

It's Time For a Party: A Foretaste of Glory

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Revelation 19:6-9

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 him the glory,
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,
and his bride has made herself ready;
to her 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 supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are true words of God.” Revelation 19:6-9 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up to whatever it is you have for us today. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear, open our hearts that we might feel. And then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen*

I received a wedding invitation at the house the other day for the daughter of a friend. We just don't know whether we want to go or not. We're going to talk about whether we should go or not or just send a gift. You know, we always have to make a decision when we receive an invitation to a party about whether to go.

I guess I'm kind of ambivalent about parties, and it might be because when I was in the third grade, we had a birthday party for me. I remember being in the basement of our house on Chautauqua Street in Carbondale, and we had it all decorated so nicely. Anyway, only two people showed up of the ten that were invited, and it was kind of heartbreaking. So maybe I'm scarred about parties.

But here's what I want us to understand today. It's that the heart of the Gospel is a party, a celebration of the incredible grace and goodness of God. That it is a time of joy.

We're going to look today at this passage from Revelation, the Marriage Celebration of the Lamb. Ordinarily, you don't think about the book of Revelation as being about parties but being more about wars and battles and all that's in there. But there's also a piece of it that's about a celebration. And what I want to do is look at this passage and understand what constitutes a party. What makes a party a party?

There are really four things. So here's the first one and that's that you have to have a reason to celebrate. There has to be some reason for people to come together and celebrate.

In my family, we have five daughters who now are all married – my daughter Caroline was married last weekend. So now there are five sons-in-law, and there are eleven grandchildren. So you have just in terms of birthdays you're up to 23, then you add Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter and the big ones altogether. And you have plenty of reason to celebrate all year long.

There are people who look for reasons to celebrate; they don't have a good reason, so they create one. I was looking online to find what crazy reasons why people have a party. Here are some things I found. One was called "A couch sitting party," and it was "after four years of being married and living in a new apartment, my wife and I could finally afford living room furniture. And the signature piece was an old six-person sofa from the 1960s that we pulled out of the trash and had reupholstered. It was magical. We had a bartender, and people wore suits; we all took professional photos on the sofa."

Here's another one – how about this? "My brother was about seven or eight at the time, and he insisted that day it was going to be a teddy bear's birthday. We just said, 'Why not? Okay!' We got a cake from the store and a tiny cowboy hat as a present and sang 'Happy Birthday' to the teddy bear." Then he closes with the comment. "My family's weird!"

We have to have a reason to celebrate, and in this Scripture, it's really clear. "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns! Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory for the marriage of the Lamb has come!" It's time. All that we've been waiting for. All that we've been leaning towards. All that we've been working towards. All that we've been trusting God for. It's all finally culminated. Things are made right again.

The picture here is of the marriage Celebration of the Lamb. The church is the Bride of Christ, and Christ is the Lamb of God. And as the church is brought fully into relationship with Christ in a complete way, we have such great reason to celebrate.

At almost every memorial service, I talk about the 14th chapter of the Gospel of John. It's a very familiar passage to people, but they often don't understand the context. Jesus is on his way to the cross, and he chooses to talk about a wedding, not about a funeral, not about his death, but about what's to come. At the time of Jesus, weddings worked this way. Once there was a betrothal, a contract had been signed between a bride-to-be and a groom-to-be, but the wedding had not taken place yet. The groom will go to his father's house and build onto the end of his father's house a room. If you go to Capernaum today, you can see that all the houses are made up of large family complexes with just a sheer wall between each one of them. The groom-to-be would build that room, and once he'd completed that room, he would go back through the village to the bride's house – her father's house. That was where she would have gathered bridesmaids, and they would be waiting with lamps, keeping the lamps burning as if to show him where the bride lives – as if he didn't know.

He would take the bride then, and they would parade through the village to the groom's house, to the room he'd built onto the end of his father's house. That's where the marriage celebration would be held.

As Jesus is on his way to the cross, he uses that allusion. He says, "In my Father's house there are many rooms, if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you I will come again and take you to myself. So that where I am you may be also."

It's as if he's saying, "We're going to get married, and I'm going to come to you and take you to myself. You're going to be a part of the marriage celebration of the Lamb."

That's a reason to celebrate—this full presence of Christ, this full culmination of a relationship we have with Christ. Right now, we're in that betrothal state. But there will come a day when the marriage is consummated.

So first you have to have a reason to celebrate, and we have a great reason. Here's the second thing. You have to have people you love to party with.

Have you ever been in that situation where you are trying to sleep, and someone next door or down the street is having a really loud party? You keep hearing this crescendo of their voices

coming up and laughing and coming down. And first, you're annoyed, but you also are kind of missing out and wishing you were at the party. You'd think, "That would be fun to be there. It sounds like they're having fun."

You all know the Dolly Parton song. The words go like this: "Two doors down they're laughing and drinking and having a party, two doors down they're not aware that I'm around." Or if you're an R&B fan, the Roy Parker Jr. song "I want to bang on the walls, rock on the floor, I want to party like the people next door. I want to wake up the neighbors at a quarter to four. I want to party like the people next door."

There's this sense that there's this great noise of a party that's happening. Listen again to the Scripture: "Then I heard what seemed like the voice of a great multitude..." That's all the saints, friends. All the saints – the whole church. It goes on, "Like the sound of many waters, like the sound of many thunderpeals, crying out 'Hallelujah!'"

These are the people that we love. This is the church. The church triumphant and the church visible here on earth gathered together as God brings heaven down to join the earth to make it right again. Then all the saints gather together in this celebration.

Then he goes on to say, "His bride has made herself ready, and to her, it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure. For the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints." The wedding dress that the church wears is the "deeds of the saints."

This week I've thought as I looked at the list of those whose names we just read – "of the deeds of the saints." Of all that they've done. You know the way they gave themselves away sacrificially. The way they lived their lives like Jesus, the way they served their family. The way they served the church. The way they served the world. It makes such an impact on the world around us, just looking at that list. Then thinking of the hard times they'd been through and the good times they celebrated and how through all those times, as they persevered, as they ran the good race, they continued to live out their faith. How they witnessed to people of the love of Christ and drew them into the church itself, how they taught the way of life that Jesus lived. All that they did are "the deeds of the saints." And I mostly remember how we were together—the sense of being connected in community as we loved one another.

My mom is on that list. I can just think about the party that we had with her. Just laughing together and having such a great time, gathered around the family table just telling stories.

“These are righteous deeds of the saints.” And they’re not far away. They’re not far away from us right now.

Look, there’s going to be a great party, and all of them are going to be there. All of them are going to be a part of it as we gather around the family table – the table of the Lord.

Look, I said earlier in the sermon that sometimes people don’t like parties, and maybe that’s you. We feel so awkward and that we don’t fit. We may feel that we’re having sort of forced conversations and having to make small talk. It seems shallow sometimes. But not at this party that’s coming. No, you’re going to want to be at this party because it was made for you. At this party, everyone fits; everyone belongs. Everyone feels a part of it. Everyone feels authentically connected to one another. That’s the kind of party when you party with the people that you really love. And that’s what it will be.

Now here’s the third thing. First, you have to have a reason to party. Second, you have to have the people you love. And third, you have to have food to eat. Remember this is the *Marriage Supper* of the Lamb. This is a feast.

We have Thanksgiving coming up, and at our house, the favorite food of Thanksgiving is not turkey or stuffing or cranberry sauce for sure. And it’s not really the pies – though we really like the pies. No, the favorite Thanksgiving food at our house is the rolls. It probably annoys my wife because you just buy rolls at the store; she doesn’t bake them herself. It’s hard to beat Sister Schubert’s rolls. They come in a little tin, and we get a little stack of those tins, and I could eat them all day, every day. They’re so good! And they smell so good when they’re baking. Then you get a little glob of butter on a hot roll - oh, have mercy! And mashed potatoes too, that’s probably second. You put corn on those when you eat the mashed potatoes. The corn goes on the mashed potatoes – I don’t know why – a family tradition of some sort.

We don’t know what the food served at the *Marriage Supper* of the Lamb will be. I’ve looked through Scripture, and there’s not a lot of description. The passage I found is in Isaiah 25, and it’s part of a prophecy of what’s to happen on the Holy Mountain in Jerusalem in Zion. Here’s what it says will be the food: “On this mountain, the Lord of Hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.” (Isaiah 25:6)

Here's what we do know. The Scripture says that the feast will be for all peoples. Everyone will be there. There won't be people hungry and people with too much. Second, all of those people will experience the incredible extravagance of God.

Katie Montgomery Mears did such a good job last week talking about what the word Prodigal means. It doesn't mean that you've wandered off. Prodigal means that you're extravagant, over the top. And that our God is prodigal – extravagant, over the top.

Here's a picture of that. Now all of those get this extravagance of God and, therefore, the most important part, all are satisfied. All of our lives, we struggle to look for that satisfaction, and at this party, we all will experience the full satisfaction of being in the presence of God.

Here is the last thing and its anticipation. You have to have a reason to party, you have to have people who you love to party with, you have to have great food, and there is an *anticipation* that is so important. That's a part of the whole structure.

In many parts of the world, and it was the case at the time of Jesus that wedding celebrations were multi-day events. The first one would be with the women and men eating separately, and the next day would be with them together. And it would go on for a number of days. We don't do that in our culture, although it's done in some cultures around the world. But what we do have is have all these pre-parties that sort of lead up to it. I have five daughters who've been married, so I understand this. You start planning the wedding months and months ahead, and for the longest time, it seems that the only thing we talk about is the wedding at the house as we're getting ready for it. And the excitement grows, and the anxiety grows too as you're planning for it. Then there are the pre-parties that happen. You might have an engagement party, but then there's a bachelor party and the bachelorette party. Then later, as you get closer to the wedding, there's a bridesmaids' luncheon. Then you have the rehearsal dinner; then you have the reception. Then you might have – we've had – a going away brunch that our grandparents put on for those out of town guests so they can have brunch before they leave to go home.

You have all that happening, and it's just this partying leading up. That's why this matters for our lives right now. It's because we're in that betrothed state, but because we know what's finally going to happen and because we already have the presence of Christ with us in one way, we begin to party now; we're full of this anticipation - this realization of what is to be. So we experience it as we get closer, as we keep working, as we keep striving. We realize how it's going to end, so there's this sense of partying in this moment right now. We sort of begin that

party here, and it continues when we pass away in heaven. Then it's culminated when we have a new heaven, and a new earth put together right, restored, and the marriage is consummated.

I've got all these allusions of pop songs in our sermon today, and another one is the "Anticipation" song with Carole King. You know the words – "Anticipation is making me wait..." But the song closes with "Cause these are the good old days. "Just the waiting and the yearning and the knowing, the confidence that God is going to finish this is what makes us celebrate right now.

Like the Fanny Crosby hymn says, "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine." Or in my favorite hymn, "Marching to Zion," the lines go: "The hill of Zion yields/A thousand sacred sweets/Before we reach the heavenly fields, or walk the golden streets." We get to experience the party now as we look forward to what God is going to do. I don't know if I'm going to the wedding I got the invitation to, but here's what this passage says, "Blessed are those who are invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb." You've been invited to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, and so have I. Boy, I don't want to miss that party! It'll be amazing. So I think we should just go ahead and get the party started now.

Let's pray together. *Gracious God, we thank you again for all these saints and deeds, righteous deeds of them that are the wedding dress of the church. We pray, God, that we would continue that tradition, that we would continue to carry forward and be a part of that celebration that is to be when you finally finish the job and make all things right. But, God, awaken within us your presence in our lives right now so that as we anticipate what is to be, we'll celebrate each and every day. In the name of Christ, we pray, Amen.*