

“When a patch won’t do”

Matthew 9:14-17

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11-21-2021

“What in the world did I sign up for?” I was conducting a wedding ceremony. We were in a Chinese restaurant. The bar was open before the ceremony, and several of the guests were taking full advantage. For them, the party had started early. Finally, I had to shut the bar down and get the groom and groomsmen lined up. I pinned on the lapel microphone the restaurant manager handed me. I gave the signal for the music to begin. The bride entered and stood with the groom at my makeshift pulpit, right in front of the recently closed bar. When I began to speak, I couldn’t believe what happened. Somehow the microphone was picking up an FM radio station. Instead of my voice, I had a disc jockey announcing the next hit song, which was some heavy metal band blasting a very un-wedding like number. The crowd loved it. I just shook my head. They got the microphone on the right frequency. Order was restored. I began the wedding ceremony. When I asked the bride if she would marry the groom, one of the guys who had spent too much time at the bar ahead of time shouted out in a drunken voice, “Don’t do it. Don’t do it.”

What do you do in a situation like that? Well, on that particular day I just grinned and shook my head. The groom was my brother Danny. The wedding party was a cast of characters he had loved his whole life. Danny has always been the life of the party. I pronounced Danny and Arlene man and wife and then I stepped out from behind the bar and joined in the celebration. The groom was my big brother. He was loving life that day, and I wanted to share in the joy.

As a pastor, I have performed countless weddings. None has topped Danny’s, but there has been some good competition. I showed up for one wedding in a big, beautiful mansion, and the mother of the bride sent me to the back yard, where I waited alone, like I was in exile. The mother of the bride had mistaken me for a member of the band. At the very first wedding I performed, I got flustered and asked the father of the bride, “Who gives this man to be married to this woman.” The dad

gave me a strange look and said with hesitation, “Her mother and I.” Realizing my mistake, I reversed the question and asked, “Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” Her father stared at me for a few minutes and then, “We still do.” Couples have forgotten the wedding license. Brides have broken down in tears. Grooms have dissolved into a fit of giggles. Lines have been forgotten. Unruly groomsmen have spelled out on the groom’s shoes, “Help me.” Equipment and wardrobes have malfunctioned. But no matter what, the wedding goes on. And without fail, the friends of the bride and groom celebrate. I introduce the newly married couple and the congregation rises up in applause and loud cheers. The receptions are full of joy, hugs, kisses, laughter, feasting, and shouts of congratulations.

“Jesus, why don’t your disciples fast? Why don’t they spend more time being solemn, sober and serious?” His answer is wonderful. He doesn’t debate the merits of fasting, although he certainly understood more about fasting than all of John’s disciples put together. Remember, he fasted 40 days in the wilderness...with the devil tempting him to boot. Jesus knew about fasting. But Jesus doesn’t address fasting. Instead, he draws on an analogy for what is happening. “How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them?”

In trying to explain his ministry, Jesus tells those who question him that he is the bridegroom. In essence, his ministry is one of taking a bride to himself. As this wonderful scene of marriage unfolds, the friends of the bridegroom do the most natural thing you could imagine. They celebrate. They rejoice. To do anything else would not make one bit of sense.

If I understand what Jesus is saying, that day when he walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and called Peter and Andrew, James, and John to follow him, he was making a marriage proposal. You four uneducated fishermen, leave your nets, your boats, and your families. “You are mine to have and to hold.”

When he reached out and touched the man with leprosy, it was like Jesus knelt down and made a wedding proposal. “Come, you are my beloved.” Jesus sat by the bed of Peter’s mother-in-law and gently whispered in her ear, “Dear woman, you are my bride.” Those who were

set free from the demons, Matthew and the other tax collectors and sinners, the paralyzed, the lame, the mute, those who mourned over lost loved ones and those who were wed to their sickness and suffering found this bridegroom rising up in their life and saying to them, "I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have taken you for myself. Come, share with me in the wedding feast." One day he issued a mass wedding invitation, "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gently and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Come be yoked with me. I will be your bridegroom. You will be my bride.

I love to read Matthew 10:28, when Jesus says, "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened...or heavy laden." But what if Jesus had listed that invitation in the personal ads of the Jerusalem Journal.

"SJM (Single Jewish Male). Former carpenter, now unemployed and itinerant. Looking for intimate and lasting relationship with sinners, tax collectors, lepers, the blind, the lame, the broken, the weary, the lonely, the lost, the disheartened and the discouraged. Personal appearance does not matter. Willing to incur indebtedness. No resume or references needed. Dying to meet you. Call if desperate. 1-800-New Beginnings."

I guess the Pharisees never read the personal ads. They were already married to their traditions. It looks like the disciples of John the Baptist come dangerously close to missing the invitation as they are married to their fasting. But in my mind, I imagine a weary and heavy-laden man or woman, broken and bowed down, sitting on a hopeless corner far removed from the temple and all of its religious activity. It is a blustery day. A section of the newspaper blows down the street and comes to rest against their knee. They slap it away a few times, but it clings to them like it has been glued on. Finally, they open the paper. Long ago they gave up on ever finding good news in the paper. And yet this day they open the paper to the personal ads. They try to put the paper down, but they can't get that personal ad out of their minds. Call if desperate. Looking for the weary, the lonely, the lost. Call if desperate. They have trained themselves for so long they can almost ignore the

feeling that is rising in them. But it grows, it swells, it surges within them. It is the feeling of hope. Here I am, broken and full of despair. Would someone want me? Would someone choose me? Would someone marry me? Call if desperate.

Tragically, they have been hurt and disappointed so many times their urge to trust, their urge to try is beaten down by years of pain. They crumple the paper. There is no hope for me. In frustration and futility, they cast the wad of paper into the street. It takes them a few minutes. At first, they don't notice the shadow as it crosses them. With their head hanging down in defeat they are not aware someone is standing over them. When they lift their head just a bit, they see next to them a pair of sandals and some weather worn feet. They look up to find a pair of hands, muscular and strong, calloused from years of working with hammer and nail. In those hands is the crumpled piece of paper. A voice speaks. It is as if that voice cuts through all the grieving and groaning. The voice speaks to the heart. The one who is speaking takes the crumpled paper and slowly smooths the wrinkles and the crinkles. He finds the ad and looks over it carefully. Then he says the most beautiful words ever. "I wrote this for you. Will you be my bride?" A whole cloud of witnesses is watching this scene, anxiously awaiting an opportunity to rejoice with the bridegroom. New life is about to be born.

The first time you saw a caterpillar, could you ever imagine what it would become? If someone told you to make the caterpillar look pretty, you might get out some tweezers and pluck a few of those ugly hairs. You might set the caterpillar up on a physical fitness program to lose that roly poly look. You might schedule that old caterpillar for some skin treatments and body flushes. But that caterpillar would always be a caterpillar. Finally, you would give up and say, "It will never become something beautiful. It will always be a caterpillar."

But once you have seen it happen, building the cocoon, the old self dying, the new self-coming to life as a butterfly, bright and beautiful, then you know, that caterpillar will not always be a caterpillar. There is a butterfly waiting to bloom.

The Son of Man is calling us to himself. He has a bright and new beginning for us. He desires us to be his bride. The witness of scripture

is not that people learned how to fast better, to pray better, to give more money more often, or to follow rules and regulations better. The witness of scripture is that the Son of God came and offered himself for us, and to us. He is still doing that very same thing. He is asking us to join him in marriage. In that marriage, he will baptize us in his love. It is a strange and mysterious love, a love that includes a rough wooden cross and an empty tomb. To be baptized into his love is to die with him, to share in his death. We get wrapped up in a cocoon. And to be baptized with him is to share in his life. If we die with him, we will also surely rise with him. We will rise as new creations. The old is gone. The new has come. Friends, Jesus knows more about us than we know about ourselves. Inside each one of us there is a butterfly. There is beauty. There is new life. It is waiting to be born. There is new wine here today. It is in search of new wineskins.

Even today, even now, Jesus takes the crumpled paper and slowly smooths the wrinkles and the crinkles. He finds the ad and looks it over carefully. Then he says the most beautiful words ever. "I wrote this for you. Will you be my bride?"