Bridegroom and Warrior

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[0:00] Good morning to all of you. My name's Tommy. You're here visiting for the first time. If you're here from out of town, maybe celebrating a graduation, we're delighted that you're here.

When I was young, I first remember hearing somebody present the gospel to me using the image of an amusement park. And they said, imagine this great amusement park, and you want to get in, and you get to the gate, and they ask you if you have a ticket.
And if you don't have a ticket, you can't get in, but if you do have a ticket, then you'll be allowed into the amusement park. And they said, that's a lot like heaven. You'll get to the end of your life, and you'll go, and you'll come to the gate of heaven, and they'll ask, where's your ticket?
And if you don't have a ticket, you're not going to be allowed in, and you're going to be sent to a different kind of park. And it's not nearly as amusing. And so you better have the ticket.
And so I said, well, how do I get, you know, and they said, in order to get the ticket, you need to put your faith in Jesus. And when you ask Jesus for forgiveness, you get a Jesus ticket.
[1:05] And then when you get to heaven, you show them the Jesus ticket, and you get in. And at the time, I found it very compelling, because it was accessible. It was relevant, I thought, to the way I saw the world.

And yet I realized in the years that followed, it didn't really tell me anything more than how to get into that amusement park.
It didn't tell me what it meant to believe in God or have a relationship with God. It didn't tell me anything about what I should be doing now, between now and when I get to the gate. What am I supposed to do?
And so for a few years, I just thought that Christianity was basically making sure the ticket was in your back pocket. And then other than that, just sort of do what you can to be a decent person and live a good life.
And that's really what I thought Christianity was. It was mainly about having the ticket in your pocket. And so it was very easy for me in the years that followed to walk away from that. By the time I got to college, I had decided it was irrelevant.
[2:04] And I spent a number of years as an agnostic, because I just thought, there's nothing really here for me. And what I've come to realize since I came back to faith is that I think many people, Christians and non-Christians, have that perception of the Christian life.

And the more we actually learn about what Scripture teaches about the Christian life, we realize how far departed that analogy is from the tremendous, mysterious, vast mystery that God has unveiled to the world.
And that's why we're reading the book of Revelation. The sense that I had of the Christian life had almost nothing to do with reality. And yet when you read a book like Revelation, it blows that whole thing apart.
Because the entire point of the book of Revelation is to pull back the veil and to show us things as they really are. To unveil those deep mysteries of God.
To help us understand what's really going on under the surface. And that transforms our whole understanding of the Christian life. And specifically in Revelation 19, we heard read, Kate read a little while ago, the first part of Revelation 19.
[3:16] For the sake of time, we read that portion. But we're going to be looking at the whole chapter this morning. In Revelation 19, we are given these two images of the Christian life.

And they could not be more disconnected from one another at face value. Right? They look completely incompatible. In the first half of the chapter, what we read, we have this image of a wedding.

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All of the saints are gathered together with Jesus as the bridegroom. And they're at a great banquet, a wedding feast. And then all of a sudden, in verse 11, there's this jarring shift.
And the scene changes. And we move from the wedding to the war. And all of the saints are charging into battle. And they're not following Jesus, the bridegroom.
Now Jesus is a warrior. He's on a horse. And they are charging into battle together. And at first, these seems totally incompatible. As though we need a new chapter header. But as we're going to see, they actually go together.
[4:18] And you cannot have one without the other. Together, they help us answer the question of what is the Christian life. The wedding shows us what our salvation means. The war shows us what our salvation is for.

Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, we only have the joy of being here at your invitation. And it's only because of your grace that we can ask these questions.
Contemplate having a relationship with you. It's only through the power of your Holy Spirit that we can understand your word. And it's only there that we can encounter your living word, Jesus Christ. And so we pray, Lord, by your grace and invitation that you would speak to us. Nourish us. Prepare us to come together to your table. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.
So first of all, let's look at this image of the wedding. I want to read again these verses that are so beautifully capture the scene. Hallelujah. Hallelujah. For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns.
[5:23] This is verse 6. Going into verse 7. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come. And his bride has made herself ready.

Jesus has achieved a great victory on the cross. And now we see this tremendous celebration. But it's not just a victory feast.
It's a wedding feast. And the most striking thing about this image that we get of this feast is that the people of God are gathered together and collectively they're referred to as his bride.
So we have Jesus, the bridegroom, and the church, all of the saints across history gathered together as the bride. And all through the Bible in places like Isaiah chapter 62 or Ezekiel chapter 16, God talks about himself as the bridegroom to his people.
We need to understand this is utterly unique. No other religion talks about their God this way. In no other religion would God talk about their subjects this way.
[6:37] And there are a number of religions that would be completely scandalized by the implication of this kind of intimacy and mutual indwelling that is implied with this image.

And what it shows us is the Christian life is not just about getting a ticket and carrying it around in your back pocket until you get to the gate. It's about having an ongoing day in, day out relationship with God that is a lot like a marriage.
With all of the intimacy and all of the joy and all of the vulnerability that that brings. And if you think about a marriage, those of us who are married, those of us who may be not married, but we know people are married, a marriage, particularly a good marriage, requires time.
You need time to build trust and to build intimacy and to build connection with one another. You know, imagine that you're married and imagine that you're married to someone and you love that person as much as you can imagine loving anyone.
But imagine that every day your spouse gets up and they leave the house and they go and they spend time with other people. And maybe they go on dates with other people.
[7:52] They spend time sharing their hopes and their dreams and their fears with other people. Sometimes they share a bed with other people.

And imagine your spouse coming home one evening and you confront them on it. And imagine you sharing your heartache over this. And imagine your spouse responding, what's the problem?
We're still married. I have my wedding ring. Look, it's right here on my finger. Right? I haven't taken my ring off. We have the same last name.
We have a joint bank account. What more do you want from me? We're married. Imagine what that would be like. Right? What would you say?
You would respond maybe, yeah, I see the ring and I see the account. I see the last name. I know I have those things, but I don't have your heart. Clearly, your heart is elsewhere.
[8:53] And I think, you know, a lot of Christians, a lot of us can be like that with God. You know, it's like, well, I believe in Jesus. I've been through the membership class.

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I've been baptized. I go to church when I can. But let's be realistic. Life is busy. What more do you want? I'm doing all the things. Right? And I think that what this image reminds us is that God is after our heart.
God wants our affection. Right? When it comes to who do I share my hopes and my fears and my dreams with, that's the role that God wants to play in our lives.
God desires that we would delight as much in him as he delights in us because he delights in us. We're the love of his life. Teresa of Avila is a woman who lived in the 16th century in Spain, and she writes in her book about her own life.
She talks about, she sort of admits to spending years, as she says, a mediocre monastic. She talks about her relationship with God being dry and mechanical.
[10:09] She talks about kind of going through the motions, but she couldn't connect with any of the available forms of prayer that were being practiced. She never really felt any sense of connection with God on a personal level, and so it was dry, it was rote, it was mechanical.

But then she talks about making a very small shift that ended up changing everything in her spiritual life. And she essentially says, I came to a point where I stopped talking about God, I stopped thinking about God, and I started talking to God.
She says that the moment she began talking to God as a real person, everything began to change. And the story resonates with me because of how easy it is for me and probably for some of you to fill up our lives with all kinds of activities that are about God.
You know, we're talking about God, we're reading about God, we're doing things that we think are related to following God, but we're not ever actually spending time building a relationship with God or talking to God, even though he's right here.
And Teresa of Avila has a wonderful book on prayer called The Interior Castle, where she describes what it's like to progress in our relationship with God. And she says, you know, in the early stages of her journey, it was just about committing herself to spending time regularly speaking to God.
[11:49] Prayer, but just talking to God. And she said a lot of those early experiences were just about learning how to avoid distraction. You can imagine this great mystic, Teresa of Avila, sitting there just trying not to be distracted by the chirping bird, you know, or the squeaking or the people chatting over here too loudly.

And she's trying to, we've all been there, anybody who's ever tried to pray. But she hung in there. And as she grew, she began to recognize that she had to learn how to deal with discouragement and dryness.
Because sometimes there were times of rich connection and other times she felt discouraged and dry. But the main thing she learned was not to stop, not to give up. And she kept going. And she kept growing.
And she kept praying. And as we grow, she says, our prayer becomes less and less dependent on words. And more and more and more, she began to learn how the joy and experience the joy of simply attending, as she says, to God's loving presence.
Just quietly attending to God's loving presence. And what I love about it is that she describes the ultimate, as we fully mature in our life of prayer, she describes the ultimate aim as experiencing, as she says, spiritual marriage.
[13:11] She says, in this, she began to experience more fully what it's like to be in a spiritual marriage, which she defines as a deep and abiding sense of union with God that was with her at all times.

And what you see in someone's journey, like Teresa of Avila, is you see somebody who starts in a place very much like probably many of us are in now.
Can't imagine what that would be like. And for her, all it took was time and patience and consistency. Nothing more. There's nothing that she has access to that any of us lack.
You know, I think about my own marriage. You know, Laura and I have, we've been married, I think it's something like 18-ish years. I think we're in the 18th year now.
And we've developed a habit of taking time in the morning. And it's between when we drop our kids off at school and when we have to get started on whatever that day's work entails.
[14:14] It's normally no more than about 30 minutes, most mornings. But we try to grab a little window of time where the kids have been dropped off at school. And this is how it works in our stage of life.

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It's gonna be different for you depending on what your stage of life is. But we grab that time in the morning after drop off and before we have to start our day officially. And we just have coffee together.
And we've been doing this for a number of years now. And like I said, normally it's no more than about 30 minutes. But we do it most mornings. Not on the weekends, but I would say four or five mornings a week we do this.
And I would say that more than any other marriage book or vacation or retreat or romantic outings that we have had, I would say that the simple practice of sitting down together four or five mornings a week and spending 20 to 30 minutes talking has by far been the best possible practice to keep our marriage strong, to keep us connected.
And here's the thing. It doesn't mean that we are deeply connecting and sharing our most vulnerable thoughts and feelings every morning, right? A lot of times, to be totally honest, we are just talking logistics.
[15:26] Who's gonna pick this kid up? Who's gonna get this kid there? Who's gonna respond to this teacher email, right? It's just the kind of stuff of parenting, right? The value of it is cumulative.

It's the cumulative time spent together over time that keeps that bond strong. And then you add in all of the other things and it just makes it better, right?
And I'm saying this because I think that it's actually much the same with God. This is not rocket science, right? There's no mystical mountaintop experience that has to open a gate for this to become possible.
It's simply a matter of saying, I'm gonna spend time with you, Lord, regularly. I'm just gonna talk to you. I'm gonna attend to you. I'm gonna listen to you. And it doesn't have to be long.
And sometimes it might be dry. And sometimes it might be pure logistics, right? God, help me out with this situation. God, I don't know what to do here. You know, God, help us have enough money to pay the bills, right?
[16:24] Whatever it may be. It's logistics. But that cumulative time spent with the Lord over time, that was the secret to Teresa of Avila's journey into experiencing that profound spiritual union.

So this is the first thing that we see. The first half of chapter 19, shows this great wedding feast. And we are all, as God's saints, joined together as the bride, and the bridegroom is there.
And there's this great celebration over the spiritual union between God and his people. That's what salvation means. It's what we now have access to. The rest of chapter 19, there's a pivot, as I said. And it depicts a great battle, where we now see Jesus depicted as a warrior who's leading his people to fight against the beast and its followers.
And the thing that we need to see right away is that this is not a typical military battle. There are a couple of key differences. Number one, this is not a military war.
[17:25] This is a spiritual war. Revelation uses images like this to show us spiritual realities. The dragon and the beasts and even Babylon throughout Revelation, they all represent that which stands opposed to God and his word.

That which stands opposed to God's people. That which stands opposed to God's creation. Right? We have the dragon, the beasts, Babylon. And as Paul says in Ephesians chapter six, we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.
There is real evil in this world. And behind the social evil and behind the political evil and behind the cultural evil and behind the breakdown of family and the breaking apart of marriages and behind the trauma and the abuse and all of those things that we see, there is spiritual evil.
So it is a spiritual war against fundamentally a spiritual enemy. The second thing we see is that this spiritual war, out of necessity, uses spiritual weapons.
It's not fought with swords or guns or bombs. It says in verse 15, from his mouth comes a sharp sword. The warrior Jesus has but one weapon, his word.
[18:58] He is, if we look back to creation, he is the word. He has the word and he wields the word. And the gospel accounts show us what it looks like in this war when Jesus wields his word.

When Jesus does this, the blind receive sight. When Jesus wields this weapon, people with leprosy are healed. People who can't walk are now able to walk.
People who have died come back to life. People who are hopelessly lost in sin are instantaneously forgiven and restored to right relationship with God.

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And in all of these things that we see Jesus doing, he is wielding his word like a sword. He is speaking these things into being in a way that the enemy cannot stand against.
He's waging war against the enemy. He's reclaiming territory. He's liberating captives. He's driving back the darkness and chaos. And this, my friends, is what our salvation is for.
[20:04] This is the reason that we have been restored to right relationship with God, to join in that fight, to follow Jesus into battle. And this means many things.

It means speaking God's word into the chaos and confusion of the world and allowing it to be a lamp unto our feet. It also means liberating captives and freeing those who are oppressed and fighting against injustice and caring for the poor and giving food to the hungry.
In all of these ways, we push back the darkness. So all the ministries of the church are engaged in this war.
You know, when we preach and teach and live out God's word in our lives, we are pushing back the darkness. When we provide safe homes for people in need of short-term foster care, when we support moms and dads as they try to rebuild their families, we're pushing back the darkness.
When you work with those who are in prisoner re-entry programs or provide refugee care or care for those who are without homes or work in international development, those are ways of pushing back the darkness.
[21:14] The simple acts of Christian faithfulness, forgiveness, showing hospitality, generosity, showing kindness, those push back the darkness.

Right? So the image of this war shows us what salvation is for. We're here to push back the darkness. We're here to join with Christ in the renewal of all things.
You know, that's what our mission statement says at Church of the Advent. That we want to join people to God, join them to one another, and then to join in with Christ in the renewal of all things, in the work of renewal here in D.C.
and through it the world. And understanding that these images are meant to be held together gives us a much fuller picture of the Christian life.
We need to hold these things together, the wedding and the war. What does it mean? What is it for?
And what that shows us is that the Christian life is two things at the same time.
[22:21] It is a life of intimacy with God and it's a life of engagement with the brokenness of the world. It is a life of contemplation and it is a life of activism.

It is both at the same time. And I think we need to hear this, and this is why I want to do the whole chapter, because I think that we, depending on who you are and your wiring and your gifts and your heart and your inclinations and your life experience, we have different tendencies in terms of where we feel most comfortable.
You know, some of us love to worship and we love to study and we love to learn the scriptures and we love to read about theology. But if we don't get out into the fight, you know, if we're not going out and preaching the gospel to the lost, if we're not confronting injustice in our communities, if we're not pushing against the darkness and ignorance in the world, if all we're doing is holding up and reading about these things, refining our doctrine, you know, working on all, if that's all we're doing, then our faith is going to become abstract, it's going to become stagnant.
So some of us need to know, hey, yes, spend time with God, but there's a reason why you need that relationship with God. It's because you're called to go out and engage and serve, pour yourself out for the life of the world.
Some of us are the exact opposite. We love being activists. We love being out in the world. We want to go out and we want to change the world and we're really good at it and we're amazing at coming up with ways to make the world a better place.
[23:57] We have lots of ideas and visions about what justice looks like and we want to get it done and we want people around us and we can't wait to get started. But if you're that kind of person and you have not given your full heart to God, if you're not anchored by and nourished by God's word, if you're not regularly worshiping with the saints and being nourished and fed, if you're not spending time in prayer, then you're going to become rootless.

You're going to drift. Chances are you're either going to, if you're having success in that work, you're going to feel puffed up. If you're not having success, if you're running into futility, you're going to get burned out because you're fighting against a darkness that goes way beyond your strength.

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So the good news is, is that we need both and then I believe Jesus has given us a way to hold both of those things together. We have a way, every time we come together, friends, we have a way to experience intimacy and nourishment from God and then we are sent out into the world having the strength to fight.
And this is the experience we share every week at this table at the Eucharist. I mean, this meal, when we share it, friends, this is like a rehearsal dinner in anticipation of the great wedding feast to come.
You come down the aisle to receive the bread and the wine and when you come down the aisle, you're coming as the bride would process toward the bridegroom. And this feast is the thing that we need to prepare us for the fight outside.
[25:40] And every aspect of it is radically countercultural. Every aspect of what we're doing right now pushes against the darkness in the world. We live in a highly individualistic culture and this meal shows us that we need each other.

We eat together. We serve one another at this table and we remember that it's not good for any human being to be alone. That's why we do it together. That's why we don't do it in private, one-off Eucharistic gatherings for one or two people.
It's why we do it when we're gathered together as a family. In a divided culture, this reminds us that ultimately we are one in Christ. We may disagree politically.
We may disagree. And I know from past experience, there are people in this church that disagree on most of the major issues, politically, socially, even some theological. And yet this reminds us that ultimately in a divided culture, we are one in Christ because we all share the same bread and we all share the same wine.
In a culture of celebrity and self-promotion, this meal humbles us because it reminds us that no one is entitled to eat this meal. No one has earned this meal.
[26:57] We come because of God's mercy and God's mercy alone. In a culture of workaholism, where many people work all the way through the weekend, every weekend, it shows us that human beings are created for and we need Sabbath rest.

In a culture of ambition and careerism, this table reminds us ultimately that the purpose of all human vocation is the glory of God.
So when we bring the offering, what we're really doing is we are offering up the work of our hands. We're offering that up and saying ultimately, Lord, this is for you.
You know, work with your whole heart, Paul says in Colossians, as for the Lord. Lord, we're offering that up to the Lord. In a culture that divides insiders and outsiders, in a culture of cliques, in a culture of favoritism, this shows us what true hospitality looks like.
Because listen, the ones with whom we share this meal, even this morning, are not necessarily the ones we would choose to have a meal with if left to our own devices. Right?
[28:09] The people who are here, the people we share this meal with are here not at our invitation, but at Jesus' invitation. You know, and sometimes you come to a party and you're like, wait, you invited that person?

You know, how did they get invited? I think Jesus delights in that. I think Jesus loves that. And I think Jesus loves our discomfort at that.
Because I think it's exposing something in our hearts that needs to be healed. Verse nine says, blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb. You don't get to choose your family.
Here, we're reminded that God does. In an outrage culture, this meal calls us to forgive and be reconciled to one another before we eat. Every time, before we come to the meal, we pass the peace.
I'm not gonna choose outrage today. I'm not gonna choose resentment today. I'm gonna choose forgiveness and peace. In that way, I think this meal is central to re-knitting the social fabric.
[29:10] This is where we knit together the torn and shredded social fabric of our society. It begins here. And perhaps the most challenging thing for people like us who live in D.C., you can decide for yourselves, is that this table reminds us of our fundamental inadequacy.

that we are not enough. That we don't have everything we need in here. And that ultimately, we need God. And I think, honestly, friends, one of the most significant things that we do liturgically as a liturgical act is as we come up to receive the bread and the wine, we hold out our hands like this.

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We're holding our hands out in the shape of a cross. And we are signifying by doing that, ultimately, I do not have what I need and I do not deserve what I need.
And I'm here at your mercy and I'm asking you to give me what only you can give me. That's what this means. So please don't be offended if your children come up and we gently encourage them to put their hands in a shape of a cross or if we encourage you to do that.
It's not just about being formal or keeping with tradition. I actually believe that when I do this every week, it forms my heart and reminds me that I'm not enough when there are so many other voices that want to convince me otherwise, including my own.
[30:37] We recognize our fundamental inadequacy. In all of these ways, through a simple meal of bread and wine, we are pushing back the darkness.

We are living in a radically countercultural way. And we are being prepared to go out and fight the fight. God ultimately doesn't give us answers or explanations.
He gives us the life of his son and he gives us the body and the blood and that is actually what we truly need. So Christianity is not just about getting a ticket to heaven and keeping it in your back pocket until you get to the gate.
Christianity is about living in intimacy with God and participating in the life of God and then it's about joining with God in building a new society, a countercultural society, dare I say, building a Eucharistic society, a truer, better way of being human together.
And so we gather together around the feast at God's table and at the end of this service, be ready, there will be the dismissal, which is the call to arms.
[31:46] And we will be sent out. Hillary will send us out to fight against the chaos and darkness and injustice in the world and we will do so in Christ's name until he comes again.

Let's pray. Our Lord and Heavenly Father, help us grasp these mysteries. on our own, we're not enough and we can't do it, but with you, all things are possible.
Lord, as you give us yourself, we pray that we would be strengthened, filled with your presence, that you would do in and through us what only you can do. Help those of us who feel disconnected from you or dry in our spiritual life.
Lord, bless us with a sense of intimacy and connection with you. Remind us of the wedding. And for those of us, Lord, who may have become passive or inert or apathetic, Lord, stir us to action.
Stir us to good works. Lord, that we would be impassioned to live for you, not just here, but in the world and our lives and our neighborhoods and our vocations.
[33:00] Lord, that we would live for and proclaim your name and word and deed. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

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