

The People of God

Genesis 1:26-28; Exodus 19:5-6a; Hosea 2:2-8,14-20;
Mark 3:19-20; I Peter 2:9; Revelation 19:6-9; 11-16

Introduction

Tonight we are going to begin with a fairy tale. Sit back and enjoy this story of the Warrior Bride.

The Warrior Bride

Once upon a time in the land of Terra there lived a kindly old king and his beautiful daughter. The king was the best ruler the people had ever known, loved and feared throughout all the land. Unlike other kings, he did not hold spectacular balls for his own pleasure, he did not tax the people heavily, he did not engage in wars to enlarge his territory, and he did not leave the realm for long vacations. Instead, he sponsored festivals for the whole realm, his taxes totaled ten per cent of everyone's income, he maintained peace with all his neighbors, he made wise laws and executed justice, and his greatest joy was in mingling among the people of his kingdom, whom he dearly loved. But even more than his people, he loved his daughter. This child was given the best of everything: the best toys, the best food, the best clothing, the best vacations, the best tutors, and also the best discipline the old king knew how to give; because he eagerly desired for his daughter to grow up to become the most beautiful woman in the world, and he knew that external beauty must rest upon the internal beauty of a kind and orderly spirit.

As the child grew toward womanhood, the king, and even the whole kingdom, began to anticipate with great joy her upcoming marriage. She was planning to marry a mighty and handsome prince from a land far away. This was to be the most magnificent celebration in all memory, and the king had invested much energy and money in preparation. The day grew closer, and soon there was news that the prince was approaching the realm. Then, suddenly, disaster struck. The king awoke one morning to find the princess had left in the night with the chamberlain and had fled into the wilderness in a neighboring country. The court was distraught, and talked of a terrible revenge upon the chamberlain for kidnaping the princess upon the eve of her wedding, but the old king spoke up in a firm voice.

“The chamberlain has committed an evil deed and must pay for his treason. But my first concern is to rescue my daughter, whom I dearly love. This grieves me more than I can say, for I gave her the best of everything and I loved her with all my heart. Even so, she went willingly with the chamberlain, and she also deserves to die. Yet I love her, and I will rescue her, even from her own wickedness.”

The people were very perplexed by this saying. How could he know she left willingly? How could he still love her? How ever could he rescue her? As the realm was buzzing with these thoughts, the prince arrived for the wedding. At first it seemed strange to him that there was no welcoming party. Upon approaching the castle it seemed very unusual that there was an uneasy stillness about the court. When he was led in to see the king all was made clear to him.

Now this prince was a very noble young man; the king had ensured that his daughter was to marry the best prince in the world. Indeed, there was an almost unworldly nobility about him. When the prince heard of the dismal state of affairs, he immediately stepped forward.

“I will go for her. I love the princess as no one beside her father. I am betrothed to her. Nothing that has happened changes these things. I will seek her wherever she may be, and woo her, and will return to marry her here with her father and among her people.”

Off he set, alone. The prince took no one along, for he had no intention of bringing his bride back by force, but desired to woo her by his love. He traveled many days and through many countries. He slept

under the stars and ate whatever he could find. His clothes wore out and he suffered many scratches and bruises from the thorns and from robbers, but the hardest thing to endure was the knowledge that his bride, whom he dearly loved, had not only abandoned him, but at times took part in attacking him with the highway robbers and traitors. For although no one could understand it, she had indeed fled of her own desire. She lived for a while with the chamberlain, then with another man, then with yet someone else. There were parties, dances, good things to eat, fine wine to drink, handsome men to please her, and no one to restrain her desires. But little by little the glamor began to wear off, and the more she used others for her pleasure, the less desirable she became. After a while she was reduced to shacking up with whoever would have her and managing on whatever food she could scavenge. At last she found shelter only among the highwaymen.

When the prince caught a glimpse of his bride, his heart leapt with joy, but when he called out to her she at first ignored him. Then she began to taunt and ridicule him. When he continued to pursue her, she became enraged and tried to drive him away. However miserable her present condition, she would not return to her father and this prince. At last, in a blind rage, she set upon him with all her strength, she and her evil companions, but he would not turn back or resist. With all her might she sought to destroy him, and finally, when there seemed no life left in him, she collapsed.

In her exhaustion the princess dreamed, and in her dream she saw the castle. She saw the splendor of the feasts, the gaiety of the festivals, the love of all the people. She saw her own room, and her beautiful clothing. Then she saw her father, how he had played with her as a child, comforted her in distress, taught her and reared her. All her attractiveness she owed to him. And still he loved her. At last she saw her bridegroom, riding into the castle, declaring his eternal love for his princess. Surely no one in the world was as handsome as he. No one was as wise or good. No one loved a woman with the strength and purity of his love. Then her dream became darkness, and she perceived that she had killed the light of her world. Terror took hold upon her. She sought an escape, but there was none. Her companions were gone, and alone she faced her sentence. She knew she would die for rebelling against her father and for unfaithfulness to her bridegroom. In agony she cried out for mercy, but there was none to hear – so she wept with a bottomless sorrow.

Then she felt an arm around her, and a soft touch wipe away her tears. She thought she even heard a voice and wondered what this could mean. Light began to scatter the darkness, and she thought she saw herself resting upon the form of a man. How many mornings had she awoken in a man's arms? But this was different. This man had an unearthly quality about him, an aura of heavenly love and tenderness. He slowly raised her up and led her to a nearby stream where he washed away her filth. Then he wrapped her in a stunning white robe. He held her, he kissed her, and he told her he loved her. The prince seated her on his strong horse and they rode along the path. The princess began to see that they were heading toward the castle, toward home – and she was glad.

The townspeople were utterly astonished to see them returning, the prince and the princess. Neither was as beautiful as when they had set out, but their love was deeper than before. The kindly old king was overjoyed to receive his daughter again, and when the court had recovered from shock, the greatest celebration in all time began. The whole realm joined in the festivities, full of gladness for the return of the princess and her wedding to the most loving husband in the world, for the peace of the realm and the happiness of the old king. It seemed as if no one even remembered the wickedness of the princess in running off with the chamberlain. After the merry-making had been going on for many days, the prince stood up to make an announcement.

“My beloved people, whom I love second only to my bride, I am very pleased that you have rejoiced as we celebrate my wedding to this beautiful princess. My life-long desire to marry her has been fulfilled,

and no one could be happier than I. But we must remember that there are traitors who desire to overcome us. Many people are held captive by the evil chamberlain and his men, just as was my bride for a while. I must fight against these enemies and rescue the captives, and to assist me will be my bride herself. I have trained her to fight and overcome these enemies, and she shall succeed. Tomorrow we take our leave, but we shall return with a great host of prisoners and of men, women, and children freed from the enemy's grasp. We shall return to you, and at that time, our festivities shall know no end."

The next morning everyone turned out to see the prince and the princess off to the battle, and what a sight it was. He who had left weaponless in search of the princess and returned in tatters, now was gloriously arrayed in a glistening white and gold robe, riding a mighty horse, and carrying a great sword. She who had sneaked off in the night and returned in a white robe, now rode out in a full suit of armor, she also carrying a great sword, very much like her prince's. To the cheers and prayers of the throng they rode into the wilderness, and ever since have overcome every enemy they have faced. With each battle the warrior bride grows stronger and wiser in war, and deeper in her love for her prince, who constantly rides beside her, to comfort and protect her, and whose love for her never ends.

The Church, The Bride of Christ

Everyone loves fairy tales. Why is it that stories such as Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty are perennial favorites with children and adults alike? Isn't it because they tap into a profound knowledge deep within us? Isn't it because they resonate with the oldest and truest and deepest story of all, the unconquerable love of God for His people? And isn't this what we all long for deep in our souls? Men and women pursue love and wealth and power in an endless search for something, but their souls are never satisfied. They try career and marriage and parenthood, only to discard each and move on to another in an eternal quest for something, something they can't name, something which they never find. Saint Augustine was a fourth century pagan who sought for fulfillment in all the usual ways until he turned to God. He concluded, "You [God] have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." People love fairy tales because in them the princess finally finds fulfillment – the fulfillment they are seeking and never find. And these stories give us hope that someday we also will be found by our prince who will overcome all evil and rescue us from our drab existence.

In case you are unfamiliar with fairy tales, the characters in our story are not hard to identify. The old king is God the Father, the prince is Jesus, the Son of God, the princess is the church, the court is the angels in heaven, and the highwaymen are demons. The topic of our Bible study tonight is the eternal love of Jesus for His bride, the church.

The story of the church begins, not in the New Testament, but in Genesis, when God first created mankind. We see in the first chapter of Genesis that man is profoundly different than all the rest of the creation.

Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

Genesis 1:26-28

Man is special in God's eyes. He alone was created in God's image, and he alone was made a ruler over everything else on earth. After man sinned, God placed His special affection on Abraham and his descendants. Then God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and bound them to Himself by a covenant in the

wilderness.

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; for all the earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Exodus 19:5-6a

All men and women are special to God, for all are made in God's image. All human beings are little gods. We all have god-like qualities. But the descendants of Abraham were extra-special. You see here how God calls them His "special treasure". God loved Israel. But Israel was unfaithful to God. Although God gave her a wonderful land, with peace and prosperity, still she refused to worship God alone. Although God loved her alone, she insisted on worshiping other gods along with her own God. Like a jealous lover God was provoked to anger. The prophet Hosea explained Israel's adulterous behavior.

"Bring charges against your mother, bring charges;
For she is not My wife, nor am I her Husband!
Let her put away her harlotries from her sight,
And her adulteries from between her breasts;
For she said, 'I will go after my lovers,
Who give me my bread and my water,
My wool and my linen, My oil and my drink.'
Therefore, behold, I will hedge up your way with thorns,
And wall her in, So that she cannot find her paths.
She will chase her lovers, But not overtake them;
Yes, she will seek them, but not find them.
Then she will say, 'I will go and return to my first husband,
For then it was better for me than now.'
For she did not know that I gave her grain, new wine, and oil,
And multiplied her silver and gold –
Which they prepared for Baal."
Hosea 2:2, 5b-8

Israel was unfaithful. She wickedly despised God's love and sought the affections of other lovers. She deserved to die for the sin of adultery. But amazingly, God was unwilling to give up on His adulterous wife. He promised to woo her until she would return to Him and love Him alone.

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her,
Will bring her into the wilderness, And speak comfort to her.
I will give her her vineyards from there,
And the Valley of Achor as a door of hope;
She shall sing there, As in the days of her youth,
As in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt."
"And it shall be, in that day," Says the LORD,
"That you will call Me 'My Husband',
And no longer call Me 'My Master',
For I will take from her mouth the names of the Baals,
And they shall be remembered by their name no more.
In that day I will make a covenant for them
With the beasts of the field, With the birds of the air,
And with the creeping things of the ground.
Bow and sword of battle I will shatter from the earth,

To make them lie down safely.
I will betroth you to Me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice,
In lovingkindness and mercy;
I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness,
And you shall know the LORD.”

Hosea 2:14-20

“I will allure her...and speak comfort to her.” “You will call Me ‘My Husband’, And no longer call Me ‘My Master’.” “I will betroth you to Me forever; Yes, I will betroth you to Me In righteousness and justice, In lovingkindness and mercy; I will betroth you to Me in faithfulness, And you shall know the LORD.” Isn’t this a moving message? In spite of Israel’s sin, in spite of her horrible rejection of God’s love, God loves her still. How incomprehensible is God’s love! God took unfaithful Israel and betrothed her to Himself.

So when Jesus came and said that He was the bridegroom, it was an earth-shattering announcement.

The disciples of John and of the Pharisees were fasting. Then they came and said to Him, “Why do the disciples of John and of the Pharisees fast, but Your disciples do not fast?” And Jesus said to them, “Can the friends of the bridegroom fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them they cannot fast. But the days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days.”

Mark 2:18-20

Jesus was the fulfilment of Hosea’s prophecy. God promised to betroth Himself to Israel, but the wedding was delayed. Finally Jesus came and revealed that He was the bridegroom Israel had been looking for. But Jesus did not come only for the Jews. He came for everyone who would believe in Him – Jew and Gentile alike. When Peter wrote to the Christians about the church he identified them in the same terms God had used for Israel in the wilderness.

But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.

1 Peter 2:9-10

The church is now God’s “special people”, the “people of God”, the people who have received mercy from God. Furthermore, the church is the bride of Christ. In the Revelation to Saint John, Jesus showed him that those who follow Jesus are married to him.

And I heard, as it were, the voice of a great multitude, as the sound of many waters and as the sound of mighty thunderings, saying, “Alleluia! For the Lord God Omnipotent reigns! Let us be glad and rejoice and give Him glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His wife has made herself ready. And to her it was granted to be arrayed in fine linen, clean and bright, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, “Write: ‘Blessed *are* those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!’” And he said to me, “These are the true sayings of God.”

Revelation 19:6-9

Jesus’ love for the church is not some sort of platonic love, or charity love. It is not the affection of an older sister or a doting grandmother, wonderful as such loves are. No, Jesus’ love for the church is the romantic, ravishing love of a lover who will not rest until he has captured the heart of his beloved. But the

church is neither a frilly, idle housewife, nor a career woman with her own priorities. She is a helper fit for her husband. His life is her life, his work is her work. There is a war on, her lover is the supreme commander, and she has joined her Lord in the battle.

Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself. He was clothed with a robe dipped in blood, and His name is called The Word of God. And the armies in heaven, clothed in fine linen, white and clean, followed Him on white horses. Now out of His mouth goes a sharp sword, that with it He should strike the nations. And He Himself will rule them with a rod of iron. He Himself treads the winepress of the fierceness and wrath of Almighty God. And He has on His robe and on His thigh a name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

Revelation 19:11-16

You see how the same ones who were arrayed in fine, white, clean linen in verse eight are now those riding out to the battle in verse 14. The armies of heaven are the saints on earth. And the sword of Jesus which strikes the nations is the word of God which is given to the church to conquer the earth.

Description of the Bride

We could spend a whole semester studying the church, but we will limit ourselves tonight to a few more points the scripture teaches us. So far we have said a lot about the church, but have not really defined it. A good description of the church is, “God’s people led by elders and gathered to hear His word, seek His help, share His meal, join His work, and sing His praise.” The church is the people of God – a community. It includes young and old, rich and poor, intelligent and uneducated, married and unmarried, handsome and ugly. From this we can see that campus fellowships are not a church because they only include a narrow sector of society. The church is led by elders. The scripture does not present the church as an amorphous assortment of believers, but as an organized body. Christ appointed apostles with authority to establish the church, and they in turn appointed elders and deacons to lead the church. This also means a campus fellowship cannot be a church because students are nowhere near old enough to qualify as elders. RUF is Reformed University Fellowship, not Reformed University Church. RUF, InterVarsity, FCA, and Lamberton are not churches. We are fellowships of college students. These groups can play an important role in the spiritual growth of Lehigh students, but only if you are in the church. If your Christian life consists only of involvement in a campus fellowship, you will never grow spiritually.

The church is gathered together. This does not mean that we all stay in the same room, but that we are distinct from the world. There is something obviously different about us. Of course our unique identity will have little meaning if we don’t regularly gather in one place. Sunday is the appointed day for us to gather in worship, and all believers belong in the assembly on Sunday. The church hears God’s word. We live by the word of God, or die without it. So scripture plays the central role in the life of believers, and is also the central aspect of worship. We come to God poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry, and thirsty. God speaks to us in scripture and through the preaching of the pastor, and He encourages, corrects, and strengthens us. The church seeks God’s help. We come to God poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry, and thirsty. We pour out our souls to God and He hears us and strengthens us. In the church we share God’s meal. We come to God poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry, and thirsty – and God gives us Himself in the bread and wine of the Lord’s Supper. The church which is taught, fed, and strengthened by God also joins Christ in His work. Jesus is converting the nations and caring for the poor. The church is His mouth and hands in preaching and serving. We join His Spirit as He works in the hearts of the lost and ministers to the needy. The purpose of the church is to sing God’s praise. Some people mistakenly think that the purpose of the church is to witness to the lost. This is a vital part of our mission, but it is not our central purpose. Remember what we read in 1 Peter 2:9, “you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own

special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.” We were destined for eternal destruction, but God saved us. Therefore the church cannot be silenced from praising God.

Finally, we are God’s. God deserves our worship and obedience because He created us and is infinitely greater than us. But in addition, He loves us with a relentless, passionate love. We were rebellious, filthy, hateful, ugly, rejected by others, despised by those from whom we sought love, worthless to God and man. Still God loved us. He did not merely take pity on us, or attempt merely to restore us – but even when we were horrible, He found us in the cesspool of sin and fell in love with us. His heart leapt with joy, He feasted His eyes upon us, He raced to our side, He embraced us with hugs and ravished us with kisses and would never let us go. Jesus is the bridegroom whose love surpasses all other loves, whose delight with His bride is indescribable, who has only one goal in life – to delight and beautify His bride with His love. What can we do in return? Only love Him with uncompromising loyalty.

The Bride’s Love

Did you notice that this wonderful, romantic love of Jesus is never applied to you personally? Scripture presents Jesus as compassionate and caring toward individuals, but He is no one individual’s bridegroom. You may receive His marital love because you are part of the church which He loves, but not as a mere believer. Jesus is not an adulterer. His only bride is the church. If you are a member of the church, you are ravished by His love. Jesus is your lover because you are a member of His bride. But if you are not a member of the church, you are not loved like this. Jesus is not a fornicator. His marital love is only for those who are covenanted to Him, bound to Him forever in baptism, and enrolled as members of the church. If you believe in Jesus, but have never been baptized, look what you are missing! Don’t delay! See me or another pastor this week to arrange to be baptized into Christ. If you have been baptized but are not a member of a church, don’t refuse to commit yourself to Christ. Join a Bible-believing church soon. If you do not believe in Jesus, you are throwing away the only love that will satisfy you. Repent of your foolishness. Forsake your false lovers and embrace Jesus.

When you enter the church on Sunday morning and see the old, the ignorant, the smelly, the rude – and the music isn’t as good as Lehigh’s choir and orchestra, and the preacher isn’t the world’s greatest orator and, you wonder, “What is so special about this unappealing group of people?” remember this – these are the people Jesus loves. Jesus wandered in the wilderness, suffered hunger, endured the bitter cold, slept on the unforgiving ground, and fought a mortal enemy for the privilege of dying to love this church. Remember that and be grateful that you could have looked just as wretched to Him, but because you are in that church, He loves you, too. And as you experience the troubles of this life, remember, you are loved by a husband who died for you.

C. David Green
Lehigh University
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The Church: God's people led by elders and gathered to hear His Word, seek His help, share His meal, join His work, and sing His praise.

1. People - A community: young and old, rich and poor, intelligent and uneducated, married and unmarried, handsome and ugly.
2. Led by elders - Ordered leadership.
3. Gathered - A special identity.
4. Hear his Word - Priority of preaching.
5. Seek his help - Necessity of prayer.
6. Share his meal - Joy of Lord's supper.
7. Join His work - Christ in the world.
8. Sing his praise - Centrality of worship.
9. God's - Uncompromising loyalty to God and His word.