

Two Weddings and a Birthday

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Sermon for July 16, 2006

Lessons for Pentecost 6 [10]

Amos 7:7-15

Psalm 85:8-13

Ephesians 1: 3-14

Mark 6:14-29

Today is our 18th wedding anniversary. It hardly seems like it was that long ago. It doesn't seem possible that babies who were at our wedding with their parents are in college now. Wow.

Today is our 18th wedding anniversary, and that's appropriate, because I'm going to tell you stories about two weddings - and a birthday.

The first wedding was about 26 years ago. It was the wedding of Charlie, the cousin of Patty, my girlfriend at the time. From everything anyone else could tell, Charlie's fiancée, Sue was a perfectly nice person, but for some reason, Charlie's sister, Tina, didn't think so. Tina hated Sue, and wouldn't tell anyone why, except that for some reason she felt that she wasn't good enough for her brother.

Sue tried being nice to Tina, but that didn't help. She still hated Sue, and didn't hesitate to make her feelings known among other family members. Tina was even made a bridesmaid, after all, family is family - especially in an Italian family. But not only did this not help, but it gave Tina one more way in which to behave like an unqualified - well, I won't use that word here - complaining about every part of the wedding plans, complaining about the dresses Sue

picked out, and ordering people around as if it were her own wedding.

As I heard the ongoing horror stories from Patty, I said to her, "Family or not, if my sister ever acted that way in my wedding, I'd fire her as a bridesmaid. There are just some things I will not put up with."

The birthday party was about 2000 years ago, and it was for King Herod. According to today's gospel, when his stepdaughter, Salome, came in and danced for the party, she pleased him and his guests so much that he swore that he would give her whatever she wanted. Even as much as half of his kingdom. Must've been some dance. Where was she on my birthday?

So after talking to her mother about it, Salome came back and asked for the head of John the Baptist, whom her mother hated, on a platter. Ew. It doesn't say whether or not she also asked for a side order of fries.

The king was appalled because he had great respect for John, but since he had promised, in front of all his guests, to give Salome whatever she wanted, he had John beheaded.

The second wedding was 18 years ago. It was ours. The bridesmaids would be Cheryl's sister Nancy, my sister Jay, her friend

Tracey from nursing school, and my friend Agnes from work at SU.

As we started planning the wedding, we decided to do many things that were unfamiliar to our families, but that we had seen at the weddings of our college friends who came from many different ethnic and faith backgrounds.

Each time we mentioned one of the things we had planned to do as part of our wedding, the mantra that came from my family was, "But we've never heard of that before," or "But we've always seen it done this way." I swear, for a bunch of Baptists, they'd make excellent Lutherans.

Finally it got down to the dresses. Cheryl had picked out a nice style of dress that could be worn anywhere later on and didn't make the bride look good by making the bridesmaids look ugly. The only problem was that the dresses had to be made. Not a problem for Cheryl and her sister, who have sewn since they were eight years old, but at this point, my sister balked; complaining that we had made a decision on the dresses, and so many other things, without conferring with her or the other bridesmaids, yada, yada, yada.

This, for me, was the straw that broke the camel's back. I remembered the story of Charlie and Sue's wedding. I had told Cheryl the story of Charlie and Sue's wedding. Patty and her mother were going to be guests at our wedding - Cheryl and I try to remain friendly with all of our exes, and she was still a good friend - and Patty knew of the aggravation Jay was causing me.

And remembering the promise I made to myself eight years before - in front of Patty, and that I had also told Cheryl about, I fired my sister as a bridesmaid. After all, family or not, there's a limit to how much

complaining one should have to put up with, and not being Italian myself, I didn't have to give that much weight to family.

I replaced her with someone who wouldn't complain and who understood exactly what we were trying to do - Patty.

Herod was appalled by Salome's request, but felt he had to grant it because he had sworn in front of all of his guests to give her whatever she wanted. And I still say that had to be some dance.

Having made that statement in front of all these people, he was afraid that he would look like a fool if he backed down. He was afraid that he would look like a wimp had he refused this request.

And yet, though he was greatly troubled by it, he granted her request because of the promise he had made in front of all his guests.

But is it perhaps possible that granting that horrible request had the opposite effect on his guests than he had intended? Is it possible that rather than leaving impressed with how much power he had, his guests left marveling at how such a mighty king could be manipulated by his teenaged daughter? Did they perhaps leave silently wondering how he could lack the backbone to tell her that that request was totally unreasonable? Could it be that rather than seeing him as one who felt free to use his power however he wished, they saw him as someone who would do any fool thing to impress people?

Did he perhaps lose all the way around? We don't know.

Do we often find ourselves trapped by the grandiose promises we make, because we're afraid of losing face by saying that we've

reconsidered? Are we so afraid of appearing to be indecisive that we stubbornly continue along a certain previously announced path, even after we've been shown that we're wrong, and even recognize it ourselves?

Do we all too often confuse the legitimate changing of plans because of new information with being wishy-washy and indecisive, and does our confusion here often prevent our leaders from making good decisions because they're all too well aware that even a reasonable change in policy will have many of us accusing them of flip-flopping, and may well cost them the next election?

Without making my politics known here at all, it seems that the very same admission of error so many people want from President Bush now is what cost President Carter the reelection 26 years ago. Do we maybe want Herod a little more than we think?

Can we get out of the trap of feeling that we have to keep even the most stupid promises in order to impress those around us? Of course we can, provided that we remember that the only person we really need to impress is God. And frankly, I think there ain't much that's gonna impress him about us - except, ironically, our willingness to stop trying to impress even him, and to instead, quietly and steadfastly do what is right - even when it could potentially embarrass us.

Just think of how differently today's gospel lesson might have turned out had Herod told Salome "No! And for making that request, you and your mother are banished." It would've been quite a different story.

Can we bring ourselves to write a different story when faced with a situation like this? We can with God's help.

So let's return to those weddings. 26 years later, how are Charlie and Sue doing? Are they still married, and does Tina still hate Sue's guts? I don't know. The last time I saw them was 19 years ago, when Cheryl and I went to Patty's grandmother's funeral, and even then, we only saw them all briefly, before I wrecked Cheryl's car in the funeral procession.

And what about me and my sister? What happened after I fired her from being a bridesmaid? Actually, after a couple of carefully-worded letters and contentious phone calls, everything worked out, and Jay was much happier being a guest than a member of the wedding. Although, in hindsight, I realize that she wasn't anywhere near being the piece of work that Tina was, and that I could've handled the situation a whole lot better, by thoughtfully talking to her about how we were planning things, and letting her gracefully step aside, instead of having to prove to myself and others that I meant what I said by dramatically following through on my Herod-like promise of eight years earlier and firing her.

By the way, after the wedding was all over, and we had done all these things that my family had never heard of before, my mother reported back to me that everyone she knew said it was the most beautiful wedding they had ever been to.

But the wedding was nothing, compared to the marriage, and I'm looking forward to the next 18 years.

This is most certainly true!