

From Engagement to Wedding Feast
The Space in Which He Calls Us to Follow
Darrell W. Johnson
First Baptist Church, Vancouver
May 2, 2010

Text: John 14:1-3
From Engagement to Wedding Feast
The Space in Which He Calls Us to Follow

Once again, I invite you to continue exploring with me “the space” in which Jesus now calls us to follow. He is risen and ascended. He who was crucified, is risen and has ascended to the right hand of His Father. How do we now follow Him? What is “the space”, “the environment” in which He now calls us to follow? It is a very different space than the one in which he first disciples – Peter, Mary, John – were called to follow. And it is a very different space than the one we will one day inherit when he comes again to establish a new heaven and a new earth wherein we will see Him face to face! For unlike the space in which the first disciples followed and unlike the space in which we will one day follow, the space in which we now follow is marked by the absence of Jesus’ physical presence. Not by His absence as we saw last Sunday! But by the absence of His physical presence. He is not here in the way He was nor is He here in the way He one day will be. We are now called by Jesus to follow Him in the absence of His physical presence. And it is for this space that Jesus began to prepare His first disciples – and us – on the night before He gave His life on the cross.

Jesus and His disciples were settling around a large wooden dining table, in a second-story apartment somewhere downtown Jerusalem. Because they had been looking forward to the meal for sometime, emotions were running very deep that evening. Indeed, in light of the kinds of things Jesus had recently been saying, feelings were more acute than ever before. Jesus had begun the evening by saying, “I have earnestly desired” – it is an intense verb He uses, denoting deep longing; “I have earnestly desired to eat this meal with you before I suffer” Suffer? You? Why? How? “I have earnestly desired to eat this meal with you, for I say to you, I shall never again eat it until it is fulfilled – The Kingdom of God” (Luke 22:16)

He then took a loaf of bread, gave thanks, broke it, and handed it to the saying, “take, eat; this is My Body given to you; do this in remembrance of Me”. He then took a cup of wine, gave thanks, and handed it to His disciples saying, “this cup is the New Covenant is My Blood; drink of it all of You, in remembrance of Me”.

Then came the great surprise, the shock. He told them that very soon He would be leaving them in a physical sense anyway. And that where He was going they could not follow at least not yet. He was returning to the place from which He had come. He was “going home” back to the Father.

Jesus then spends the rest of the evening preparing His disciples – and us – to go on living in the absence of His physical presence.

Last Sunday we listened to Jesus as He promised that when he goes away He would send Another, another Paraclete as Jesus called Him. “It is to your advantage that I go away for if I go I will send the Paraclete to you.” I will send the Holy Spirit to You: the helper, the Comforter, the Advocate, the “one called alongside you”, to be with you and in you.

Today let us listen carefully to the promise Jesus made just before He promises the Spirit. A promise the Spirit comes to make real in the space in which we now follow.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you, And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am.”

The words of the text are clear enough are they not? Although Jesus goes away, He promises to come back. And his going away has a purpose: to prepare a place for us, in His Father’s ‘house’. When everything is set, He will return to take us to that place so that we might be with Him! A wonderful promise! What the apostle Paul calls “the blessed hope”. (Titus 2:6) Jesus’ physical absence is not forever. He is coming back to us. And His physical absence has a purpose of preparing a place.

Now, if that was all we heard in His words, it would be enough to sustain us in “this space” between His first and second coming. But the fact is, that is not all there is to hear in His words. If we had Jewish ears we would hear a whole lot more! A whole lot more! This is the case with most of the Gospel of John: when we know something of the historical-religious context in which Jesus spoke His words – rich enough without knowing the context – become even richer.

You see the words Jesus spoke at the tender moment during the Last Supper; echo words used in the Jewish marriage customs of the first century. When we understand something of those customs, we hear Jesus speaking not only of His second coming; but also of the purpose of His first coming, and the consequences for discipleship between comings. And we gain a new perspective on the meaning and purpose of Holy Communion. A Jewish marriage technically began long before the wedding day. It began with the so-called “betrothal ceremony” in which a covenant was established. In which a new covenant was established. Here is how it worked. The prospective groom would leave His father’s house, and travel, accompanied by his best man, to the prospective bride’s house. There the groom would finalize arrangements with the bride’s father in specific settling on the “purchase price”. In that time a woman was “bought with a price”. (Sorry about that ladies). As soon as the groom paid the “purchase price”, the marriage technically went into effect. The man and woman are legally husband and wife. She has declared “consecrated” to him, “set apart” exclusively for him. This covenant was then sealed by drinking a

cup of wine over which a betrothal benediction was pronounced. After the conclusion of the ceremony, the groom would leave the bride's home and return to his father's house. He would be gone for roughly twelve months. During this time of separation the bride would prepare herself for the wedding. And during this time of separation the groom would prepare an apartment in his father's house. When I visited Israel, I met a young couple in Jerusalem just engaged. She was going to stay in Jerusalem, he returning to Nazareth. I rode with him from Jerusalem to Nazareth and he spoke of much joy of going to prepare a room in his father's house.

Although the bride and groom did not live together nor see each other the whole betrothal period – they were, nevertheless, legally and spiritually bound to each other. So “binding” was the betrothal agreement – the covenant – that if the man dies during the twelve months the woman was considered a widow. To break the betrothal agreement was the same as divorce. You may know that the betrothal stage is what Mary and Joseph were in when Mary became pregnant with Jesus. Which is why Joseph's first reaction was to quietly divorce her: to nullify the covenant, which he reasoned, she must have broken. It takes a messenger from heaven to help Joseph believe what he really wanted to believe about Mary: that she had not been unfaithful. It turns out the Child growing in her womb was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

At the end of the betrothal period, the bridegroom, dressed in festive attire, and accompanied by his friends would make his way back to the bride's home. Although everyone had a rough idea of when the groom would come, they did not know the exact day or hour. Usually the groom would arrive at night, adding an element of surprise. His arrival would be preceded by a shout: “here is the bridegroom! Come out to meet him” (Matthew 25:6) Then with great joy the bride veiled and accompanied by her maidens, would come out to join the groom and his attendants. And then the wedding celebration would start.

This wedding itself begins with a ceremony the word ‘take’. The groom ‘takes’ the bride from her home. Thus the Hebrew expression “take a bride”.(Numbers 12;1, 1 Chronicles 2:21)

OK. Now, go back to that tender moment, that Thursday evening in the Upper Room. Jesus takes a cup of wine, gives it to His disciples and saying “this cup is the new covenant in My blood”. He then tells them He was leaving. Where He was going they could not come...yet (John 13:36) And then He says:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you, And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where I am.”

Do you hear what Jesus is saying about Himself? He thinks of Himself as the Bridegroom – the Lover – of the People of God! It is one of the most audacious

claims Jesus could ever make. For in the Old Testament only the Living God, Yahweh, the Holy One, speaks this way. Isaiah 54 – “Do not be afraid... for your Maker is your Husband” (4-5)

Hosea 2 – Speaking of unfaithful Israel, God says, “she went after her lovers, but Me she forgot. Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her... In that day, declares the Lord, you will call Me “my husband”; You will no longer call Me ‘my master’. In that day I will make a covenant with them”.

God goes on: “And I will betroth you to Me forever. Yes, I will betroth you to Me in righteousness and justice, in loving kindness and compassion. And I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness then you will know that I am Yahweh.”

In those tender moments in the Upper Room, Jesus reveals Who He thinks is the Bridegroom and who He thinks we are in relationship with Him. His Bride! He thinks of us as his Bride!

Yes, we are His disciples – gladly so! Yes, we are citizens of His Kingdom – gratefully so! Yes, we are the sheep of His pasture. Yes, we are members of His Body. Yes, we are His sisters and brothers and we are included in the inner life of the Trinity. And we are also His Bride! His wife to be!

He has made the long journey from his Father’s house to our home. He has come to woo us to Himself. He has come for the betrothal service. He has paid “the purchase price” for us – shedding His own blood. He has sealed the agreement by drinking a cup of wine, declaring ‘this cup in the new covenant in My blood” He has given us an engagement ring. the Paraclete.. the Holy spirit who is the down payment, the foretaste, the first installment on life in the Father’s house. (2 Cor. 1;21, Eph 1:13-14)

And he says to us, “do not be afraid. I have gone to My Father’s house to prepare a place for you. When I am ready, I will come back [literally – “I am coming back” – present tense, already in process] and will take you to Myself that where I am you may be also”.

That Jesus chooses us to be His disciples is wonderful enough. Is it not? That He chooses us to be members of is body... glory! That he chooses us to be His sister or brother . . . glory. Glory! But that he chooses us to be His Bride?

I love my children. I love my daughter-in-law and son-in-law. I love my mother. I love Sharon’s parents. I love our four grandchildren. Have I shown you their pictures lately? But no one. No-one has the place in my heart that my wife does.

We? The Bride of the fathers only-begotten son? Can it really be? Yes, it can. It is. We are.

The apostle John. - the author of the text before us – has actually prepared us for this amazing fact in the way he composes his chapters. In John Chapter 2 Jesus begins His public ministry. Where? At a wedding in Cana of Galilee, where He turned water into wine. Just coincidence? Or a signal of why he has come into the world? In John, Chapter 3 John the Baptist, the prophet who prepares the way for Jesus, speaks of himself as what? As “the friend of the Bridegroom”. As John the Baptist sees people flocking to Jesus he says, “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom’s voice” (3:29). John the Baptist sees crowds flocking to Jesus and rejoices that the Bridegroom is gathering His Bride to Himself.

Then John, Chapter 4, the story of the woman at the well. If you know the larger Biblical story, you know that in the Old Testament there are a number of stories of women at wells. What happens to these women? All of those women at the well stories? They are being chosen as someone’s wife. Abraham’s servant finds a wife for Isaac at a well – Rebecca. Jacob finds a wife at a well – Rachel. Moses finds a wife at a well. In John Chapter 4, Jesus meets a woman at a well. He asks her to go get her husband. “I have no husband”, she says. Now she does! Is not the Samaritan woman at the well the first of these who the Father is calling to be His Son’s bride? “The Churches one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord. She is His new creation By water and the word. From heaven He came and sought her to be His Holy Bride.”

Living in the wonder of this understanding of our relationship with Jesus has many wonderful implications. Like intimacy. The bride image speaks of deep intimacy. Jesus says to the Church in the first city of Laodicea: “behold I stand at the door and knock: if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with Me.”(Rev 3:20)

Those words “I stand and knock” and “open the door” echo the words of Song of Solomon, chapter 5, verse 2, Words of the great Love Poem of the Bible. “A voice! My beloved was knocking: “Open to Me, my sister, my darling, my perfect one!” Our desire for Jesus, as strange as it might be is nothing compared to his desire for us! Intimacy.

Security. A deep sense of security. For our Bridegroom has sealed the Marriage Certificate in His own blood! He is committed to us “for better or for worse as long as we both shall live”. Which means – get this – that when the worse in me comes out and it does I need not fear losing Him. He is not a starry-eyed lover: He does not ignore or close His eyes to the blemishes He sees in me or you when He calls us to Himself. He saw the “worse” in me when He proposed! He is not surprised when the wrinkles show. He sees them all even ones I do not see! Which means that he will never discover something about me or you that will make Him cancel the covenant. We will never hear “like, wow, if I had known that about you I would not have gotten into this relationship” He chooses us just as we are and will stay with us “for better or for worse”.

Living out this image of our relationship with Jesus gives us greater motive to remain loyal to Him. We are His bride. What are we doing fooling around with rival Lords? Our true Lover calls us for exclusive devotion. His call is based purely on the fact that all other Lords eventually let us down. But His call is based mostly on the fact that He will settle for nothing less than our being wholly His.

Living out this image of our relationship with Jesus gives us greater reason to endure the tough times between His comings. For we can now see the difficulties differently as part of the process by which the Bridegroom is helping us get ready for the wedding. He is using the difficulties to remove the spots and get out the wrinkles. He is actively working to be able to present us as a Bride. As Paul puts it "having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and blameless" (Eph. 5:27) We are becoming more like Him, Beginning to reflect His own beauty and grace and wisdom and gentleness.

Living with this image of our relationship with Jesus simplifies the challenges of discipleship. By simplify, I do not mean make easy; I mean clarify, bring us to essentials. "Simplicity beyond complexity", as they say. Living out this image disencumbers our over-booded lives. As His Bride we do whatever it takes to stay in love, to grow in intimacy with the lover of our souls. I remember those days when I first fell in love with Sharon. I had all kinds of time to be with her!

The apostle Paul says to Corinth: "For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy: for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I may present you as a pure virgin. But I am afraid, Lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, Your minds should be led astray from the Simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Cor. 11;2-3)

Living with this image of our relationship with Him will keep alive in us the longing for His coming. When you are in love you long for the presence of the beloved. The early church was in love and longed for His appearing. As someone has said, "those who love Him best long for Him most".

And living with the image of being the Bride of Jesus gives us another window into Holy Communion. In this Meal we are re-affirming betrothal vows. Our Bridegroom re-affirms His betrothal covenant. Over the up-lifted cup He once again declares for all to hear: "this cup is the new covenant in My blood". "I love you, You are Mine. I give you Myself as long as we both shall live". And we the Bride-to-be once again accept his marriage proposal. As we take the bread and cup into our hands as we eat and drink we are saying: "Yes, Jesus, I welcome Your love: yes, I am no longer my own: You have bought me with a price: I am gladly Yours".

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you, And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me".

Come, let us now gather the Table, where the lover of our souls brings us again to the greatest act of his love.