

“The Wedding and the Honeymoon”

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The marriage is better than the honeymoon.

Acts 2:22-47

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The honeymoon

As I prepared for today’s message, I read in two different commentaries that it’s not correct to call Acts 2 the “birthday of the Church.” The Reformed tradition believes the universal Church includes everyone God has called into his eternal family, including believers before the time of Jesus and before Pentecost.

I’m not sure that those who object to the phrase “the birthday of the church” would like my alternative label any better, but it works for me. If the church is “the bride of Christ,” Acts 2 describes the wedding and the honeymoon.

I have spoken before in sermons about Linda’s and my wedding, but I don’t think I have ever told you about our honeymoon. We spent a week sleeping, cooking, boating, and hiking at Cacapon State Park in West Virginia. We paid \$40 for the entire week’s rental. Our pictures were all made with our fancy Polaroid camera that even had a mechanical delay shutter – the early version of selfies.

So what’s a honeymoon all about? Well, it’s about *that*, especially if you’re two 21-year-old Bible college virgins, but even *that* is only part of what’s happening. Humans bond through touch, through conversation, through eye contact, through shared meals and experiences. The honeymoon provides concentrated togetherness. It’s about “just us.” There’s a sense of awe: “Of all the people in the world, you chose me for this lifelong connection. I can’t get enough of you. Life can’t get any better than this.”

This morning let’s start at the end of Acts 2, which describes what I’m calling the honeymoon of the church.

The honeymoon

There's no text in the New Testament that better summarizes the ideal for church than Acts 2:42-47. It's the church's honeymoon.

Devotion. "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayer" (42). The word "devoted" indicates steadfastness, perseverance. This was a priority. They were all in.

Fixation. "Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles" (43). The word "awe" can be translated "fear" or even "dread," but it's used positively here. They are obsessed with what only God can do.

Togetherness. "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts" (44-46). This is not a pattern for forced socialism. It's all voluntary. Their attitude is, "What's mine is yours, what's yours is mine." If you have a problem or a trial, it's mine too. *Mi casa es su casa.* My food is yours. My time is yours. My joy is yours.

Grace. "Praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (47). The word "favor" is literally "grace" or "kindness." Everything about this early church is grace-filled. There's no external opposition as there was with Jesus' public ministry and his execution. There's no persecution as will arise quickly in the book of Acts. People are drawn to them by grace, and they can't stop praising God for all the grace.

It's beautiful. Devotion, fixation, togetherness, grace. There's joy, desire, worship, community. It's contagious. It can't get any better than this honeymoon. So how did it happen? Let's look back at the wedding.

The wedding

Last week we started looking at Peter's Pentecost sermon. About a third of the book of Acts is lengthy quotation of various speeches. This is the first. It's still not very long, by modern sermon standards, 3 or 4 minutes. What we have is a summary.

To understand any speech (or sermon), you need to know the occasion, the speaker, and the audience. The occasion is the visible and audible display of the Holy Spirit in wind, fire, and tongues. Nobody saw this coming, but it is so God. It's God's power and mystery for the purpose of connecting people to God and to each other. The occasion for this speech is that these miracles need explanation.

The speaker is Peter, who is at once the most likely and least likely of the 120 followers of Jesus to explain what happened. Other than Judas, he was the most

notorious among those who had forsaken Jesus. But he was also the most spontaneous, the one most likely to say something, do something, on the spot. Now he, like the others, has been filled with the Holy Spirit.

The audience is also critical. The Feast of Pentecost was seven weeks after Passover. These were the first two of three major festivals prescribed in the Torah as required pilgrimage for Jews. Therefore, it's reasonable to assume that most of these Pentecost pilgrims had been in Jerusalem for Passover week.

The people now listening to Peter had been among those who hailed Jesus as Messiah on Palm Sunday, were mesmerized by his teaching in the temple courts on the following Tuesday, and demanded of Pilate on Friday that he should be crucified. Jesus had gone from celebrity to criminal in a matter of five days, and it's fair to assume that everyone listening to Peter had either been part of those dramatic days or had heard about them. To whatever degree they had believed him, Good Friday had ended their expectations. Messiahs don't die, especially by crucifixion.

That was 50 days ago. You and I know from Luke and the other gospel writers that Jesus had made multiple appearances after the resurrection, but it's fair to assume that the rest of Peter's audience knew nothing about that. Most people haven't heard about or seen Jesus since Passover. Surely they thought about him, talked about him, maybe even felt a great injustice had been done. Maybe there was a twinge – or even a corporate surge – of guilt. What had Jesus done to deserve the cruel execution?

Peter starts with the part of Jesus' story they had undoubtedly heard about: that "Jesus of Nazareth" performed "miracles, wonders, and signs" (22). That part was hard to deny, even for his enemies. Peter says this is how Jesus was "accredited by God to you." The word means that a third party vouched for him. God was the voucher, and he did the vouching through miracles.

Across the course of his speech, Peter overviews the same events that are embedded in the Apostles' Creed that we say every Sunday – he suffered under Pontius Pilate ("with the help of wicked men"), was crucified, dead, and buried ("put him to death by nailing him to the cross"), descended into hell ("he was not abandoned to the realm of the dead"), raised on the third day ("God raised him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him"), ascended to the heavens and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty ("Exalted the right hand of God").

It's this Jesus, Peter says, who "has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear."

To connect with his specific audience, Peter makes comparisons to their greatest historical hero – kind of like comparing a current leader in America to George Washington or Abraham Lincoln. Their guy was David, undeniably the GOAT (Greatest of All Time) among their ancestors. But here's the thing, Peter says. David is dead. You

can visit his tomb if you want. And David also said that someone greater than he would come, someone who would not be abandoned to the grave, someone who would sit at God's right hand. He spoke of Jesus, who has now superseded David as the GOAT.

If all that is true, Peter says, we (those who have experienced the miracle of wind, fire, and tongues, we are witnesses that God raised Jesus from the dead. All 120 of us. Just ask! We'll tell you. We saw him.

So who's responsible for what happened to Jesus? On the one hand, it all happened because of "God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge" (23). It wasn't an unfortunate accident of history. On a human level, it's the people to whom Peter is speaking. "You, with the help of wicked men, put him to death" (23). Some of them actively participated; others were passive. They are all collectively responsible for crucifying not only a miracle worker but the one God has now accredited as "Lord and Messiah" (36). That's quite a speech!

Some of them believed Peter. Believed God. Were convicted and convinced by the Holy Spirit. Their response is, "OMG! What should we do?" If you were party to the execution of the Messiah, what's next? Is it too late to get in on the miracle?

It's not too late! Peter says they should "repent." The word literally means "change your mind." Rethink. Reframe your worldview. Reassess what happened. Peter is specifically challenging them to revisit the scene of the crucifixion – the specific sin or series of sins that led to Jesus' death – and reconsider the Person of Jesus. They should then be baptized. This is also reframing baptism. Baptism to that point – even with John the Baptist – had been a symbol of personal cleansing. Now they are to be baptized "in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (38). Baptism is to be a symbol of public identification with Jesus as Lord and Messiah. Baptism will become the initiation rite into the community of those who "receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (38) and will include both the Jewish community and, before long, expand to "all who are far off" (Gentiles), "all whom the Lord our God will call" (39).

That's a short summary of Peter's speech, and the pastor in me doesn't want you to tell me I should preach sermons that are 3 or 4 minutes, like Peter did. After all, Luke says he added "many more words" (40). The end result of all this was "the wedding" – the formal promises given and received by 3000 who were baptized and added to the 120 who had been together since Jesus' ascension.

This was the wedding. Christ has called his bride, and she has responded to him. So maybe it's not a "birthday," but it's clearly a pivot point. This is commitment, it's "I will" and "I do." It's for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death do us part. Jesus has his bride.

He's still doing this – calling and inviting a response. What responses?

Repent, release, reclaim

Repent. There is a sense in which Peter's message of "Repent" to the crowd on the Day of Pentecost is unique to that event, and another sense in which it's for us. The word "repent" is literally "rethink" (meta-noia). The common definition is "turn around," or "go in the opposite direction." It's both more and different.

When Peter used it, he was telling a specific audience – those who had been actively or passively involved in the actual crucifixion of Jesus – to think again. Most had believed him to be an imposter. Peter was providing evidence – biblical evidence, miracles, and witnesses – that Jesus is Lord and Messiah, at God's right hand.

"Repent" is bigger than the Day of Pentecost. It's used in the Old Testament of the Jews, by John the Baptist and Jesus, and by Paul, Peter, and John in the New Testament. It's a change of everything – mind, will, and actions.

Sometimes people get married – and this seems to be more true of men than women – thinking marriage doesn't change anything; it just comes with more benefits. Marriage changes everything. The same is true of becoming a mother or a father. Until you're in it, you don't realize the "all in" is comprehensive.

Of what is Jesus calling you to repent – what wrong assumptions, what determination to go your own way, what actions that are inconsistent with his will?

Release. A second response is to release your dreams. In the little book I wrote last year for our pastoral transition, I quoted Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who said, "He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter."

Acts 2:42-47 describes a dream church. Luke knows as much as anyone that the church of Jesus doesn't always look like that, any more than a marriage is a forever honeymoon. If you're holding up this church or any other to Acts 2, you're going to be disappointed. Maybe you're thinking, "Where's the devotion? The fixation? The togetherness? The grace? I just don't see it in the church of today." The dream of a perfect church – or marriage or family, for that matter – will destroy the one you're in.

Reclaim. Finally, reclaim the church for what it is. It's a community of people who are in various stages of repentance and growth. Take the next step in toward the church. Whether you're new here, a lifetime member, or somewhere in between, church needs your renewed commitment and effort. This church does.

This is especially true as we continue moving toward a new senior pastor, in God's time. I need to remind you regularly that it will be different. The new pastor will not be another Bob. The new pastor will be someone who loves Jesus and loves the

church, but will have a different personality, different gifts, different background, different style, different strengths, different weaknesses, different expectations.

The best way for you to prepare is to remember that Jesus didn't invite you here to have a relationship with Bob. Bob invited you here to have a relationship with Jesus. It's quite likely that your relationship with a new pastor will stretch you spiritually, testing your faith and endurance like I never had. Reclaim the center of your spiritual life in Christ, and open yourself to all he will do in you and through Corinth Reformed Church.

Let me tell you from almost 45 years of experience: the marriage is better than the honeymoon. The ebb and flow, the shared successes and failures, the intertwined lives and interdependence, the experience of knowing and being known with all of your faults and still being loved unconditionally, that's so worth it.

In the same way, release your need to recreate the Acts 2 church. Instead, reclaim the one you're in – today, tomorrow, next year, and beyond. As the church changes, don't ask, "How can we get back to my dream?" Rather, "Lord, what are you doing in me, right now, through these people with whom you've bonded me?"

Repent, release, and reclaim. They're not "once and done" words. More like "Once and keep on." There's the initial choice to follow Jesus by giving up self-effort and self-sufficiency, reframing life by following him as his disciple. But life in his church requires an ongoing, daily process to "think again" (repent) and trust him for how he's at work among his people and in me. In the process I find I am fully known and loved. The marriage is better than the honeymoon. Amen.