

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Funerals and weddings ... any connection? Most people would probably say, "Not much." They're both occasional services done by the church, funerals at the occasion of a member's death, and for weddings, the occasion is that members are getting married. That's generally about as deep as the conversation goes, except that among pastors there is often the additional comment that he would much rather perform a funeral than a wedding ceremony. Dealing with some brides or their mother or a wedding coordinator can be unpleasant. I try to forestall problems by having the bridal couple read a column that I read from "Miss Manners" Judith Martin about this very topic, entitled "In church weddings, who's in charge?" With a bit of humor, she dispatches the question: of course, in church, the presiding minister is the one in charge, and the answer coming from Miss Manners implies that, if you disagree, you're not merely wrong; you're being rude.

But with two funerals this past week and with today's assigned texts, the connection between funerals and weddings seemed to be staring me in the face. In the gospel, Jesus tells a parable of a wedding feast. The introit for today, with its references to the bridegroom and bride, contains a verse from Isaiah 61 that we used yesterday in our brother Don Ganaway's funeral. People usually think that weddings are a time to rejoice, not funerals. Funerals are a time for mourning. But using that text, I made the point that for Christians funerals also are a time to "[rejoice greatly] in the LORD" and to "exult in [our] God" who "has clothed [us] with the garments of salvation" in the waters of Holy Baptism, and "covered [us] with the robe of righteousness."

Our Old Testament reading today from Isaiah 25 that speaks of "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine," etc., also intersects nicely with Jesus' parable of the wedding feast. And yet, this text speaks of God swallowing up "the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations," of God swallowing "up death forever." This text, too, is often used at funerals. What a comfort it is! The "Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth."

I hope you're hearing the connection. The fact is, the wedding and marriage now in time are a foretaste of the eternal wedding feast to come, but to enter into the eternal feast, you have to pass through death. You will have had a Christian funeral. What a comfort that is, for if you have a funeral in the church, then you died in Christ, then you died trusting that the King did everything to ensure you that you will be sitting at the eternal wedding feast of the Son.

Indeed, God often uses the imagery of marriage to speak of His love for the church. "As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over

*you,*” says the prophet Isaiah (62:5). The heavenly multitude from Revelation also sings for Christ’s bride, the church, *“Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready”* (Rev. 19:7).

No one would disagree that weddings are a time of rejoicing. They’re a time of optimism and hope. But then, even though we are mourning, so ought funerals be a time of rejoicing and anticipation. One beautiful hymn (we should sing it more often) expresses this truth with yearning: “Oh, how blest are they whose toils are ended, Who through death have unto God ascended! They have arisen From the cares which keep us still in prison. ... Come, O Christ, and loose the chains that bind us; Lead us forth and cast this world behind us. With You, the Anointed, Finds the soul its joy and rest appointed.” This funeral hymn with Jesus’ parable is filled with hope. They both anticipate a time of great rejoicing for God’s elect, Jesus using the imagery of a wedding feast as He talks of the kingdom of heaven, of His church, and of our salvation.

Now, in His parable, Jesus reminds us that the kingdom of heaven is about what the King does for His guests. The King initiates. The King gives the wedding feast for His Son. The King invites the guests. And so forth. Moreover, Jesus says, the King has all things prepared. It is His doing! He has prepared the feast. He has slaughtered the bulls and oxen. He supplies the food and drink. He does it all. *“Everything is ready,”* He says. *“Come.”*

And oh, how much this all cost the King — indeed, we know it cost Him much more than gold or silver. It cost Him the holy, precious blood and innocent suffering and death of His own Son, *“a lamb without blemish or spot”* (1 Pet. 1:19).

Dear wedding guests, the Lord of hosts has made all things ready for you to come to the wedding feast. By the waters of Holy Baptism, He has *“clothed [you] with the garments of salvation”* and *“covered [you] with the robe of righteousness.”* He has given you the Bread of Life to eat; He has slaughtered the perfect Lamb for you that you might eat now of the feast of His pierced flesh. He bids you drink of the water that quenches your parched mouths forever. Oh, what had to be done for you to be invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb and His Bride. Oh the cost, but oh the benefit to you, for death has been swallowed up forever, and your reproach has been taken away. Good Friday is good, a time of rejoicing. Let *“us rejoice and exult and give him the glory ... Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”* (Rev. 19:7, 9).

We have been invited to this supper, to *“Eat what is good, and delight [ourselves] in rich food”* (Is. 55:2). Indeed, the invitation goes out to all, to the Jew first and also to the Gentiles, for God is not the God of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles. Therefore, the wedding feast is not only for those first invited who

by their rejection are found unworthy, but for all of us found on the highways and byways, good and bad, beggars, tramps, harlots, robbers, thieves, murderers, all whom the King's servants could gather. *"Oh, the depth of the riches ... of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!"* That His heavenly wedding hall should be filled with low-life like this — authority-defying, bad-mouthing, neighbor-hating sinners like us — bears witness to His love for mankind. He truly does want all people to be saved.

But think not that we can come to the wedding hall without proper attire. And there is nothing of our own that is fitting — nothing worthy of the Son. No, the wedding garment is surely not our own righteousness, for that is nothing more than *"a polluted garment"* (Is. 64:6). No, as I said before, the King Himself supplies the spotless garment of salvation in Holy Baptism. *"For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ"* (Gal. 3:27), clothed with Christ Himself and His righteousness, wrapped up in the wedding robes cleansed and made *"white by the blood of the Lamb"* (Rev. 7:14), robes without spot or wrinkle or any such thing (Eph. 5:27). By this sacrament of water and the word, you enter the wedding hall properly attired and are invited to sit at the feast of salvation.

To be sure, in Jesus' parable, it's not all rejoicing. There are those who refuse the invitation and are destroyed. There is the man who apparently refused the garment and arrogantly entered anyway, who was bound and cast out of the wedding hall *"into the outer darkness"* where *"there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."* Not everyone receives a Christian funeral. But is that you gathered here, clothed in the baptismal garments of Christ? Is that you, gathered here at the King's invitation to feast on the foretaste in His Supper? Have you come refusing to confess your sins and receive the Lord's forgiveness?

Somehow I doubt that for, as those in Jesus' parable, how easy is it to find excuses not to come. But you have come, so that when the King's servants issue the call to *"Come to the wedding feast,"* you'll be ready to answer the call, appropriately attired. You will have been bid farewell in the church's funeral rite and welcomed to the King's eternal wedding feast. That's why, whether occasional services like weddings or funerals, or our regular Divine Services, we *"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice,"* for in word and Sacrament, *"The Lord is at hand."* Thus, we don't come *"anxious about anything,"* but trusting in Christ and built up by His means of grace, *"the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus"* until that day when we pass through death to life and to the eternal wedding feast.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.