

God Preparing Wedding Feast – Part II

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Brothers and Sisters, we must understand that this wedding which Franziskus spoke about is no metaphor! It is real, and God's heart is set upon it. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all focused on bringing this wedding to completion.

We must dare to believe that scripture is true. That we are created in the image of a God who is love, and who strongly desires to be loved. Every desire in our heart to know and be known comes from Him and ends in Him. He is the Alpha and Omega. This is why God calls us His children, why Jesus calls us His brothers and sisters, why He calls us servants, His friends and His bride. We have a deep longing for all these kinds of love – most of all for the love which unites us in eternal intimacy – the love which completes us – the love which romances our hearts – the love which bears fruit and multiplies.

And the truth which is hard for us to believe, hard for us to imagine, is that God desires this union even more than we do.

The Father created us for this union with His Son. He knows this union will bring Him joy, and it will bring us joy beyond all we could imagine or hope for. But the fulfillment of the Father's plan is costly because love always requires sacrifice. It is perilous, because God has an enemy. And so, as Franziskus said, both the Son and the Bride must be prepared.

The Incarnation

We know that Jesus, the second Person of the Trinity, is God's only begotten Son. He is Light from Light, True God from True God. We men are created, not begotten. We are made of dust. We are small, and weak, and weighed down with the pain of our sin.

We also know that for a legitimate marriage to occur, the Bride and the Groom must have the same nature. In the Garden of Eden, the Lord brought before Adam all the kinds of animals for him to name, but among all the animals, no suitable helpmate was found. Adam needed a mate who was flesh of his flesh.

The Son needs a Bride who shares His nature, and so the first act of the Son's preparation is the Incarnation.

Paul tells us this mystery, rooted in the creation story.

“FOR THIS REASON A MAN SHALL LEAVE HIS FATHER AND MOTHER AND SHALL BE JOINED TO HIS WIFE, AND THE TWO SHALL BECOME ONE FLESH. This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.” *Eph 5:31-32*

This mystery is great indeed! The Father made us to fulfill the desire of His Son to be loved, to have a fitting helpmate. And He knew that the joy of the Son in His Bride would be so great, that He sent Him away from His presence – away from the glory and power that was rightfully His – to become one of us.

When the Jesus was born as a man, he became dependent on men. This was the Father's plan. Jesus relied on Mary every day of His infancy and childhood. His mother fed Him; clothed Him; taught Him how to talk. She also taught Him how to navigate the pain of life in a fallen world. I am sure that Jesus fell down and skinned His knees. Mary washed and bandaged them. I am certain that other children sometimes hurt Jesus feelings. Mary comforted Him , defended Him, taught Him how to respond to the pain of teasing and rejection.

Jesus depended on Joseph. Joseph saved Jesus' life. He left his business, his friends all the security he knew and fled to Egypt to save the child who was not his own biological son. Joseph provided for Jesus. He taught Jesus to work with His hands. Jesus learned obedience living under Joseph's authority.

And so Jesus came to love his parents, just as we love ours, only more so, because He is Love.

Jesus had friends whom He loved. Friends who left everything to follow Him. Friends who listened and learned from him. Friends who gave money to support Him. Friends who, in the end, gave their lives for Him. Jesus loved His friends, just as we love ours, only more so, because He is Love.

This was the Father's plan in the Incarnation – for the Son to become dependent on the Bride – to learn to love her in the flesh, not just looking down from heaven, but face to face. And this is the mystery of being the Body of Christ, that the Son continues to depend on us – to work mercy on the earth, to preach the gospel, to heal the sick and cast out demons. In doing these things, we become a suitable helpmate to our Savior, and this a beautiful thing.

Jesus tells us in Matthew 25 that when He comes again in glory to judge, He will say to His Bride,

'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.'

Brothers and sisters, this is another glorious mystery! When we minister to one another, we minister to Jesus, like His friends did on earth. In this way, He comes to know us, we come to know Him, and as we come to know Him, we will love Him more. And He will be jealous for us. As He said in the gospel of Luke, we will be to him "His mother, His brothers and His sisters." Luke 8:21

The Cross

The first step of the Son's preparation for the Marriage was the Incarnation. But there was another step which was necessary to prepare the Marriage, and that was the Cross.

In the Cross the Son shows the depth of His love, His obedient trust in the Father and His humility. The Father knew that our hearts could not be won with a show of power or a promise of heavenly riches.

No. The Song of Songs says, "If a man gave all he owned for love, it would be utterly despised." The Father knew that we needed to see the depth of His love for us, and so He sent His only Son to die.

At the last Supper Jesus tells us what we already know. "Greater love has no man than this, than he lay down his life for his friends." And then He says that we are His friends.

In the Passion, Jesus not only died for us, but He suffered unimaginable pain and humiliation. He took on all sorts of suffering that men know. He was betrayed by a friend. He was unjustly accused. He was mocked. He was beaten. He was tortured and humiliated. The God who made the universe was stripped naked and died. He suffered without complaint. He died without regret. Because this is what the Father asked. And the Father asked because He knew the joy it would bring the Son.

In John 10 Jesus says this...

For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.

And again in John 14,

I will not speak much more with you, for the ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in Me; ³¹ but so that the world may know that I love the Father, I do exactly as the Father commanded Me.

The cross proves to us how much the Son loves the Father. And it should prove to us beyond doubt that we are loved, that we are treasured, that we are greatly desired – by both the Father and the Son.

I have often had trouble contemplating Jesus on the cross. It was just too scary to imagine the Lord in that place, and to think that this was the result of my sin. But in the past year Jesus has helped me to see the cross differently – as an expression of the depth of His love – and when I look at Him that way, my heart burns with desire for Him, that He should receive the reward of His suffering – that He should have my whole heart – my tongue and my thoughts to give Him praise – and my body to serve His people.

I believe the enemy does everything in his power to keep us from looking on the cross – or to distort our image of it. If we feel fear or shame or condemnation or anything but love when we look on the cross, then I think we are missing God's heart. I believe that Jesus wants us to see His love, and the Father's love when we look on the cross. So today, I encourage you, if you have not been in the practice of contemplating the cross, of looking on your Savior in the place of His sacrifice, then ask the Holy Spirit to help you see Him there.

Because the cross is the victory and glory of the Son! By the standard of the cross, Jesus has the right to release His Bride from sin, from slavery, and from death. There is no tongue in heaven or hell that will deny Jesus' authority to claim His Bride. The wounds on His Body silence the tongue of the Accuser. And anyone who is not moved by those wounds, anyone who refuses to bow and kiss the Son, is unworthy of the Wedding Feast.

Now Son has been prepared for the Wedding, and He is waiting in Heaven, eager for that day. But the Bride must be prepared.

The Cross and the Bride.

The Son was prepared for the wedding through the Incarnation and the Cross.

The Bride is also prepared for the wedding through the cross.

As we said earlier, a Bride and a Groom must share the same nature in order for a marriage to be valid. The Son humbled Himself and took on flesh for His part. But He was still sinless, and we were not. The cross was necessary to take away our sins.

John the Baptist recognized Jesus as the Bridegroom. And he understood that his own ministry prepared the way of the Bridegroom. John called people to repent of their sins, and this was crucial. It remains crucial for prophets and pastors to call people to repentance. But when John saw Jesus approach Him, John called out “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” Friends of the Bridegroom call the Bride to repentance, but only the Lamb, only the Son, can take away her sin.

The cross is the means by which the Bride is washed clean. The blood Jesus spilled on the cross takes away our sin. But the mystery of the cross runs even deeper. In the Incarnation, Jesus took on our nature to become like us. Through His death on the cross, Jesus invites us to partake of His nature.

Early church fathers saw a parallel between the creation story and the crucifixion. In Genesis, God puts Adam into a deep sleep. He then opens Adam’s side, removes a rib, and fashions Eve, his bride, from that rib.

In a similar way, Jesus was put into the deep sleep of death. A spear pierced His side, and water and blood gushed forth. Early church fathers saw the water and the blood as symbols of baptism and communion – the two signs by which Christians are marked and changed, separated from this world. This is the cleansing which transforms us into a fitting Bride. Jesus said unless we eat His flesh and drink His blood, we have no part of Him. These are shocking words, but the transformation which must take place is shocking. We must take on His nature, and the cross provides the only path for this transformation.

So just as the cross is the glory of the Son, it is also the glory of the Bride.

But there is a further mystery of the cross. Jesus calls the Bride to take up her own cross and follow Him

Here I want to tell you a funny personal story about my courtship with Thomas.

Thomas began pursuing me when we were both in college. He spent a few months in Taiwan, visiting his aunt and uncle who were missionaries, and while he was there, he remembered me from our high school youth group and decided I might make a good wife. So when he came back to Texas, he started calling.

What he did not know is that I had just sworn off men. While he was away, I was breaking off a serious, but unhealthy relationship with another boyfriend. So when Thomas started calling me, my heart was still hurting. I was afraid that I could not be trusted with romantic relationships. I was afraid that God was disappointed in me. I was

simply afraid, and so I did not return Thomas' calls. Now I am not sure why, but Thomas kept calling, for a whole month, and I did not respond.

I did not respond because I did not want to mess up another relationship. But I knew that Thomas was an exceptional man! I admired him greatly. In fact, I had once told myself, "I want to marry a man like Thomas Cogdell" – never imagining that the real Thomas Cogdell would be interested in me. So I went to my former boyfriend who knew Thomas from church, I told him my situation, and that young man spoke the wisdom of God to me. He said, "Amy, you would be a fool not to date Thomas Cogdell!"

So the next time Thomas called, I answered the phone and agreed to see a play with him and his sister. This seem to encourage him, so he proposed another date. Here was Thomas' idea of a good second date.

"Amy," he asked, "would you come with me next Saturday to an abortion protest and get arrested?"

What young man in his right man proposes a trip to jail as a first date?
What woman in her right mind accepts?

Well, I did. I was arrested for criminal trespass and spent the night in a very dirty, uncomfortable cell. I went to another protest, was arrested again, and ended up spending 30 days in jail. 30 glorious days coming to know the tender heart of Jesus for His hurting sheep. 30 days in which I saw Jesus heal people. 30 days which changed the course of my life. Those days in jail are a treasure to me.

I was thinking back on those early days of courtship with Thomas recently, wondering whatever made me say yes to such a proposal.

The truth is that I had not thought much about the tragedy of abortion before Thomas invited me to be arrested. I did not go to jail out of passion for a cause.

I did not go to jail for love. At the time, my heart was still numb. I was not in love with Thomas.

But I did admire him. I respected him. I trusted him more than I trusted myself. If Thomas thought going to jail was the right thing, then I felt it must be. Even though I missed class. Even though going to jail jeopardized my grades and put a mark on my criminal record. Even though it was a little scary.

When I was thinking about those days recently, I laughed to think how much my earthly husband resembles my Heavenly Husband, Jesus. "Take up your cross and follow Me," is a daring invitation to one's Bride. Most people will say "no thank you" to such an invitation. The promise of suffering does not sound so romantic to our ears.

But Jesus is good and can be trusted. And for those who will take up their cross and follow Him, their cross becomes their glory and their victory, just as it is the glory of the Son.

At the last supper Jesus is praying to His Father and He speaks these words which are so beautiful, so powerful that we hardly dare to believe them.

The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one.
John 17:22

What is this glory? It is to be like Jesus, to share His nature and character. We partake in His glory when we manifest the name of the Father, like Jesus did. We carry His glory when we are kind and merciful, when we forgive sin. We carry His glory when we proclaim good news to the poor and the captives. We carry His glory when we practice justice and defend the weak. But we carry His glory most clearly when we suffer with Him. When we take up our cross and follow Him

The first apostles were martyred for their witness, and in their death, they carried His glory. St. Francis fasted and lived in extreme poverty, and in that suffering he also carried the glory of Jesus. Our Anabaptist brothers and sisters refused to fight in the military; they refused to even to defend themselves, and so they chose to embrace suffering for the sake of Jesus. The world takes notice when people lay down their lives for Jesus.

For the past five years, Thomas and I have had the honor of partnering closely with a team of friends, of spiritual fathers and mothers, in this work of Wittenberg 2017. I have seen the glory of Jesus in them – Catholics, Lutherans, Anglicans, Free Church brothers and sisters, Messianic Jews – and my heart is closely united with them. I love them. And in working with them, I have come to see the wisdom of Jesus. Doctrinal discussion is good, but in itself, it will not bring unity. What unites us is the glory of Jesus. When we carry His glory, we bear witness to His name – and if we love Him, we will love anyone who carries His glory. And if we love Him fully, we will take up our cross and follow Him. We will lay down our lives for one another, because that is the glory The Bridegroom shares with the Bride.