

Four Pillars

“Belong to God. Belong to each other.”

Exodus 6:6-8

Rev. John H. Hice

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Wedding

God is doing something incredible here.

The first time I saw a *chuppah* was at a friend’s wedding. The bride’s father was a storied United Methodist pastor; and he officiated the wedding. Set in an immense sanctuary, both the place and the ceremony were altogether familiar to me. The wedding was celebrated according to the traditional Methodist service, just as I had heard times before and knew I would be leading for others soon. I paid attention, noting the senior pastor’s style and grace and knowing I was seeing it the way it was supposed to be done. I felt at home.

Then came the reception in an elegant dining room where we were served the hors d’oeuvres and dinner. Friends were talking and laughing and taking part in the joy of occasion the way it’s gone so many times before.

Then the bride’s father, this respected and eloquent preacher, called for all of us to pay attention. He announced that a dear friend of his was present; a friend who had watched his daughter growing up for several years, who’d been like an uncle to her. He said that his friend was also a rabbi; and in the moments to follow, he would perform a Jewish celebration of marriage.

I’d seen *Fiddler on the Roof*. “Ah,” I thought, “they’re going to smash the wine glass!”

But first my friends came together again in the center of us. Then the rabbi-uncle had four people raise the chuppah: a wide prayer shawl set on poles – one at each corner – over my friends’ heads. Then he said some things about covenant and God and blessing. Then they set the glass on the floor before the groom...and he smashed it!

That's the first time I saw a chuppah; and, biblical scholar that I thought I was, I didn't have any idea what it was about.

I didn't know that it was a tradition Jewish people have kept for thousands of years. I didn't realize that it is a forerunner of some of the traditions we keep at our weddings. And I didn't know that it's a practice that's taken right out of the Bible.

The Relationship that Conditions Relationships

Back at that beginning was the great prophet, Moses. He had stood at the burning bush and thought he was called by God to go to Pharaoh and get the Israelites free. Just like that.

The first meeting didn't go very well. His demands were met by even harsher treatment of the people. They were in bondage already, they were crying already; now for Moses' efforts the situation got even worse. So the people blamed and complained. Then Moses complained. And this is what God said.

I am the Lord. And I will free you, I will deliver you, I will redeem you, I will take you (to myself).

I will free you (*yāsa*): your chains will be loosed and you will be set at liberty. You will live and die as you choose. I will deliver you (*nāsal*): you will be taken from this place and brought to another. I will redeem you (*gā'al*): I will be solid-with you like a kinsman who acts for the honor and well-being of a wounded or abused member of the family. I will take you (*lāqah*): this is not an act but the establishment of a relationship. It is sealed by a covenant.¹

This is God's promise. Grand Rapids preacher, Rob Bell says this is wedding talk! These are the same promises a Jewish groom makes to a Jewish bride.² It's probably what the rabbi-uncle had one of my friends say to the other when he led them through the Jewish celebration. God's promise to Israel, in other words, is to enter into a marriage covenant with the people.

So it played out. God freed the people. Pharaoh finally had to let them go. God delivered them from the land of bondage through the wilderness and finally to the Promise Land. He redeemed them, making a bunch of nobodies into people of blessing. He took them in: it would be forever clear – the people belong to God.

On the long road through the wilderness – during the years they lived in hardship along the way – God covered them with the cloud by day and went before them with a pillar of fire by night. God covered them with a presence that made them remember God was there.

Covered them like a tent: a chuppah – a prayer shawl raised over their heads with the four pillars for the four promises: I will free you; I will deliver you; I will redeem you; I will take you to myself.

The house established by God is bound to be sacred space.

And the people must be sacred – set apart. They live in the tent – in the house of the Lord

They must be the family of God.

And so are we. Jesus said, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”³

Perhaps we can even think of this sanctuary with its high ceiling vaulting over our heads as that tent. Sacred space: covered by this roof of grace that shelters us, you and I are members of the household of God.

Then this is where life together can be different than it often is in the rest of the world. This is where there can be care and forgiveness and striving after peace the way we understand the head of the household strives after these things. This is a household that stays in covenant with God the way families stay in covenant.

This is what God wants for God’s people.

This is what God wants for the church.

This is what God wants for our families; and what better day to think about this than on Mother’s Day and Festival of the Christian Home?

I've come to talk about this sort of thing with couples who are preparing for their wedding and their marriage. I've asked them to consider being members of three churches at once. Maybe it's something all of us could try on.

I don't mean to suggest that you run out and join up with the Presbyterians and the Roman Catholics while retaining your membership here. But three churches: all at the same time can work like this.

We need to belong to what we've got here: the *collective church*. This is where we gather – families and individuals – to praise God in the assembly, and to compare our notes about faith and life. This is where we support one another when tragedy or calamity strikes one family and others can rally around them in prayer and presence. This is where we can challenge each other to grow, get informed training about the Gospel and roll up our sleeves together to unleash the love of God in the world through mission and ministry together. One of my professors called the *collective church* by the Greek word, *Ecclesia*.

Then he said that we also need to be a part of an *ecclesiola* – a little church. This is a small group of about ten or so, where you form more intimate friendships. This is where you belong for more intense and specific prayer and study. It's the people who know you so well, that when you come to the collective church, the small group ensures that you'll always know someone's name. You'll also know that there will be someone who will know yours. If you have this smaller circle, you're more apt to be missed if you aren't here for a couple weeks; and it's these folks who will care for you with all the attention of the world and challenge you to meet your goals in spiritual growth. Sometimes people blame the big church for not doing the things that can really be accomplished only by the little church, if they were only in one. We need both – *ecclesia* and *ecclesiola*.⁴

There's one more church we all need. Let's call it the *domestic church*: the church of the family. After all, it's the people we live among daily, at least during some times in our lives. This is the church in which children grow and discover their world, their values, and the stories that frame their understanding of God and life. This is where prayers can be prayed and Bibles can be read every day. The domestic church is where you get to practice the practical fine points of the Gospel – like forgiveness – a *lot*. It's where you can get your basic moral support, even when the rest of the world is

on your back.⁵ The Jewish people believed the individual family was the basic worshipping unit of the Faith. The *domestic church* is no less important for us.

Three churches you can belong to at once: the collective church, the little church; and the domestic church. All of them essential, and all are covered by the canopy of God's grace – a chuppah that binds us in holy covenant.

The House of God

A long time ago someone gave us a cross stitch wall hanging that we've posted here-and-there in the houses we've lived.

*Our family is a circle of strength and love.
With every birth and every union, the circle grows.
Every joy shared adds more love.
Every crisis faced together makes the circle stronger.*

Through the years I've read this and as time goes on, it makes more and more sense. It describes life under the canopy of God's grace with people I'm bound to love.

I may not have understood what I watched that day when my friends were joined under the sheet with four pillars. But what I saw was God doing something incredible.

And God is doing something incredible here. Joining us together by the power of Jesus' love. The chuppah of our houses and the chuppah of this sanctuary are signs of the dome of God's presence.

Guiding us to live in a special covenant of love. Hovering over us and guiding us wherever life may lead.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* Vol. I. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press © 1994. p 734.

² Rob Bell, *Sex God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan © 2007. pp 131-132.

³ Matthew 18:20.

⁴ I thank my professor, Dr. Egon Gerdes, who developed this idea in his work in theology of spirituality during his days (and mine) at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, Evanston, Illinois.

⁵ Marjorie J. Thompson, *Family the Forming Center*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books. © 1989. The book develops this concept throughout, especially in the final chapter, pp 1129-131.