

McCabe United Methodist Church

Thanksgiving Series

“Thank God for Seasons”

Sermon on Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 (11/19 & 11/20/16)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

Holy God, you give us words, you guide our thoughts, and you fill our hearts. May these words I speak be pleasing to your ears, may our thoughts be formed in your image, and may our hearts be ever tuned to you; in Jesus name we pray. Amen.

For some reason, I could not get *weddings* off my mind this past week. It may be because we had a wedding here this weekend. It may be because one of my brothers-in-law just got engaged and his fiancé and I were chatting the other night about their wedding plans.

It may be because I'm less than two months from celebrating the one-year anniversary of my own wedding. Or it may be because, given the theme of this message, I simply couldn't help but think about weddings.

This weekend marks the third and final week in our “thanksgiving” series: two weeks ago, we thanked God for the saints in our lives... last week we thanked God for our land and country...and, this week, we're thanking God for the *seasons* in our lives and world. This week we're giving thanks for the ways in which God provides for us in different ways – depending on our particular circumstances at particular times.

And, when it comes to life's *seasons* — when it comes to God's provision within the seasons of our lives — weddings are a unique beast, aren't they? They mark time for us... they call to mind relationships past and they inspire us to think about what the future might bring... weddings remind us who is present in our lives and who is not – dear ones who have died or with whom our relationships are strained.

“Everything on earth has its own time and its own season,” says the writer of Ecclesiastes. “There is a time for birth and death, planting and reaping, for killing and healing, destroying and building, for crying and laughing, weeping

and dancing ... embracing and parting.

“There is a time for finding and losing, keeping and giving ... listening and speaking. There is also a time for love and hate, for war and peace.”¹

These words from Ecclesiastes 3 were read when my husband and I got married last January... it was after they were read that our parents and my stepson helped us fill our “unity hourglass” with sand – sand that’s from places that are special to our families, in an hourglass to remind us how precious our time together is.

So, again, as I thought about God's provision during the *seasons* of our lives, I couldn't help but think about weddings. And, as I thought about weddings, I thought about one of my favorite wedding stories.

This story is by writer and minister Robert Fulghum². The pastor who officiated my wedding – the pastor I worked with for five years when I served as an associate pastor in Pierre, South Dakota – always reads this story at wedding rehearsals. And I'm going to read it to you now. It is lengthy, but worth it.

Robert Fulghum writes:

“I have married more than a thousand times. Officiated as the minister at a whole lot of weddings and usually managed to get involved in each occasion [so much so] that it felt like I was the one getting married. Still, I always look forward to marrying again, because most weddings are such comedies.

“Not that they are intended as such. But since weddings are high state occasions involving amateurs under pressure, everything NEVER goes right. Weddings seem to be magnets for mishap and for whatever craziness lurks in family closets.

¹ Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

² <http://www.robertleefulghum.com/books/>

In more ways than one, weddings bring out the ding-dong in everybody involved. I will tell you the quintessential wedding tale. One of disaster. Surprisingly, it has a happy ending, though you may be in doubt, as I was, as the story unfolds.

“The central figure in this drama was the mother of the bride... Not the bride and groom or minister. Mother. Usually a polite, reasonable, intelligent, and sane human being. Mother was mentally unhinged by the announcement of her daughter's betrothal. I don't mean she was unhappy ... To the contrary. She was overcome with joy...

“Nobody knew it, but this lady had been waiting with a script for a production [worthy of] Cecil B. DeMille's approval. A royal wedding fit for a princess bride. And since it was her money, it was hard to say no. The father of the bride began to pray for an elopement. His prayers were not to be answered.

“She had seven months to work, and no detail was left to chance or human error. Everything that could be engraved was engraved. There were teas and showers and dinners. The bride and groom I met with only three times. The [Mother of the Bride] called me weekly...

“An eighteen-piece brass and wind ensemble was engaged. (The church organ simply would not do) ... Not only were the bridesmaids' outfits made to order, but the tuxedos for the groom and his men were bought—not rented, mind you. Bought.

“If that wasn't enough, the engagement ring was returned to the jeweler for a larger stone, quietly subsidized by the [Mother of the Bride]. When I say the lady came unhinged, I mean UNHINGED...

“Looking back, it seems now that the rehearsal and dinner on the evening before the great event were not unlike what took place in Napoleon's camp the night before Waterloo. Nothing had been left to chance. Nothing could prevent a victory on the coming day. Nobody would EVER forget this wedding...

“The juggernaut of fate rolled down the road, and the final hour came. Guests in formal attire packed the church. Enough candles were lit to bring daylight back to the evening. In the choir loft the orchestra gushed great music. And the mighty [Mother of the Bride] coasted down the aisle with the grandeur of an opera diva at a premier performance. Never did the mother of the bride take her seat with more satisfaction. She had done it. She glowed, beamed, smiled, and sighed.

“The music softened, and nine—count them, nine—chiffon-draped bridesmaids lockstepped down the long aisle while the befrocked groom and his men marched stolidly into place.

“Finally, oh so finally, the wedding march thundered from the orchestra. “Here comes the bride. Preceded by four enthusiastic mini-princesses [chucking] flower petals, and two dwarfish ringbearers—one for each ring. The congregation rose and turned in anticipation.

“Ah, the bride. She had been dressed for hours if not days. No adrenaline was left in her body. Left alone with her father in the reception hall of the church while the march of the maidens went on and on, she had walked along the tables laden with gourmet goodies and absentmindedly sampled first the little pink and yellow and green mints.

“Then she picked through the silver bowls of mixed nuts and ate the pecans. Followed by a cheeseball or two, some black olives, a handful of glazed almonds, a little sausage with a frilly toothpick stuck in it, a couple of shrimps blanketed in bacon, and a cracker piled with liver pâté.

“To wash this down—a glass of pink champagne. Her father gave it to her. To calm her nerves.” (Just a side note here: this story is clearly not from a United Methodist church since we do not allow alcohol on the church property! But I digress. The story continues:)

“What you noticed as the bride stood in the doorway was not her dress, but her face. White. For what was coming down the aisle was a living grenade with the pin pulled out.

“The bride threw up. Just as she walked by her mother. And ... there's just no nice [way to say] it. I mean, she hosed the front of the chancel— hitting two bridesmaids, the groom, a ringbearer, and me. I am quite sure of the details. We have it all on videotape. Three cameras' worth. [After all, the Mother of the Bride] had thought of everything.

“Having disgorged her hors d'oeuvres, champagne, and the last of her dignity, the bride went limp in her father's arms, while her groom sat down on the floor where he had been standing, too stunned to function. And the mother of the bride fainted, slumping over in rag-doll disarray.

“We had a fire drill then and there at the front of the church that only the Marx Brothers could have topped. Groomsmen rushed about heroically, mini-princess flower girls squalled, bridesmaids sobbed, and people with weak stomachs headed for the exits.

“All the while, unaware, the orchestra played on. The bride had not only come, she was gone—into some other state of consciousness. The smell of [the bride's mess] drifted across the church and mixed with the smell of guttering candles. Napoleon and Waterloo came back to mind. Only two people were seen smiling. One was the mother of the groom. And the other was the *father* of the bride.

“What did we do? Well, we went back to real life. Guests were invited to adjourn to the reception hall, though they did not eat or drink as much as they might have in different circumstances. The bride was consoled, cleaned up, fitted out with a bridesmaid's dress, and hugged and kissed a lot by the revived groom. (She'll always love him for that. When he said 'for better or worse,' he meant it.)

“The cast was reassembled where we left off, a single flute played a quiet air, the words were spoken and the deed was done. Everybody cried, as people are supposed to do at weddings, mostly because the groom held the bride in his arms through the whole ceremony. And no groom ever kissed a bride more tenderly than he.

“If one can hope for a wedding that it be memorable then theirs was a raging success. NOBODY who was there will EVER forget it. They lived as happily ever after as anyone does—happier than most, in fact... But that's not the end of the story. The best part is still to come.

“On the tenth anniversary of this disastrous affair, a party was held. Three TV sets were mustered, a feast was laid, and best friends invited. (Remember, there were three video cameras at the scene of the accident, so all three films were shown at once.)

“The event was hilarious, especially with the running commentary and the stop-action stuff that is a little when seen one frame at a time. The part that got cheers and toasts was when the camera focused on the grin on the face of the father of the bride as he contemplates his wife as she is being revived.

“The reason I say this is the best part is not because of the party. But because of who organized it. Of course. The infamous [Mother of the Bride].

The mother of the bride is still at it, but she's a lot looser these days. She not only forgave her husband and everybody else for their part in the debacle, she forgave herself. And nobody laughed harder at the film than she.

“There's a word for what she has. Grace. And that's why that same grinning man has been married to her for [decades]. And why her daughter loves her still.”³

“There's a word for what she has. Grace.”

“Everything on earth has its own time and its own season,” the writer of Ecclesiastes reminds us. And it is all held in God's grace.

I don't know what season of life you are in right now – whether it is a joyful season, a season filled with anxiety, a hopeful season, or all of the above.

3 “MOTB” by Robert Fulghum; from *It Was on Fire When I Lay Down on It*.

Whatever this season of life holds for *you*, I know it's a challenging season in our community, in our nation, and in our world.

But I also know this: no matter the season in your life and no matter the season in our world, it is a season held in God's *grace*.

So... friends, in this moment, and through this Thanksgiving week, may we surrender our hearts to the God we know in Jesus Christ: the God in whose grace we are held, no matter our circumstances... no matter the season.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, send your Holy Spirit to breakthrough into our hearts and into McCabe United Methodist Church. Lead us to bold, new ways of sharing your love with one another, in our neighborhood, in Bismarck-Mandan, and beyond. May we look to you always as we build your heavenly kingdom on earth. We pray this in the powerful name of your Son, Jesus. Amen.