

“Until we are parted by death...”

The “Wedding season” is now in full swing. June has always been a popular month for weddings and this year has been no exception. And since many weddings in our community and nation take place within the context of a faith tradition, clergy are typically centrally involved, at least in what our culture calls, “The Ceremony”.

But according to those who compile such statistics, this year will actually be different. Reversing a tradition which goes back for some time, this will be the first year when more weddings take place outside of a church or faith tradition. It is a clear sign of the times. Not long ago, it would have been the exception not to be married in church. But with the steady erosion of church membership and identification in the past couple of decades, the trend has been reversed. We are living into a new secular culture. And that culture is on display when couples marry.

As a clergyman who has officiated at over 300 weddings in my career, I have always enjoyed weddings, even though they require huge amounts of time and energy and typically knock out a good part of a busy clergyman’s weekend. It is a real honor and privilege to be part of such an important moment. From our vantage point, we can observe the little things and pick up on many of the subtle moments as a bride and groom work together to plan their wedding and then, as they exchange their vows and celebrate their marriage.

And we also receive a refresher course in human interaction under stress as we observe parents, family and friends who all come together for the celebration but often have differing sets of assumptions and expectations! I have learned that I need to be especially pastoral attentive and sensitive to the mothers of the bride and I find myself identifying with the emotions of the fathers who walk their daughters down the aisle.

Yes, I enjoy weddings and appreciate the preparation that goes into a wedding. But I am more interested and concerned about a couple’s preparation for *marriage*.

Some churches and clergy now require admirable preparation, often referred to as “counseling”. I guess that for many, this “counseling” must seem like another hoop to jump through. It would be nice if I could produce statistics to prove that all the preparation for marriage works- that those who carefully and patiently prepare for marriage and say their vows in a church have a better chance for a successful marriage. Sad to say, I can’t claim that. Still, it seems to me that most couples invest an amazing amount of energy, resources and care in the “big day” (or actually, in the big weekend long series of wedding events!), but they don’t do much planning for what comes after the wedding.

In late April, millions of people throughout the world watched telecast of the royal wedding from London. Since the wedding took place in one of the great churches of my Anglican faith tradition, Westminster Abbey, and followed the liturgical rich tradition of my church, I was especially eager to count myself among these who got up early that morning to watch. I must say I was proud of our tradition. Some label us Episcopalians as “stuffy” and hopelessly “old fashioned”. Well, a wedding is an occasion for tradition and dignity. Say what you will, many

of those wedding hats were anything but “stuffy”!! And all couples are “royal couples” on their wedding day. It wasn’t just about the dress, the uniforms, the hats, the music, or even the grand setting. It was really about two people who seemed very genuine, so much so that they wrote their own prayer and clearly are in love. A fairytale- perhaps. But also a profoundly common moment with which we can all identify.

The royals and celebrities in general don’t have a very good marriage track record. Neither do we as a society. As clergy watch the happy couple walk out of the church, we can only hope and pray that something transformative has really happened before our eyes. Yes, I like weddings. They are moments of joy and hope and we surely need all the joy and hope we can get. But when the “big day” is suddenly over, the real, hard work begins. That heavy lifting can break the back of the most loving relationships. But by God’s grace, and in the context of the community of faith, the burden can become light.