

Stefani and I have a lot of really fond memories of our wedding. Or, rather, I have a lot of really fond memories of the events immediately before and after our wedding. To be honest, the wedding itself is kind of a blur. I was sweaty and nervous and everything just kind of happened and then it was over.

But before and after the service was really memorable. I had a simple, but fun bachelor party the night before. When I couldn't sleep that night, I sat outside with one of my groomsmen, drinking Jack Daniels out of styrofoam coffee cups and talking about life.

And then after the wedding was over, of course, there was the reception. Which was great. We had amazing food and a great cake and wonderful speeches. And then, to top it all off, people actually danced.

I don't know why, but that just absolutely blew me away. I had been to so many weddings that nobody danced at. They ate, they talked, they enjoyed themselves. But they didn't dance. And I never thought of myself as having a wedding reception that people actually danced at. But they did.

Of course, the fact that people danced is a good thing. It means they were having fun. And people are supposed to have fun at a wedding reception. That's why it exists.

Look at the history of weddings in western civilization and you will find one common thread throughout all of them: 1) every single culture had marriage and 2) every single culture had a party associated with getting married. From Egypt to Babylon to Persia to Greece to Rome to the Germanic tribes of northern Europe. All of them had a party when people got married. It was a time of celebration.

The Israelites and Jews were the same way. Look at the Old Testament and you'll see wedding parties that consumed entire cities. Look at the intertestamental books and you'll find wedding celebrations that lasted for weeks on end. Look at our Gospel lesson, and you'll find a wedding reception that literally drank the cellar dry. They partied until there wasn't a drop of wine left. And they still wanted to party some more.

Weddings are supposed to be a time of celebration. But life after the wedding celebration isn't always so joyful. Partying is easy. But marriage is hard.

Marriage is the union of two people after all. Two very sinful people. You are combining their greatest strengths, but you are also combining their greatest weaknesses. Their greatest temptations and vices. And when you put that many sins into one house, well... things can go very wrong.

You can end up with disagreement. With arguing. With distrust. With bitterness. With hatred. You can even end up with infidelity and adultery and divorce.

There's a reason why the service of Holy Matrimony includes so many prayers for the bride and groom. They're not just there out of tradition. They are serious pleas for God's intervention and protection and grace. Because marriage is a daunting challenge. A near constant struggle against sin and temptation.

A struggle that always ultimately ends in death, as all things in life do. There's a reason why we say, "till death do us part." Because one day it will. Every married person dreams of living for 80 years in blissful matrimony. And then husband and wife dying simultaneously in their sleep.

But that rarely happens. More often, somebody dies first. And somebody else is left to grieve the loss of this half of themselves that is gone.

Weddings are a time of love and joy and hope and celebration. And wine... lots of wine. But marriages often involve a lot of heartache. Be it from adultery or divorce or death. Weddings are a picture of everything God wants for us. But adultery and divorce and death are a picture of everything sinful and broken in this world.

And I know that there are people in this congregation who have seen that first hand. Who have been through times of marital strife. Or who have been divorced. Or who have lost a spouse they loved. So many of you know exactly what I mean.

Which is why what the Bible says about marriage doesn't always match up with what we experience. I mean what kind of comfort is Psalm 128 to a Godly man who's been divorced or widowed. *"Blessed is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways! ...Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house... Behold, thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord."*

Sorry, God. That didn't work. I did fear you... and my wife left me. I did walk in your ways... and she still died. Where's the blessing in that?

And there's truth to that. I would say the same thing. In fact, David himself would probably say the same thing. The same man who wrote Psalm 128 also wrote Psalm 13: *"How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"*

God does bless those who fear him. He does bless those who walk in his ways. But we still live in a very sinful world. Where the curse of sin and death are just as common as the blessings of God.

Which is really what Isaiah is getting at in our Old Testament lesson. Because, here, Isaiah is talking to a group of people who have felt the curse of sin and death. They have been crushed by it. They have felt so Forsaken and Desolate that it feels like their new name.

They're not the Israelites – the children of Israel – anymore. No, they are Forsaken – the people of a god who has abandoned them. They are Desolate – the people of a god who has taken everything from them. That's their new identity. In the eyes of the world, and in their own eyes.

And to them, Isaiah says, "No. You are not Forsaken or Desolate. Whatever you are feeling right now, it's not the truth. It's not who you are in God's eyes. You are the one in whom God takes delight.

And a day will come when everyone will look at you and know that. When everyone will look at you and know that you are Married. That is your identity in God's eyes.

Not Forsaken. Not Desolate. Not Divorced. Not Grieving. Your identity is the bride of Christ. You are the Church. And as the Church, you are united to a God who loves you.

In a bond that can survive sin and discord and adultery and death. Because it already has. It survived us calling for our bridegroom's death and hanging him a cross. It survived till death do us part. Because death couldn't part us. He rose again on Easter morning.

And now, knowing that the marriage of God and his people is a marriage that cannot end in divorce or death, we live as his Church. Rejoicing for all eternity like a bride and groom rejoice at their reception.

Rejoicing like the master of the feast did at the wedding of Cana. As someone who has tasted the best wine coming last. Coming out just when we thought the party would end. Coming out in gallons and gallons and gallons. Until we realize that there's so much wine, the party will never end.

Jesus did that as his first miracle. He came to a people who felt Forsaken and Desolate. And the first thing he showed them was the God who wanted them to have joy and love again. He wanted people who thought the divine wedding was over to know that the marriage was only just beginning.

And he wanted us to know that even though human marriage so often ends in feelings of abandonment and desolation. In divorce and grief. That is not the marriage of God and his people.

In fact, quite the opposite. Divorce and death are proof that we need God with us. That we need him in our lives and homes and marriages. That we need him in our hearts. Because we are sinful people who do sinful things and die a sinner's death.

But he is a God who forgives sin and does righteous things so that we may rise again, just as he did. So that we may celebrate with our Lord and with all the disciples at Cana a wedding reception with good wine that lasts for all eternity. Amen.