Yakob's unmarried eldest daughter pairs off with a young widower. Guests marvel that their host isn't putting out the cheap stuff now that they should be too drunk to notice. The host himself drinks in their joy. It is all very carnal, incarnational and scandalously sacramental.

Yes, sacramental. This is the Gospel of John, so of course we're looking not just at a miracle but at a sign, something with a theological dimension. Jesus could have chosen any vessels, but he made use of those jars. Holding perhaps 180 gallons, when only a drop of water on the wrist was needed for purification, they would have sufficed for most of Israel. Significantly, they were empty. Sacramentally, Jesus filled them with wine. John's theological point is obvious: his blood will make us pure.

And yet—this wasn't blood, this was wine at a wedding, and once Jesus made it, there was no more water. No one rose, outraged, and demanded to know what had happened to it. The servants didn't object, either. They all were just having a high old time, enjoying that endless supply of wine.

It's one of Jesus' most curious miracles, how he exchanged religious ritual for simple joy.

For the first time but not the last, Jesus had let himself be used. It would happen again with ten lepers, and again with a crowd of 5,000 who stayed for supper. People who thought they were getting something from him would come away transformed; their encounters would be intoxicating and purifying.

That's part of pastoral ministry—the willingness to be used. Like Jesus, pastors have plenty of opportunities to meet people where they are and transform them. When parents want a child baptized, we could ask why. ("Why?" they would puzzle, "Why?") When two young people come asking for a ceremony, we could instead help them to think about why they want to have sex with no one else for the rest of their lives, and what God has to do with that. There's a lot of potential in these routine pastoral encounters. But some days, about the most religious question I ask is, "Would you prefer the Trumpet Tune or the Mendelssohn?"

Jesus didn't miss these opportunities, because he knew who he was. Despite the dizzying variety of things people said about him, he may have been more sure of himself than we are of ourselves. He was a Jew, a very devout Jew. His message was neither liberal nor conservative, but radical. And he knew that his God was certainly not to be confused with Baal or Mammon, this intoxicating, purifying God—a God of joy.

My friend David has done his share of weddings, always looking forward to one in particular. He's a big bear of a guy, with a beard and a swarthy face, a useful disguise for someone so tender. No one has ever brought out more of its

expressiveness than his daughter Miriam. As a little girl she told him that she wanted a big wedding and he should start saving. Later on she became such an exasperating free spirit that David was tempted to keep her bottled up at home.

“Your dates need to know one thing,” he said. “I have a shotgun and a shovel.”

“Yeah, they read that on the Internet, too,” she said. “Look, Dad, make it easy on yourself. Don’t wait up for me.”

By the time she was 19, Miriam had gone out with plenty of guys and given David ever more cause for anxiety, learning some hard lessons and not learning others. She wound up in rehab, where at last she found a tentative faith of her own.

Two days before Father’s Day, she made an unfortunate left-hand turn into oncoming traffic.

In a terrible irony, she lay at the very hospital where David had been a chaplain. Her injuries were so severe that after a while all they could do was turn off her life support and wait. David sat at her bedside, stroking her hand.

A few days later, a thousand mourners gathered for a funeral that was surprisingly joyous, more so than most weddings. For the better part of an hour, a band played praise songs, and we were encouraged to sing, even dance. Some mourners didn’t know what to make of it. David managed to give the eulogy—clothed and in his right mind, as the phrase goes, and at a stage of grief that others of us could only imagine. “Please don’t misunderstand,” he said. “Our family is just stricken with grief. But we also want you to know how it’s possible for us to feel joy, too. I really have to tell you a story.”

David told of his anguish at the hospital as he had stroked her hand. When Miriam had been a little girl, she had held onto him, and he had protected her. After all, what else does a father do? Their whole life together had pointed toward the answer, but David had not really let her go, for Miriam hadn’t met the right man. And now he would never give her to a husband.

Within him, or all around him, a voice spoke unmistakably. It said, You are so wrong. I have already taken her by the hand, and she will be my bride.

He knew that this was true.

So did his wife, when he told her about it. A wise woman, she knew what needed to be done for funeral arrangements.

“And that is why,” said David, “Miriam is wearing her mother’s wedding dress.”

Ever since hearing that story, I have thought about it before performing each wedding. The couples scarcely have any idea what they’re promising—to have and to hold for better or worse, for richer or poorer, through sickness and health, until they are parted by death—and really, who could understand those vows until living them all the way through? The best that the ceremony can do is hint at the depth of the water in those tall jars.

So here comes the bride, all dressed in white. She’s on the verge of a lifetime with a man who is still a boy, and she’s worried about whether her caterer has fully stocked the bar. Someone needs to take the water of the moment and turn it into wine. “Woman, what does this have to do with us?” Everything.

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