

Sermon: At A Wedding

I want to begin with a story. It's a story I was reminded of this week by our reading from Song of Solomon. The last time I read this passage, I was reading it to about 200 people, last summer at my best friend Mike's wedding. I remember word had gotten out that I was going to be a minister--both sides of the family were pretty religious--so there was a lot of pressure on my reading. I must have read it over 50 times to prepare. I was relieved and encouraged at the rehearsal the day before when their very fastidious priest gave me a nod of approval. On the big day, the reading went smoothly. Mike's wedding went off without a hitch.

The story I want to tell predates that moment, but it involves this same best friend. And it also involves a wedding--this time mine and Caity's. Our wedding was in the fall, in October, but in St. Augustine, Florida that means sunny and 80 degrees. We found a beautiful little Episcopal church on the edge of the city, just beyond where tourists

walk. We chose this Episcopalian church because there wasn't a UCC church there in the small city. But they had a rainbow flag outside, and they would allow our UCC minister from Jacksonville to perform the service, so it was suitable. The service itself would blend our inclusive theology with more traditional elements. Caity's sister Anna agreed to sing and we had two incredible classical guitar players to accompany the procession. Our young cousins, twin girls, scattered flower petals to prepare the aisle for Caity. And our brave nephew Bryce--only five years old at the time--served as our ring bearer. The weather that day was warm, of course, but there was a cooling breeze off the ocean. Everything was planned and organized perfectly. Everyone traveling from Canada had arrived safely and on time. For my part, after the last of my groomsmen had tried on their tuxes at the rental store, I breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was in order.

Now, on the day of the wedding itself, Caity and her side of the wedding party had a schedule all laid out, times allotted for each of their

pre-wedding tasks. This idea of making a schedule had not occurred to me and my groomsmen. We slept in and then decided we'd all meet up for lunch, my father and father-in-law, and my five groomsmen. When we finished eating, we did briefly consider getting dressed. But you know, with that Florida sun...we decided to put that one task off a little longer. We gathered in my brother-in-laws hotel room--not my room, because that was reserved for Caity. As I say, we had fun playing with some of the more traditional wedding ideas, so Caity and I were not to see each other until she was coming down the aisle. This ended up being to our mutual benefit--in the event that anything did go wrong on my side of the day, she wouldn't need to know about it. Not that that was going to happen of course, everything was in order. About two hours before wedding time, the groomsmen gathered to have a glass from a prized bottle my father-in-law had procured, delaying again the one thing we needed to do--actually get dressed--until the last possible moment.

With a little over an hour to go, full from lunch, with a bit of a glow from whatever it was that my father-in-law had shared with us, my groomsmen began to disperse, heading to their rooms to begin to get dressed. I announced a plan to re-gather in my brother-in-law's room for the finishing touches, and then we'd travel together to the church. I remember seeing my friend Mike, sitting on the bed, when a quiet look of hesitation, maybe confusion, began to dawn on his face at this announced plan. My friend Mike is a gregarious guy, he gets along with everyone, fits in in any crowd. But he can be a bit sheepish if he ever thinks he's done something wrong. So, he just sat there quietly. I went to my dad's room, where my tux is. I put it on, feeling calm if a little rushed, annoyed at myself for waiting so long to get ready, but otherwise feeling really good. Then, a knock at the door. I'm half dressed in the bathroom, so I don't answer it right away. Then I hear Mike through the door:

“Dave, I’m really sorry, I screwed up, I don’t know what to do, I’m so sorry.”

As he would explain in a panic to my dad, Mike *had* tried on his suit, but he had left the store without it. It must still be there, in Jacksonville, about 30 minutes away. I hear my dad calming him down. He must have checked his watch and realized our good fortune: we had exactly 65 minutes to go before Mike was due at my side in the church. That meant we had 5 whole extra minutes more than we needed. So we not only had enough time, but, when you think about, even time to spare.

My dad is very good in a crisis, he’s very calm. As I listened to my dad counsel my best man, I was also at peace. My dad told Mike to go ahead and get going to the store. We would call and alert them to the situation. But don’t drive too fast. There’s time. I remember I interjected at that point with words I’m quite proud of, following my dad’s lead: Mike, remember, you are the best man. The wedding won’t start without

you. It really *can't* start without you. I laughed at him, he laughed, and off he went.

We have had a number of difficult scripture readings these past few weeks. And of course, the double weight of a pandemic and the still ongoing protests, have only made those scriptures more difficult to encounter. So I was relieved this week to find this passage from the Song of Solomon among the selections in the lectionary, and to be reminded of Mike's wedding and then Mike's antics at my wedding. I think I latched onto this reading out of my own need to be reminded that life is supposed to be joyful. Even when we are undertaking difficult things, like combating systemic racism, that work--hard as it is--should be deeply rewarding and enriching. There are so many voices in our society today that say this work should be endlessly agonizing, a kind of spiral of guilt. I disagree. Building solidarity between people is

incredibly satisfying. The work of decolonizing our own hearts and our communities and workplaces is liberating; it is a joyful work.

And I think wisdom is ever present in our experiences of joy. The same way grief and sorrow alert us to a need to draw closer, to confess and forgive and to comfort and heal, joy alerts us to a need to celebrate and honor and to witness and revel in the goodness of the gift of life.

The Song of Songs, or Song of Solomon, does not technically belong to the Hebrew Bible's category of 'Wisdom' writings. But its traditional association with Solomon, who in turn is traditionally associated with wisdom literature, alerts us to the idea that these songs, these poems on love, have wisdom to impart, and that they were read with that understanding. Though the poems or songs center human love, especially romantic, erotic love, they seem to say that this kind of love connects us to the love of God beyond--not only our love for God, our pursuit of God, but God's love and pursuit of us. In another poem from

the Song of Solomon, there is a line that says, “As strong as death is love.”

I think I was able to say the right thing to my friend in a moment of acute distress because that day was overwhelmingly joyful; I was wiser in that moment than I normally would have been, because I was in the condition of joy. The winter was past, the rain was over and gone. Nothing could spoil that day, nothing could undo me. Nothing could dissuade me of my expansive mood; love is *stronger* than death, it’s certainly stronger than a mistake or an error, even a best man’s.

Now, this leads me to the Gospel reading, because Jesus is saying something that the wisdom literature is often saying to us. Jesus is saying that those who do not listen, who do not heed God, who would accuse and persecute God’s messengers, they won’t be convinced by any personal behavior, by any amount of individual piety or respectability. Jesus says that John the Baptist--a man who the wisdom literature might

say destroyed himself by being overly righteous, a man who destroyed opportunities for laughter and levity by being overly severe--was called a demon for his separation from the community's daily life. Then Jesus contrasts himself with John the Baptist. Unlike John, Jesus throws himself into the community, never declining an invitation to a wedding or a party, always gathering around his table. He doesn't judge tax collectors or sinners; *everyone* is invited at a wedding Jesus attends. And still, people attack him, not for being too uptight like John but for being too irreverent, too personally liberated, too quick to turn water into wine. Jesus is telling us something very important and very useful that we should hear in this difficult time: there is no amount of individual right behavior that will convince those who hold power over us to relinquish their power. No amount of personal piety or moralistic sermonizing will ever free us from the chains of racism. No amount of private, inner anguish, no spiral of guilt, will be enough to transform a carefully designed system.

We will need something stronger than guilt, we will need something stronger than piety; we will need something much stronger than sermonizing. We need something as strong as death. We will need love. We will need the wisdom and the strength of being in the condition of joy.

It is summertime, a time of weddings. In this pandemic, weddings have been called off--some postponed, some canceled. So we need to make time to remember the weddings we have enjoyed, we need to join Jesus in ministering to one another in the condition of joy. I know for Caity and I there was this great rush of reaching out to family and friends and being creative about how we connect and have leisure time in our lives. We need to get back to that. And our church is getting back to that, planning safe outdoor activities.

Nothing really matters in times like these but to love more than we did before, to be more open about who we are--what we are proud of and what we are ashamed of. It doesn't matter if we are like John the Baptist,

disciplined and spartan, or like Jesus, lush at a wedding. It only matters that we love without limit. When we love this way, we will hear the call to mourn, and we will hear the call to dance. We will live not as individuals, fussing over our own behavior or over the behavior of others, but we will be moved into the social life of our communities, where hard work is done joyfully together.

Alleluia and amen.