

I have not performed nearly as many weddings as Robert Fulghum did during his active ministry career, although I have done enough that I've lost count of how many I've done.

I have not – at least not yet – had anything like the wedding he described in the reading for today. Not even close.

The weddings I do fall into three categories.

First, the ones for friends and family. I've performed my brother's wedding, my mother-in-law's, and a few good friends. These are fun.

Because we are family, because we are friends, there is obviously a long-standing and deep relationship, one which will continue for a long time to come.

And when I'm done with the ceremony, I get to take off my robe and enjoy the party.

Second, the weddings I do for members, and the children of members, of the congregations I have served. I like these too.

One of the great privileges of being a minister

is that you get to part of the important moments of human lives – their joys and sorrows, those rites of passage from one state of being unto another.

Folks often say, when I arrive – oh, my minister is here.

They seem to relax and remember that what they are about to do is about their lives for years, and not just one day.

I feel a sense of ownership, too, over their ceremony, not just that I want it to go well, but that I love them and their lives together, and want it to begin well with them.

Third, I do sometimes do weddings for hire.

For strangers.

Truthfully, I don't like this very much, and so I charge a lot of money, and don't have to do many.

I do have folks ask if I'll do it, and I say, well, it costs so-and-so, and they say, that much! that's too much!

I tell them a justice of the peace costs much less, and they should feel free.

It's not that I'm not happy for them, I am.

It is just that between spending time with folks I don't know, and being with my family on a Saturday afternoon,

I'd rather be at home.

Though I charge strangers, there is no cost to members of the church.

I don't charge members, or their children,  
because we are in a covenant together.

As your minister, performing rites of passage for you  
is part of our covenant together –

as it is to preach for you, to lead the staff, to support your ministry,  
to challenge you and comfort you, to memorialize your lives when they end,  
and to speak the truth in love to you.

And as I have responsibilities under our covenant together,  
so do you have responsibilities to one another, and to me.

We'll get to that.

But this is the key difference with strangers,  
and their weddings:

we are under no covenant.

They have, instead, signed a contract,  
which is different.

I am not, in their mind, their minister.

I am just another vendor –

not as expensive, or important, as the caterer or the florist,  
more on par with the DJ.

There is no covenant between us,

and though these couples usually treat me with respect,

I feel the difference –

in them and in me.

I am there to do a deed,

and not as part of a larger life, a larger promise, and living tradition.

I feel the difference.

Don't you?

I bet you, too, can tell the difference,

feel the difference between being together in covenant, on one hand,

and having a contractual or consumerist relationship, on the other.

Take another example, one not very far a-field from the wedding.

The marriage.

One couple I know –

let's call them Sam and Mary –

it is clear to me, observing them,

that their marriage lives in covenant,

is grounded in a deep promise between them.

They said, once, to each other

that they would love and honor,

and work through it,

and support each other,

and they do.

It is not that they are particularly romantic or affectionate –  
‘bout the same as most folks, really.

It is not that they swim in a sea of love,  
or are overpowered by each other –

They do love each other, but they are not teenagers.

Passion comes and goes,  
but covenant remains.

You see the way their marriage is grounded in covenant is the little things.

The way that Sam speaks about Mary when she’s not around.

The way that Mary shakes her head and smiles when Sam does something silly.

The way they sit in the same room together, enjoying the quiet.

The way they are honest about their imperfections without cruelty or one-ups-  
man-ship.

Some years, they do their own thing.

Some years, they do more together.

The tide ebbs and flows, and they do too.

But they keep their promises,

and when they don’t, they don’t give up or blow up.

And, of course, we know that not every covenant of marriage is like this.

I suspect that even Sam and Mary, every once in a while, slip into this thinking:  
am I getting out of this marriage what I’m putting into it?

Is this worth it?

Do I really want to keep doing this, or could maybe I trade up?

Because they live in covenant, Sam and Mary don't go very far down that road.

There is a place to assess balance and fairness,

but not because the marriage is a transactional relationship,

but because it is a way to keep the promise.

Some other couples I know don't seem to do it that way.

They seem to often be fighting with each other,

and fighting in particular about who is getting what.

I did that for you, you do this for me.

It is transactional, it is consumption.

As all consumable goods, the marriage eventually seems to be used up,

and no longer of any worth.

Typically, it then ends – though it can sometimes drag on for years, or a lifetime.

The couples I know who wind up in a consumable marriage

seem to get there one of two ways:

either they never really understood the depth of the promise they were making in the first place –

because they were too young, or too naïve, or too distracted, --

or, the love that once existed between them fades, leaves the relationship,

and then the covenant becomes an empty shell, brittle and breakable.

For what we know through human history

is that a covenant, unlike a contract or consumption,  
a covenant depends on love for its life and vigor.

Love – the deep caring for another person in their fullness –  
this is like the oxygen for a breathing covenant.

A covenant cannot live without love.

In marriage, the covenant is explicit.

Even in the simplest civil ceremony, promises are made to each other.

In other cases, a covenant is implied, though not always stated.

I don't remember if, at the convocation when I started college,

we had to recite any promises,

but it was surely implied.

Some students have a very covenantal relationship with their educational  
institution.

Others are consumers of education.

You know what the consumer is like.

They say to the professor –

why should I buy this book? What, exactly, am I going to get out of it?

They say,

hey, I paid for this class, you had better give me a passing grade.

In each lecture or class discussion,

they think about what is relevant to them,

how does this affect their life.

It's not just college, of course, where you see this.

Students, parents, and taxpayers have this attitude about all education.

What value are we getting out of this?

We are paying for high test scores, so you had better produce.

How is this education going to get me a job?

If I do the homework, what will I get out of it? What's my take?

This attitude sound familiar to any of you educators?

We hear these kinds of things often enough, we all start to think this is the way we should understand it.

And there is a kernel of truth here –

we do want to use our collective funds effectively,  
and education should make a difference in people's lives.

But we also have a nagging sense that something is off here.

I submit to you that what is off is that education isn't a consumable good, it should, instead, exist in a covenant between the learner and the teacher, between the student and the school, between the whole community together.

The covenantal attitude toward education would produce very different questions:

for students, they might ask, “if this whole enterprise depends on my keeping a promise to try and stretch and risk, how am I doing?”

parents might ask, “how am I nurturing my student to keep their promise and learn to take initiative for their life?”

educators, including administrators, would wonder “am I keeping my implicit promise to share a love a learning, and its power to develop human potential, with these students?”

It would be a very different conversation, wouldn't it?

This goes way back, by the way.

About 2500 years ago, the philosopher Socrates got into a famous argument with Gorgias, who was a sophist.

If Gorgias was alive today, he would be a political consultant – he advised people on how to be persuasive and win arguments.

People paid the sophists a lot of money to teach them, because you could get a lot of honor, power, and wealth by giving a good speech.

Socrates was not impressed, and he kept asking – using that infamous Socratic method of his –

he kept asking Gorgias,

do you actually make people wise and good,

or do you only teach how to seem wise and good?

Gorgias replied, in part, what's the difference?

But the difference, Socrates knew, was everything.

It is the difference between a sophist, one who displays wisdom, and a philosopher, one who loves wisdom.

It is the difference between education as an act of consumption, and education as participation in a covenant, a covenant going back millennia, a promise that through cooperative discovery, one will come to learn about the world, truth, justice, and yes, ultimately, their own soul.

Briefly, two more areas where I think that living like a consumer is dangerous, or unfulfilling – where to consume the good makes us like Midas, destroying the things we love best.

One is friendship.

Here, the covenant between real friends is almost always implicit.

We don't have a "friendship ceremony" where people who have been acquaintances and are ready to take the next step show up and exchange the serving dishes they will sometimes leave at each other's homes.

Not only that, but what counts as friendship is always blurry.

It has been since we were children and had a different best friend every year, if not every day.

And now with social networking, is hard to know what friendship is:

Let's be honest, not all of my 561 Facebook "friends" are really friends.

I said before that you could tell the difference between consumer and covenant through feeling.

And that's how it is with real friendship – it feels different.

Like with a covenantal marriage, it's the little things – the kindness, the help without question, the acknowledgement of our real selves.

The sense that no one is keeping score.

And when you start keeping score – start evaluating, am I getting enough out of this friendship to make it worth my time, well, then, it's not a covenantal friendship anymore, if it ever was.

Some “friendly” relations are transactional – we can be nice to people without being in covenant.

But if all our so-called friendships are about what we are getting out of it, then they are not friendships at all.

Then we've turned our friend into gold, dead to the world, pretty, maybe, but nothing we can really love – and nothing that can love us back.

Another brief example: citizenship and the civic life.

Our forefathers and foremothers were certainly individualists,

who celebrated and promoted the idea that each person had worth,  
and the right to make their own life, own their own property, and so on.

But they also understood that the nation they created  
was based on a covenant –

a shared vision and a shared history of common struggle.

A covenant of mutual respect, a “commonwealth” –

that our wealth was created by and manifest in our coming together.

You see places today where this covenantal sense of civic participation is  
strong:

when volunteers show up to fix a school or clean a park,

when people stand and show respect to a passing honor guard,

when a citizen activist waits their turn to speak at the microphone,

when voters, even politicians, every once in a while,

put the interests of the whole, or the most vulnerable, ahead of themselves.

You see it; but you don't see it often enough.

Too often, we are stuck in a consumerist idea about citizenship:

what's in it for me,

am I getting what I want,

I'm fine, so they should take care of themselves.

Make any absurd, false, insulting, nasty argument you want,

who cares if it poisons the well and cheapens our republic?

Consumerism, transactional thinking, eats away at the core of our life together  
as human beings.

We could think of other examples, I'm sure.

There are times and places when a consumer attitude is useful.

But not with other human beings, and not with nature,  
and not with wisdom, and not with civic life, and not with the spirit.  
Not with anything that matters.

So, how do we strike out consumption and replace it with covenant?

In the things that matter to us,  
how do we replace one way of being for a better one?

One thing I know about covenant is that it is a life-long practice,  
a matter of commitment and habit and continual work,  
so there is no easy fix here.

That's sort of, you know, the point.

But a few things seem like particularly good ideas when it comes to turning  
from consumption to covenant.

We can take a clue from the mother of the bride,  
and show grace.

Sometimes we, like her, become unhinged.

It happens.

And we can do what she did, afterwards –

forgive, forgive, forgive, including ourselves,  
and laugh, laugh, laugh.

Celebrate our humanness, in all its glory and disaster.

Grace, a sense of humor,  
these things are part of what keeps us in covenant with one another.

The words for the chalice lighting give us another clue:

serve.

Serve without the expectation of getting anything in return.

Serve because someone served you –  
and because love doesn't exist in the abstract,  
love exists in service to others.

Say, "you need someone to lean on? I'm here."

It doesn't have to be complicated service.

Sometimes the best service is the simplest.

I even have a suggestion, something you can do today, even!

– sign up to be a greeter, usher, guest table host, or coffee maker here at the church.

Don't ask what's in it for you,  
though you will probably enjoy getting to know people and you will feel closer  
to your church.

Don't do it because you feel like you owe it to someone,  
though as hard as Kimberlee is working to get this program in shape,  
she really needs your help.

Do it because you are part of a covenant,  
this church,  
because you made a promise when you became a member,  
to serve and support this place, and to welcome others unto its body.  
Do it because it keeps a promise.

Grace and service, two of the essential ingredients in covenantal life,  
whether in the covenant of church, marriage, friendship, learning, or  
citizenship,  
grace and service both flow from the same spring:  
thanksgiving.

For the sun and the dawn which we did not create  
For the food which we plant but cannot grow  
For friends and loved ones we have not earned and cannot buy  
For all things which to us as gifts

This, really, is the core difference between consumption and covenant.

In consumption, the things of the world are for you to use.  
You bought them,  
with money or time or work that you believe belongs only to you.  
You might say thank you to be polite,  
but really, why should you say thank you –  
you paid for it. They are just doing their job.

Covenant knows better.

Everything, the skin of your body, the sun and soil,  
your very existence, memory, beauty, love, truth –  
these are gifts of being from sources beyond ourselves.

And we give thanks.

We give thanks that the world is more than us,  
for how else could we learn to laugh at ourselves?

We give thanks that the stream flows down,  
and water from that stream of forgiveness and love  
can bring all that is good back to life.

We give thanks that we have each other to lean on, to grow with, to serve  
together.

We give thanks for this life, a gift,  
and we, out of this thanksgiving,  
pledge ourselves to lives of service and grace,  
to justice and love,  
and to hope.