

In the Image of God: The Christian Vision for Love and Marriage
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Incarnational Marriage: How the Presence of Christ Matters

A likely place to start talking about Christian marriage may be John chapter 2 [:1-11],

where we find Jesus at a wedding, at Cana-in-Galilee.

At this wedding, Jesus does what is what is often said to be his very first miracle,

he changes water into wine,

but – *is it?*

Try this: ***Jesus ministry starts with a miracle at a marriage, but it may not be the miracle we think.***

Perhaps you remember some of the details.

Jesus is there with his mother, St Mary, and his freshly called disciples.

In the course of the celebration, the steward runs out of wine.

Mary comes to Jesus to let him know, and after some discussion, Jesus goes to work.

“Fill the jars with water,” says Jesus, and they do.

“Draw some off and take it to the steward,” says Jesus, and they do.

The steward tastes the draw, water now become wine, and celebrates the bridegroom,

“Everyone else serves the best wine first,

and waits until the guests have drunk freely before serving the poorer sort;

but you have kept the best wine until now.” (Jn 2:7-8, 10)

So simple, that first miracle of Jesus – *or is it?*

This is a strange story, this story of water become wine,

because unlike Jesus' other miracles,
there is no talk, there is no touch, and there is no stunning, obvious, miraculous moment.

Jesus does not speak to the water – *be changed!*

He does not touch the water – *be good!*

He does not offer a personal, public, decisive, and certain point of contact – *be wine!* –

as he does when, for example,

he frees a woman from adultery, personally, publicly, decisively, completely,

and nose to nose,

“Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more,” (Jn 8:11),

or when he rubs mud in a blind man's eyes to make them see (Jn 9:6),

or raises a stinky corpse with a shout, *“Lazarus, come out!”* (Jn 11:43).

There is no talk, no touch, no stunning, incontrovertible climax with Jesus' first miracle.

(See William H. Willimon, Pulpit Resource, 23:1, 1995, 12-13)

So what are we left to conclude?

Try this: *Jesus ministry starts with a miracle at a marriage, but it may not be the miracle we think.*

Or this: *water to wine is a miracle,*

but we might do better to think of it Jesus' second miracle, rather than his first.

Why say that?

St John was a Jew, weaned on repetitive Psalms and spiraling Hebrew prophets,

texts which said the same thing over and over, again and again,

but each time more deeply, more richly, more typologically,

and for the faithful,

more clearly.

For St John, history is the **LORD's** history,
salvation history, messianic history (Jn 1:45), and eschatological history (The Revelation to John),
so everything is connected to everything, start to finish,
and everything pulls together toward Jesus' most glorious hour of all,
his cross (Jn 2:4; 12:23, 32; 13:31; 19:30),
and then it all pushes beyond, farther and future,
toward the gift that cross delivers,
forgiveness, life, and ultimately,
the utter re-creation of heaven and earth,
where all things are made new (Rev 21:5).
Remember that for St John, history has its **τέλος**, its consummation, in holy marriage,
in the wedding feast that has no end.

Knowing all of that, listen to the last verse of this first miracle story:

***“This deed – at Cana-in-Galilee – is the first of the signs
by which Jesus revealed his glory and led his disciples to believe in him.”*** (Jn 2:11)

This deed – water to wine – is a sign, says St John.

But signs point beyond themselves – that is what they do – signs point,

and so we ask: What is the sign pointing **to** –

what is Jesus first miracle, really?

And the answer is: ***incarnation.***

Certainly this is a story about saving a host from embarrassment.

Certainly this is a story about Jesus rallying his new disciples.

Certainly this is a story about Jesus and his mother.

But first of all, and most of all, this is a story about Jesus *and his Father*.

The clue lies in that odd exchange between Jesus and St Mary which for us the KJV may render best.

Mary says: *“They have no wine.”* (Jn 2:3)

Jesus says: *“Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come.”* (Jn 2:4)

Contrary to what seems in the English translation, Jesus is not being sassy to his mother.

“Woman” is a polite address which Jesus uses again the next time St Mary appears in the Gospel of St John,

when she stands at the foot of his cross.

“When Jesus therefore saw his mother,

and the disciple standing by whom he loved, he saith unto his mother, Woman behold thy son!

Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother! (Jn 19:26-27)

Next, the phrase, *“What have I to do with thee?”*, is neither aloof or insubordinate.

Jesus is using an old Semitic phrase which means something like –

“This is not really an issue between you and me” –

or more colloquially – *“Sorry, but this is not really your business.”*

(see Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd Ed, ἐγώ, 275; 2 Kings 3:13; 2 Chronicles 35:21)

Here is the point: this is not a story about Jesus and his mother,

but Jesus and his Father, his heavenly Father.

This is the ongoing story of God the Father and God the Son sorting out the salvation of the world,

messianically, eschatologically, and even maritally.

It is a matter between the two of them,

from eternity, gradually unfolding,

toward the holy hour of Jesus that will eventually come,

that hour when Jesus hangs on the cross for the life of the world. (Jn 6:33)

It is the story – the continuing story –

of the glory of God on the move

from Trinity to tabernacle to temple to Mary to manger

to Cana to cross to eschaton,

ending in the marriage feast that has no end.

The second Eden does not happen without the second Adam,

and the second Adam does not happen without the first miracle,

which is not water to wine, but God to flesh.

What is the Jesus' first miracle?

Jesus.

Jesus is the first miracle of Jesus in St John's Gospel.

Jesus – present, in the flesh – Jesus is the miracle.

The implications of this are unbounded.

What St John is kind and daring enough to tell us is this:

When Jesus comes to earth, when Jesus comes to town,

when Jesus is ***present*** in flesh and blood,

everything changes.

If Jesus is really here, really present, really inscriptured, but more, really en fleshed,

really located in our midst,

then everything changes, everything is different,

then we can expect a new and miraculous life in him, in his body, in his Church, and in our marriages.

Anytime Jesus shows up,

on an ordinary planet, amidst an ordinary people,

for an ordinary congregation, in ordinary family,

at an ordinary wedding,

with an ordinary man and an ordinary women,

there is glory,

where glory means ***the holiness of heaven come to earth.***

By that incarnate holiness,

which forgives and purifies and nourishes and prompts us beyond ourselves,

things are different, things are transformed, things are changed,

not just water to wine,

but sinners to saints, and doubt to faith, and despair to hope,

and masters to servants,

and water to salvation, and penitents to free,

and bread to body, and wine to blood,

and two to one,

it is a miracle,

he is a miracle,

and he is ours.

Christian marriage, as an act of the Christian Church, starts with a miracle,
and the miracle is this:

that God makes the first move, and that God moves graciously toward us.

The miracle is this:

that God makes the first move, graciously toward us,

in the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, in the incarnation.

The miracle is this:

that our LORD lives among his own, his tribe, his called-out, his Church,

not just long ago and far away,

but here, among *us*, now, today,

with his Holy Name – but more,

with his Holy Word – but more,

with his Holy Absolution – but more,

with his Holy Flesh and Holy Blood,

by his Holy Spirit.

Within his Church,

marriage is one of the places where Jesus promises to be present, for us, here and now,

as Jesus himself said: ***What therefore God has joined together, let man not put asunder.*** (Mt 19:6)

Two things are striking in that as a basis for Christian marriage.

First, Jesus says very clearly that Christian marriage is *his* work, not ours.

Marriage is not primarily about our love, our vows, our words, our works, our songs and candles and flowers and caterers – our ways.

Nothing that originates with us can hold a marriage together in the very stressful and individualistic 21st century world in which we live.

We simply do not have the resources for original sinners to live together in anything that approaches glory,

that is marked by holiness,

and that gives witness to real reality,

the ongoing, cosmic, nuptial joy of heaven.

We are sinners,

and to sin within a marriage is to sin in close quarters.

Repeated or unforgiven sin makes a marriage very brittle very quickly.

If we are honest,

I think that every married Christian here would say

that there has been at least one morning in your marriage

when you have rubbed the sleep from your eyes, rolled over,

looked at your spouse and said,

“There must be some mistake.”

Whether we know it or not,

to say that even once is to admit that we have lost sight of Jesus,

the fleshly-present Son of God in our midst,

and of his work,

what Jesus did for us at his altar on our wedding day.

At the altar, the Lord is doing the almost impossible,

fitting two very different kinds of person to each other,

a man and a woman,

pairing the two of them up (συζεύγνυμι: yoked together),

tightly fastening them together, and sending them off in the same direction,
so that they live, rejoice, grow, flourish,
not as individuals, not even just as a team
but as two become one flesh. (Mt 19:6)

That is at least one reason why the liturgy speaks of *holy* marriage.
What is done at the altar is otherworldly (Jn 15:19; 17:11-19) and wholly sacred,
because it is done by the holy LORD himself.

As St Paul reminds us,
even the love with which Christians love each other is not what we muster up,
but a spiritual gift (1 Corinthians 13).

That is one thing to draw from Jesus' words.

Here is a *second*: our LORD never leaves us to ourselves.
He is not the sort of God who gives us spin to start us up,
but then lets us trail off to our own designs as if we belonged to us.

The whole biblical history of salvation –
the LORD drawing Abraham from Ur to the Promised Land,
the LORD spurring Moses to exodus from Egypt,
the LORD having himself a people in the wilderness, an Israel,
and then promising a Messiah out of Israel for all peoples (Is 53),
the Lord pushing history through the cross to a never-ending heavenly marriage feast –
that entire history is the history of God *for* us,
and *among* us,
and even one of us – *incarnation!* – one of us *in* Christ,

and so *with* us in every part of live,
even, and perhaps especially, *in* marriage,
as Jesus uses it as an icon of salvation.

Abraham, Moses, the children of Israel, the Messiah –
they all had opportunity
to live in the utter confidence that were the LORD's own, the LORD's chosen.
A call from God, a covenant,
a burning bush, a Red Sea sliced in two,
manna in the wilderness, a promised land,
an open heaven and a dove,
a booming voice, "*This is my beloved Son with whom I am well-pleased,*" (Mt 3:17) –
all were there to make them sure that they would never be alone, and never go unloved.

But what about us, individually, and especially today,
what about us as Christians married to each other, yoked one to another –
how do we know that the LORD has not left us to our self, and to ourselves?
What confidence have we got that we will not be left alone
and not go unloved,
to make our own diminished, even sinful, ways?

This is where presence matters – real presence – Jesus presence –
fleshly presence – sacramental presence – miraculous presence –
always presence – everywhere presence –
and, for us, not against us, presence.

Like Abraham, Moses, the children of Israel, and the Messiah, the LORD has
taken us as his own.

He possesses us, and fills us.

We are his.

The Scriptures could not be more clear.

“Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?

You are not your own; you were bought with a price.

So glorify God in your body”. (1 Cor 6:19-20)

You are a temple, says the text – but how does a temple become a temple?

Our LORD tells us that in 1 Kings 8 and 9.

Solomon’s project was almost complete on Mt Zion in Jerusalem.

The big box is built.

But, because nobody controls the LORD of heaven and earth,

how does Solomon know the LORD will show up at the party,

and if he shows up, that the LORD will be pleased with those he finds there?

Solomon asks something like this:

You are a great big God, and this is a very tiny box.

How do we know that you will move in?

The LORD responds something like this:

I will put my Name there, in that place, in that box,

and if my Name is there, then I am there,

there for your good, to bless you, and forgive you, and not to harm you.

That is how my Name works,

that is how I work.

That is how a temple becomes a temple –
the LORD puts his Name down, moves in, owns, blesses, goes to work,
and uses all things there for his good.

So it was for us at our Baptism.
Jesus said that his disciples are to be made
by baptizing in the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Mt 28:19-20)
Just to say these are made by way of water and Word does not say it strongly enough.
The Name is the key here.

With water, the Holy Name was put to us, put on us,
seared into our skin like branding iron,
tattooed on us.

Branded with his Name,
we are his sheep, not goats, at the Last Judgment. (Mt 25:33)
Tattooed with his Name, we are placed on the guest list for the heavenly feast.

It is there in the very last chapter of the Bible: in the heavenly Jerusalem, at the heavenly feast...

***“There shall no more be anything accursed,
but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it,
and his servants shall worship him,
they shall see his face, and his name shall be on their foreheads.”*** (Rev 2:3-4)

Once baptized, we do not belong to ourselves – we belong to him,
as much as Abraham, Moses, Israel, and Jesus belonged to him.

We are never alone, and never unloved.

That guarantee comes in the Words of Institution for Baptism as well.

Listen to how Jesus speaks in Matthew 28:16-20.

“All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me” – here Jesus is talking about *space* – and,

“Lo, I am with you always” – and there Jesus is talking about *time*.

So there is no place, in space or in time, where Jesus is not present *with* his baptized, with us,

where Jesus is not there *by* us, *for* us.

By wearing Jesus’ Name,
he is present *in* us, he is committed *to* us,
just as he was *in* them, and *with* them, and *for* them, and *to* them.

And, just as it was for them,
in the course of our days, our history within his salvation History,
he intends to have good use of us,
so He gets what he wants.

What he wants is **not just our salvation** –
yes, of course,
he shouts us up out of our baptism just the way he shouted dead Lazarus out of his tomb,
and our baptism is a real resurrection,
but that day was not Lazarus’ last day,
and our baptism was not ours.

It was his first day, and ours,
of a new life, in Christ.

So the Christian life is never lived at the bare minimum,

but starting with baptism,
it is a life wholly given to words of witness and acts of mercy,
especially inside marriage.

That is why St Paul speaks so easily
of the connection of Baptism, marriage, and the Christian life in Ephesians chapter 5.
As Jesus gathers the Church to himself,
washing it up in Baptism,
hallowing it,
really present with it, incarnationally, sacramentally,
his love is so strong it purifies the loved.

Holiness bestowed is the ultimate act of mercy.

Taking the Church as his one and only,
he lives with her in perfect monogamy,
perfectly faithful,
really present with his one and only, incarnationally, sacramentally,
ever giving, ever serving, ever caring,
all in the way of the Gospel.

Faithful presence is the ultimate word of witness.

Having been given such gifts,
the Church is meant to live as a holy and faithful bride.
Should any of those within the church – any of her members –
seek to marry,
their marriage is to be a chancel drama,

a children's sermon,
a visible mercy,
a tangible witness,
an incarnation of incarnational love,
a sign of divine sacramental presence,
a life *in* Jesus pointing others *to* Jesus.

*“For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother
and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.
This mystery is a profound one,
and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church.”* (Eph 5:32-33)

The Gospel is resistible, of course.
The crucifixion is the ultimate proof of that.
Some of those to whom Jesus came preferred their own darkness to his light,
and in the battle of darkness and light (Jn 1:4, 11),
one of them must die.
So Jesus did.

But with Jesus, death is never the last word.
He is risen, and to be baptized is to be raised with him, by him.

Still, we struggle with our Old Adam, and sin gives place to sins, even in the best marriages.

What to do? Especially if we are already married...

There is a double joy in the story of the woman caught in adultery,
John chapter 8, to which I pointed earlier.

You remember how the story goes.

There was a woman caught in the act.

She was dragged before Jesus for judgment.

Obliging the demand, Jesus pronounced it: ***“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone.”*** (Jn 8:7)

From oldest to youngest, from wisest to dumbest, they left,
until the woman and Jesus were left all alone, nose to nose.

Now comes the double joy.

Is anybody here still condemning you?, says Jesus.

No one, says she. (Jn 8:10-11)

Brilliant!

Of course she knew she was caught,
of course she knew she was wrong,
of course she knew she was inescapably guilty,
of course she knew for all of this that Jesus could do her in.

That would be fair.

But he does not.

Jesus is utterly unfair with her.

“Neither do I condemn you;” says Jesus, “go, and do not sin again.”

Do you see?

It is fairly simple.

Faith ***agrees*** with Jesus.

Sin ***disagrees*** with Jesus.

Jesus says she is free –
free from her past sin, free to have her life back,
free not to sin again, free to be of some good use to him –
Jesus says she is free.

Faith agrees.

No one is left to condemn her – not the crowd, not Jesus – and not she herself.
In faith, she agrees with Jesus' judgment about her – that she *is* free,
free from past sin, free to have her life back,
free not to sin again,
free to be of some good use to him.

That is Holy Absolution,
the Holy Absolution that only a real, living, present, incarnate Jesus can give,
the Holy Absolution that is central to the life of Christians,
the Holy Absolution that is primary in a marriage,
the divine thing that lets two sinners live together in close quarters,
that lets two sinners live together as one,
within the miracle Jesus bestows at Holy Marriage.

What is left?
What is left once we have been washed up and called home,
and once we have been absolved of sins that would destroy home –
what is left but for Jesus to touch us,
the way he touched the blind man, rubbing his eyes, healing him?

Such a touch comes to us in the Holy Supper,

the new covenant where Jesus puts his body and blood for our good.

To begin to see all that our LORD is doing there, we might remember Luther. Luther was a new man once he discovered that the LORD speaks realities, once he realized the LORD's words do what they say, mercifully, and for our good, for example, that the LORD, with a righteous word, did not mean to damn him, but instead to change him from sinner to saint.

There is nothing new in that, of course, but we are often as blind to it as the young friar.

Once we see it, however – that the LORD's words do what they say – *life is different*.

To the chaos, Jesus says, "***Let there be light,***" and there is light.
To the lame man, Jesus says, "***Walk!***" and he walks.
To the leper, Jesus says, "***Clean!***" and he is clean.
To the demons, Jesus says, "***Out!***" and they go out.
To the dead, Jesus says, "***Rise!***" and they rise.
To the sinner, Jesus says, "***Forgiven!***" and he is hallowed.
To the bread, Jesus says, "***This is my body,***" and it is his body.
To the wine, Jesus says, "***This is my blood,***" and it is his blood.
With Jesus it is one miracle after another, done by his creative, bestowing word.

That body and blood –
the same body and blood that once was pierced by nails,
the same body and blood that once hung upon the cross,
is hung upon our tongues at the Holy Supper.

There Jesus –
the same Jesus who went from Trinity to tabernacle to temple to Mary to manger
to Cana to cross to eschaton,
ending in the marriage feast that has no end –
now locates himself in bread and wine on his altar.

That same Jesus – crucified and resurrected –
that same Jesus – the incarnate,
the one who always has his flesh and blood,
ever and everywhere, in time and in space –
that Jesus, at his Holy Supper,
speaks to us, touches us, forgives us, heals us, strengthens us,
binds us to himself,
to the Holy Trinity,
to each other as community, as Church,
and then, if we are married,
specifically to each other as wife and husband.

When we understand all of this –
when our marriage is based on the miracle of incarnation,
and it is Jesus' work, not ours,
and when our marriage is
bounded by the way this incarnate Jesus chooses to be with us,
in holy means, in holy things,
in Holy Baptism, Holy Absolution, Holy Supper, and Holy Word,

the world is a different place.

For example,
when I look at my wife and see that
the primary fact about her is that she belongs to Jesus,
that she bears his Name,
that he locates himself on and in and for and with her,
that she is baptized,

or,
when I look at my wife and see that
the primary fact about her is that
she bears the body and blood of Jesus in her body and blood,
that Jesus so esteems her,
so binds himself to her,
so loves her, so cares for her,
so nourishes her,
so uses her,
as one Suppered, bodied, blooded,

or,
when I look at my wife and see that
the primary fact about her is that Jesus does not condemn her,
but forgives her every sin, and then some more,
and faith agrees with Jesus
so I do not condemn her,

forgiving her every sin, and then some more,
and she is free,
and I am free
and we are free to live beyond our sins, in forgiveness,
that is the joy of Christian love and Christian marriage.

Then it becomes clear why marriage begins with a miracle,
the miracle of incarnation,
and why the incarnation matters for marriage,
because real flesh and blood Jesus is here for real sinners like us,
and why the miraculous, sacramental presence of Jesus matters,
because this is how Jesus chooses to give himself to us *here and now*,
so someday there can be a *then and there*,
at his τέλος, at our τέλος,
at the wedding feast that has no end.

But until then, in all things
we live by acts of mercy,
and as a word of witness,
not just with our lips,
but with our lives,
even life together as two become one.

Though we *see* St Mary again after John chapter 2, we never *hear* from her again after today.

These are her last words in the Gospel of St John: “*Do whatever he tells you.*” (Jn 2:5)

We could profit by that too, by doing whatever he tells us,
knowing Jesus' work of putting us together as one
between his altar and his font,
where all of life worth living is really, really lived,
and staying there with us through thick and thin.
Then there is faith, hope, and love in marriage,
and it in the way of Christ.