

Wedding Present

One of the signs that you are getting older is that you no longer get invited to many weddings. Your friends have all been married for years, and you're some years away from being invited to weddings of their children. As a priest, I've been invited to more weddings than most, usually as the officiant. But even those have gotten few and far between, as couples are getting married later, if they get married at all. There are a number of concerns there, but one good thing that has come out of not being invited to so many weddings is that I don't have to buy so many wedding presents!

Because, you know, it's hard buying wedding presents these days. More often than not, a couple already has all they need before they marry. Few newly-weds today need dishes or kitchenware — unless they hope to upgrade. Their grandparents may have started out in a small apartment with a used stove and an icebox, but the 21st-century couple often already owns a Viking oven and Sub-Zero refrigerator. So, we often have to get more creative and start turning to things nobody needs—like ashtrays from Bali and clocks from NASA. Some time ago, the online magazine Slate ran a contest for the “Most Unidentifiable Wedding Gift.” The gifts described were truly bizarre. They included an asymmetrical dish crouched on three vaguely animal legs; it was an ashtray. Another turned out to be a gourd for brewing yerba maté, an Argentinean grass tea drink.

No one knows what gift Jesus might have brought to the wedding at Cana, but it could hardly have been more memorable than the service Jesus provided them in their time of need. Part way into the week-long wedding celebration, the wine gave out. Now, running out of wine is not only inconvenient; in Jesus' culture it is a real social disaster and disgrace. For wine isn't just a social lubricant, it's a sign of the harvest, of joy and gladness and hospitality. And so running short on wine meant you've run short on blessing. The hosting family would have to live with the shame of that; the bride and groom might regard it as bad luck for their marriage. Despite this threat of disaster, however, Jesus is reluctant to get involved when his mother asks him to help. “Dear woman,” he says, “what has that to do with you or me? My time has not yet come.” Surely the Son of Man has not come to earth just to get guests liquored up.

Mary is undeterred, and tells the attendants to do whatever he says. And in short order Jesus relents and quietly, miraculously, saves the hosts from enormous shame and embarrassment by turning water into wine. And not just some wine, but lots of wine! The six jars of water mentioned held around 20-30 gallons each—*as much as 180* gallons of wine, all told! Way more than was necessary to finish out the festivities! It was enough wine to gladden the hearts of the whole town of Cana and a few nearby villages as well. It's as though someone asked for a bottle of water and Jesus gave him the James River. In the blink of an eye, the wedding guests went from having no wine at all to having almost enough to swim in.

But the extravagance doesn't end there. The head waiter is amazed when he tastes the wine: “Everyone serves the good wine first,” he says, while the guests are still able to taste what they

are drinking, “and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But instead of breaking out the Franzia or Gallo jug Chablis, you have kept the good wine until now.” Now, thanks to Jesus, instead of the party ending with hosts and guests pointing fingers at each other, the celebration continues and everyone is able to enjoy themselves. What would have been a social disaster became an occasion of joy—180 gallons of joy!

As wonderful as turning water into wine was, though, Jesus’ supplying the party with abundant alcohol was not really the gift he had brought the couple, nor the point of John’s story. Turning water into wine allowed the festivities to go on for many more days, but this marvel was only a symbol of something much more amazing. John says as much when he refers to the turning water into wine as Jesus’ first “sign.”

‘Sign,’ you see, is the word John uses in his Gospel to describe miracles, moments when the things of this world become transparent to the glory of God. They are occasions when the window of heaven is opened and God’s transforming power shines through into our world, when the heavenly realm is manifested in the ordinary things of this world. As a sign, Jesus’ turning water into wine gives us a glimpse of a new reality that comes into being through Jesus. We see how, when Jesus is present, even humdrum, commonplace activities are touched with a new power, a power that makes them overflow with flavor, enjoyment and delight. Indeed, the point of Jesus’ turning all that water into wine wasn’t just to help out a family friend in a crisis, but to show that Jesus has come to make all things new, to fill old forms and tired customs with new meaning.

And perhaps nowhere is this more powerfully manifested than in the institution of marriage, which is after all the occasion for this miracle. Indeed, one way to read this story is to see it as a promise for what marriage can be. As Jesus turned ordinary water into wine, he opens up the ordinary, conventional marriage to a new horizon. In Jesus’ name and presence, marriage becomes more than a convention or contract; it becomes a sacrament, the sacrament of holy matrimony, a way in which God’s grace and love is poured out on a couple and in the world.

To be sure marriage isn’t easy, and is arguably harder today as there are fewer societal supports to keep people together. And we all know people whose marriages fell apart, or maybe our own marriage has failed. But the decline in marriages in our country (and in others) is concerning because marriage is important. We in the church don’t often explain why, of the many “states” of human life, marriage alone has been singled out and understood as a sacrament. Churches may talk about marriage as having been sanctioned by God in creation, and we pray for spiritual help for the married couple, and the blessing of children. But that doesn’t explain how marriage is different from, say, starting a new job, taking a trip, or any other act for which we need the Lord’s help and guidance, his sanction and blessing.

No, for marriage to be a sacrament there must be something more. Officially speaking, for marriage to be a sacrament of the Church, it must somehow be connected to, part of “the great mystery of Christ and the Church.” It must somehow point to the ultimate event of Christ’s death and resurrection and involve people in His work of redemption. So just how on earth does marriage do *that*?

Even raising the question may seem strange, given the modern approach to marriage and even the typical “Christian” approach. We’re accustomed to thinking of marriage, even marriage in the church, in purely practical terms, as being about responsibility, compatibility, and Sunday school, and we often think of Christian values and “family values” as one and the same. We forget that marriage—even the best marriage—is, like everything else in this world, fallen and distorted. Marriage and family can be a demonic distortion of love, just as they can be a caring community. Just ask anyone who has been in an abusive relationship, or a loveless marriage or a truly dysfunctional family. No, marriage-as-it-is needs not to be blessed by Christ and the Church, but repaired, or, better, restored—restored to its original intent as a community of God’s love.

Indeed, a “Christian marriage” is not a marriage to which God’s blessing has been added as something extra, as icing on the wedding cake. Rather, a “Christian” marriage is one which, in its human love, bears witness to the love of God in Christ. A “Christian” marriage is one in which the couple accepts their calling to emulate the faithful, steadfast love of God in their love for each other. And, as God’s love was shown most powerfully in Jesus’ suffering on the cross, the greatest witness that a married couple gives to Christ’s love is their willingness to suffer, to surrender and forgo what they want, their desires, for the sake of each other. It is here that we begin to see that the real threat to marriage today is not adultery or spousal abuse or no-fault divorces. The real threat posed to marriage is rather the easy identification of marriage with happiness and the refusal to accept that being married involves suffering. This is what is troubling about the way weddings today have become opportunities for brides to live out fairytale fantasies and occasion for couples to express their personal style and idealized views of love. What the couples who put on these weddings don’t understand is that marriage is less about self-expression and more about self-sacrifice and service to the other, less about romance and more about mutual forgiveness and being patient with each other.

I don’t think I’m telling you all anything you don’t already know. Many of you have been married longer than I’ve been alive. You’ve seen how marriages work and how they don’t. You could probably tell me dozens of stories of marriages ending because the couple could not accept with grace the suffering that comes with marriage, that comes when two proud, stubborn, all-too-human people submit themselves and their wills to each other in love. In marriage, husbands and wives are called to fight against themselves for the sake of the other. In Christian terms, they are called to “crucify” their pride and “die” to their selfishness, for only then can they truly love each other. Submitting to one another is not easy, of course. Impossible, really, on our own. It is the cross of Christ that finally brings our selfishness and self-will to its end. It is Christ’s self-sacrifice on behalf of the world that enables husbands and wives to sacrifice themselves for each other. It is here then, in the end, where the Christian marriage becomes a sacrament, a ‘sign,’ bearing witness to the redemptive work of Jesus, by helping couples to be better husbands and wives by helping them to be better disciples, better followers of Christ.

But as the overflowing of wine at the wedding in Cana suggests, Christian marriage is not just about hard work and suffering and “dying to self.” It is that, sure. But alongside that, infusing that, is a deep joy and gladness that Christ imparts. I mean, it’s not for nothing that Jesus likens the culmination of God’s plan of salvation to a great, heavenly *wedding feast*. For, in the joy that accompanies weddings we see a glimpse of the grand, cosmic joy that will arise when God

brings all of creation under his gracious rule and Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, sweeps his Bride, the Church, off its feet in a great dance of love and joy.

We get a foretaste of that heavenly banquet, a sample of what is to come, when we participate in Holy Communion. It is interesting that for centuries the Church did not have any separate “Christian” marriage service. Christian couples simply used whatever wedding customs the culture provided. What was different about Christian weddings, though, was that the “fulfillment” of the marriage came when the two Christians participated in Communion. As every aspect of the Christian life is gathered together in Holy Communion, so matrimony was “completed” by being included in this central act of the Christian community, in Holy Communion. Christ is the very essence of our life together. He is the wine of the new life of the children of God. And so he was, at the wedding feast in Cana. The marriage of the anonymous couple was sealed by Jesus with the miraculous provision of an abundance of wine, the sign of the joyous arrival of a new age.

And so, as you come forward today to receive communion, you are invited to receive a foretaste of that heavenly wedding banquet revealed at Cana, as a sign of how God transforms our love and all our life into a sign of God’s love, God’s rich, abundant, 180-gallons-of-joy love. *That* is the best wedding present we could ever receive. Amen.