

A Marriage Made in Heaven

Rev. Chris Glaser

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The Trial of the Rev. Dr. Janet McCune Edwards

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Text: Revelation 19:5-10 (NRSV, adapted)

And from the throne came a voice saying,

“Praise our God,
all you who serve,
and all who hold God in awe,
small and great.”

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, crying out,

“Hallelujah!
For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.
Let us rejoice and exult and give God the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
whose intended has prepared for this moment,
to whom it has been granted to be clothed
with fine linen, bright and pure”—

for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb.” And the angel said to me, “These are true words of God.” Then I fell down at the angel’s feet in worship, but the angel said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

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Thanks Janet, for inviting all of us to be here, and thank you for the honor of your invitation to show my support of you by speaking this evening. Thanks to your outstanding legal team, Sara and her colleagues and witnesses for the defense. Thank you, Gail, for creating a beautiful and meaningful liturgy. Thank you, Deb, for organizing this ingathering of saints. Thank you, All Directions, for facilitating travel and lodging. Thanks to all of you for coming. And thank you, Pittsburgh Presbytery, for giving us a reason to gather—though I must confess, convening Janet’s trial in the “Grand Hall of the Priory” reminded me uncomfortably of *The Da Vinci Code*!

Today we witnessed history, whatever the outcome of the trial tomorrow. C. S. Lewis wrote that “the Present is the point at which time touches eternity.”¹ Lewis believed that we needed to be equally mindful of the present and of eternity, that to focus

on the one and not the other was a mistake. Today in the trial we focused on the present historical moment, fed by the past and feeding the future. Tonight in worship we have an opportunity to look to the eternal within this fleeting moment.

This is a particularly holy week to reflect on the eternal in the present. Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, began at sundown Sunday, and next week is the observation of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Tomorrow Eid al Fitr marks the end of the month of Ramadan for Muslims. Hindus remember Mahatma Gandhi's birth tomorrow as well. And Sunday is World Communion day for Christians.

In the context of her trial on same-gender marriage, Janet chose our text tonight about the *only* marriage made in heaven according to the Bible, the marriage feast of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation. For those of you who are not Christian or are unfamiliar with this metaphor, the Lamb refers to Jesus and his marriage is to the church, the spiritual community. The Book of Revelation is the mystic John's vision of things as they are beyond time and space.

If "the Present is the point at which time touches eternity," worship is the opportunity to celebrate the eternal in the moment: *kairos*, or spiritual opportunity, in *chronos*—linear time. In biblical times, there were at least two ritual ways to transmute the present into eternity: one was through a sacrifice and the other through a meal or feast. We have chosen tonight to do so through a shared feast. We can only pray that tomorrow we don't also experience a sacrifice.

I would guess that, regardless of our views, the vast majority of us are here because we believe in the larger picture, something greater than ourselves. We struggle with powers and principalities, in the apostle Paul's words, to live as if the commonwealth of God were fully present. In that spirit, I ask you to pray with me:

[PRAYER]

Now there was a same-gender wedding at a church in California, and Jesus was there. When the wine ran out, Jesus' mother asked him to do something about it. Jesus rolled his eyes, smiled, and said, "Mom, this isn't the right time!" Nonetheless, Jesus' mother told the caterers to do whatever he asked them to do. Not long after, Jesus told them to fill the baptismal font with water and to serve the guests from it. When the caterers began to draw from the baptismal, they discovered that what came out was an exquisite cabernet for those wanting red wine, a very fine chardonnay for those preferring white wine, and tasty grape juice for those desiring a non-alcoholic alternative. Everyone was amazed at the miracle, and they realized something eternal had surfaced in that moment.

But news reports of Jesus' miracle at a same gender wedding angered religious people throughout the country. Leaders of the religious right claimed Jesus' action had been misunderstood, blamed the media who reported it, and condemned the church for fabricating the story. Mainstream liberal churches issued a statement that it was not much

of a miracle or else the caterers would have been able to serve a blush wine as well. A little miffed and jealous, even progressive congregations complained, demanding to know why Jesus hadn't done the same thing at holy unions in their churches! And at the Vatican, a special conclave of cardinals demanded the pope's resignation. Exasperated, the pope asked why. "Because," he was told, "If you can't control Jesus Christ, how can we expect you to control the church?!"²

Robert Frost's poetic metaphor for control, for custom, was the stone wall he and his neighbor had to reconstruct after the toll taken on it by nature. "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," he observed.³ And there was something in Jesus that didn't love a wall, the temple walls that kept out the religious outcasts with whom he himself dined. In Ephesians, the apostle Paul said Jesus had broken down what he called "the dividing wall of hostility" that separated the insiders from the outsiders. Celebrating the marriage of Nancy McConn and Brenda Cole, the Rev. Dr. Janet Edwards has bumped into a similar wall of resistance. But the grace in her declares this wall a gift, an opportunity to consider the eternal in this historical moment!

In his internet sensation "The Last Lecture," the late Carnegie-Mellon professor Randy Pausch said, "Brick walls are there for a reason. They give us a chance to show how badly we want something." (The Last Lecture, p 79)

Most of us, for one reason or another, know what it means to come up against walls that our governments and our religious institutions have built that restrict us because of color, gender, disability, sexual orientation or gender identity. These barriers prevent us from having what we really want.

And what we want can be simply put: we want to belong. We want to belong to each other in marriage. We want to belong to our congregations in ministry. We want to belong to our respective vocations in service. And we want everyone to belong, even those whose privilege grants them immediate access to blessings we can only pray for, work for, struggle for, and sometimes die for. We have something to teach about gratitude for blessings too many take for granted.

We want everyone to belong. And so our theme tonight, selected by Janet, is "A Time to Embrace: Toward Love and Reconciliation." And to illustrate this theme, she has chosen for our text, not the wedding feast at Cana in the Gospel of John, but the marriage of the Lamb in the Book of Revelation. In being challenged on the question of resurrection, Jesus said that marriage as we know it does not exist in eternity. In fact, he implied the family as we know it does not exist in the eternal realms. "Who are my mother and brothers and sisters?" Jesus rhetorically questioned, "Those who do the will of God in heaven." The family of faith is given ascendancy over the biological family.

And I would take Jesus' eternal perspective a step further to suggest that not even today's families *of faith* exist as we know them in the eternal realms—that the family of God is far more encompassing than our cultural conditioning can allow us to imagine.

The mystic John used metaphor to describe the culmination of the only marriage truly made in heaven, the marriage of the Lamb with the Beloved Community. The Lamb who has given up everything to serve others, who sacrificed life itself at the hands of “the powers that be,” is betrothed to the spiritual community that is prepared to embrace blissful union, a community dressed in the “fine linen [of] the righteous deeds of the saints.”

Maybe Janet’s affinity for the marriage of the Lamb is genetic. Rummaging through the Yale archives on line, I discovered that her ancestor, the Rev. Jonathan Edwards, whose birthday is Sunday, wrote about the marriage of the Lamb in 1741, “Thus Christ and his saints both shall receive their consummate felicity and full reward, and shall begin the eternal feast of love, the eternal embraces and eternal joys of that marriage of the Lamb.”⁴ And Edwards—Jonathan, not Janet—rhapsodizes, this eternal embrace will transform *all of heaven*.

Oh, if only our marriages on earth were like that! Our marriage of body and spirit, our marriage of love and justice, our marriage of prayer and practice, our marriage of word and deed, our marriage of spirituality and sexuality, not to mention all same-gender and opposite-gender marriages.

As one who was married to his partner in my neighborhood Presbyterian Church in Atlanta many years ago, I can personally testify how transforming marriage can be—if not of heaven, at least of me. I felt more tenderly toward my partner as a beloved child of God, and I realized more deeply the sacred nature of our covenant. I knew more clearly and felt more dearly the love and support of our congregation for us as a couple. As scriptures were read, hymns sung, prayers said, vows exchanged and blessings offered, God was there transforming water to wine, the ordinary into the extraordinary, the moment into eternity.

Did Presbyterians from other congregations in the presbytery object when our ceremony was announced in the Atlanta Journal Constitution? Hey, I’m from the South! You bet there were objections, ranging from calls to discipline our pastor to the undoing of our blessing. But how the Presbytery of Greater Atlanta handled it was this: the presbyters asked our pastor to explain his action on the floor of presbytery, and he told them his story, how a career Navy bomber pilot with the prejudices of a straight white male with a Southside Boston Irish Catholic upbringing, retired from the military, went to seminary, and became a Presbyterian pastor, and began to meet gay people who transformed him to the point he could eagerly celebrate our covenant relationship. After he spoke, the presbytery gave him a prolonged ovation and took no action against him, not because they all agreed with him, but because they recognized that God alone was Lord of his conscience. This is why storytelling is so important in the church.

And here I can’t resist this aside. Paul wrote of the church, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.”⁵ The church is finally “getting it” about suffering alongside those of us with HIV/AIDS or cancer, suffering with those of us brutalized by hate crimes, even suffering a little with LGBT

people denied civil rights. But the church still needs to learn how to *rejoice with us* in our church memberships, our ministries, and our marriages.

As friends, Janet and Gail and I go all the way back to seminary days. Thank God for the church that has kept us in touch! I know a little of Janet's decision-making process, one undoubtedly applied to her decision to officiate at Brenda and Nancy's wedding. At seminary, she had just been appointed chair of the worship committee. An opportunity arose for her to do something that might seem to fly in the face of the very staid image of the chair of *the worship committee at Yale Divinity School*. She later told me, in making her decision, she thought back on her independent-minded great Aunt Mary, then asked herself the question, "Would I be any different doing this than I am now?" The answer was "no."

In celebrating the marriage of Nancy and Brenda, the Rev. Janet McCune Edwards made a decision true to her faith in Jesus Christ, true to her independent-thinking great Aunt Mary, true to her sense of calling and ministry, true to her self as a minister of word and sacrament, and ultimately, true to her church.

There is something in Janet that doesn't like let alone love a wall. As Dr. Chris Elrod reminded us this afternoon, she believes with John Calvin that no one person can discern the truth—that's why we need to keep speaking to one another. That's why she's part of the Community of Reconciliation. That's why she describes herself as a pray-er who wants to pray without ceasing, because that's where we all come together, in prayer. And that's why she wanted tonight to be about love and reconciliation, about a time to embrace one another despite our differences.

The Confession of 1967 helped bring me into the Presbyterian Church as a college student in 1970. It spoke of overcoming divisions of race and nations. It affirmed that we are called to a ministry of reconciliation. Long before I could reconcile my own faith and sexual orientation, I knew this was the church I wanted to serve. And long before homosexuality became a big issue in the church, my home Presbyterian congregation helped serve as catalyst for the Spirit's reconciliation of my faith and sexuality.

Over the past three years I have served as interim pastor with two troubled MCC congregations, each divided in its own way. Let me tell you, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are no better and no worse at doing church than straight people! I found myself pointing out from each pulpit that the word for "devil" in Christian scriptures is "diabolos," which means divider. The spirit of division or divisiveness is what we experience as demonic.

And the word to challenge division is "dialogue," which literally means "through the word" and connotes finding common ground through holy conversations, finding each other through hearing our respective stories. As we engage in dialogue, we overcome the devil within and among us, that adversarial spirit that would divide us from one another. In Nikos Kazantakis novel *Saint Francis*, the saint, whose feast day is this

coming Saturday, tells Brother Leo that even the Tempter, the devil, will enter paradise and be transformed. “How do you know, Brother Francis?” asks Brother Leo. Saint Francis replies, “I know because of my heart, which opens and receives everything. Surely paradise must be the same.”⁶

So let’s talk. Let’s open our hearts to one another. Together let’s discern and discover a tradition of marriage for the 21st century. As Presbyterians and our friends gathered with us, let’s enjoy worship and fellowship tonight around our dialogue sparked by this trial. Let’s celebrate our tradition as the Reformed church always reforming. Let’s welcome Christ to our weddings, that two may become one, not only in temporal marriages but in the eternal marriage of the Lamb. Let’s celebrate love where we find it, in the present and in eternity.

And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb.” And the angel said to me, “These are true words of God.” Then I fell down at the angel’s feet in worship, but the angel said to me, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.”

Just as the mystic John was not to worship the angel who delivered God’s words, but to see the angel as a fellow servant with John and all believers who hold the testimony of Jesus, so we too are not to worship the angels who have delivered God’s words to us, the angel of scripture, the angel of tradition, and the angel of church. Scripture, tradition, and the church are fellow servants with us in holding the testimony of Jesus, not objects of worship. No, we are to worship God, and listen for the testimony of Jesus, which is the spirit of prophecy and thus the spirit that draws us in this moment into God’s future.

“Let us rejoice and exult and give God the glory,
For the marriage of the Lamb has come.”

¹ *The Screwtape Letters*, Number 15, excerpted in *C. S. Lewis: Readings for Meditation and Reflection*, Walter Hooper, ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p 100.

² Adapted from Chapter 15 “Dwelling in Beulah Land,” in *Come Home! Reclaiming Spirituality and Community as Gay Men and Lesbians* by Chris R. Glaser, Second Edition [Ch. 15 added to original Harper & Row edition, 1990], (Gaithersburg, MD: Chi Rho Press, 1998), p 116.

³ “Mending Wall,” *Complete Poems of Robert Frost* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967), p 47.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards, *Heaven Made New After the Day of Judgment. Happiness of Heaven. Christ’s Glory Increased After the Day of Judgment*, 1741, p 2, Works of Jonathan Edwards On Line, eds. Harry S. Stout, Kenneth P. Minkema, Caleb J. D. Maskell, 2005, Jonathan Edwards Center at Yale University.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:26

⁶ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Saint Francis* (Chicago:Loyola Classics, 2005), pp 288-289.