

40 Celebrating God's Handkerchiefs

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" (Revelation 21:1-4)

What does a "saint" look like to you? What would be the words that you would use to describe one? When I ask that question to various classes, the responses I get back often include words like "holy," "good," "Christ-like," "God-fearing." You get the idea. All good answers. The Greek word for saint, *hagios*, refers to "separate from common condition and use; pure; righteous."

Those are helpful definitions, but I especially like the one that Frederick Buechner wrote:

"In His holy flirtation with the world, God occasionally drops a handkerchief. These handkerchiefs are called Saints" (2004, p. 352).

What a marvelous picture of those saints God places in our lives. Add this thought to your pondering as well:

"God, the shy and proper lover whose heart has been stolen away by the world, drops a handkerchief in the pure, naïve hope that the world, that someone, will notice and pick it up and give it back and in so doing notice God and fall madly in love with God and talk with God, laugh with God, cry with God, even fight with God and fall asleep in His embrace" (Buechner, 1993.)

If it seems like a stretch to picture God as our lover who longs to be one with us, consider how often He refers to us as being His bride:

"I delight greatly in the Lord; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isaiah 61:10-11).

"As a young man married a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride so will your God rejoice over you" (Isaiah 62:5).

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come and his bride has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

"I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with me, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more

death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true . . . Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21: 2-5, 9).

God has a wedding on His mind. He cannot get it off His mind. He talks about it all the time in Scripture. His love for His Church, His holy and beautiful bride, is passionate like that of a lover. It is a theme woven into the fabric of Scripture as each page points toward the wedding that will be celebrated in heaven. It is not always a joyful theme. Much of the story of the Bible is one that is filled with great heartache. Listen to this love letter He writes to His wayward and unfaithful beloved, the nation of Israel, as He tries to woo them back to His love:

"Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. There I will give her back her vineyards, and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. There she will sing as in the days of her youth, as in the day she came up out of Egypt. 'In that day,' declares the Lord, 'you will call me 'my husband'; you will no longer call me 'my master.' . . . I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the Lord. 'In that day I will respond,' declares the Lord—'I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and oil, and they will respond to Jezreel. I will plant her for myself in the land; I will show my love to the one I called 'Not my loved one.' I will

say to those called, 'Not my people,' 'You are my people'; and they will say, 'You are my God'" (Hosea 2:14-16, 19-23).

The story of Scripture is the story of God seeking to gain the attention of His people, enticing them back to His love. "God, the shy and proper lover" seeks to win over His people once again. "*How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel?*" (Hosea 11:8) is the plea of God heard through the prophet Hosea.

God is Almighty. He is Lord of the Universe. Yet, He will not force His way or His love upon you. "God, the shy and proper lover" will seek to catch your attention through what Frederick Buechner calls a "holy flirtation."

Many of us are too young to remember the days of dropping the handkerchief. The idea was simple: A woman conveniently drops her hanky to the ground. A gentleman notices this and stoops down to pick it up. As he hands it to her, their eyes meet and lock for that moment. She has his attention, and soon his love.

God has dropped many, many, many handkerchiefs into the world, hoping that the world would notice. Some of those handkerchiefs have been soaked with God's tears, such as those shed over the blood of Abel spilled onto the ground and all the persecuted who would follow.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10).

Stephen was one of God's dropped handkerchiefs. His life bore testimony to the very love and forgiveness of Jesus. A man by the name of Saul took notice of this. He would not, however, celebrate the gift at that time, but would assist in stoning Stephen by holding onto the coats who hurled the stones (Acts 7:58).

God dropped His handkerchiefs as He sent one prophet after another to catch the attention of His unfaithful lover, Israel. Time

after time, however, his “holy flirtation” was only to be picked up and flung in a furious and hateful swell of rage and anger. Instead of celebrating these gifts, the world would, as God’s unfaithful lover, reject them while they chased after other lovers.

Sometimes the handkerchiefs God dropped were so young and so fresh. Samuel was called as a young boy, and David was chosen among all of his older and stronger brothers. These, too, were the ways in which God sought to catch the attention of His lover.

There were times, as well, when the handkerchiefs held a sweet fragrance. The scent left from those whose lives radiated with the aroma of His love by means of their sacrificial gifts and actions. The woman with the alabaster jar, the widow and her mite, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus who lovingly wrapped the body of Jesus in clean linen—they were among those fragrant handkerchiefs that God dropped into this world, all in the hope of catching the eye of His lover.

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God” (Matthew 5:8).

When the world would not take notice, God then dropped His very best and most personal Handkerchief—His own Son. This was the One who carried the very fragrance of God Himself. This Handkerchief was marked by His love and holiness. This was the One that God dropped in the hopes that finally He would catch the attention of the one He loved. Jesus expressed this hope in one of His parables, shortly before His crucifixion:

“Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watchtower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and went away on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit. The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. Then he sent

other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. Last of all, he sent his son to them. ‘They will respect my son,’ he said. But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, ‘This is the heir. Come, let’s kill him and take his inheritance.’ So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?” (Matthew 21: 33-40).

When finally this pure and clean Handkerchief of God had been stained with blood, they would lay Him in a grave. Wrapping Him in linens, ironically, they would place over His face a “handkerchief” or a “napkin.” When He arose, we are told:

“Simon Peter arrived after him, entered the tomb, observed the linen cloths lying there, and the kerchief used to cover his head not lying with the linen cloths but separate, neatly folded by itself” (John 20: 6-7 MSG).

I have always found it curious and humorous to think of Jesus rising up through the grave cloths and then neatly folding the face cloth to the side as if to make a little statement there in the tomb: “TA-DA!”

I am reminded of that little face cloth each time communion is offered and the cloth, or as some call it the “purificator,” is used to wipe the chalice. This is not the intent of this cloth, yet it reminds me of a God who is deeply in love. It gives silent witness to God who seeks to catch the eye of His lover, His holy bride, the Church. In this sense, communion is like that of a wedding rehearsal dinner where we celebrate a foretaste of the wedding feast that is yet to come when “God, the shy and proper lover” will be joined forever with His bride.

Over the years, God has continued to carry out His “holy flirtation” with the world. A study of world history reveals many “handkerchiefs” that God has used to

catch the eye and heart of His bride. There is great merit in taking time to study the lives and service of people like Martin Luther, Chuck Colson, Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Lincoln, George Washington Carver, and Anne Sullivan. God has made Himself known through all of these and so many others. God's desire is that others would notice Him and that they would be joined as one through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Who are the handkerchiefs that God is dropping in the world today? Who are the handkerchiefs that God has dropped into your life—those saints through whom God has sought to catch your eye and your heart? There are a few whose names come to my mind very quickly—those people who are so filled with grace that in their presence I have been drawn closer to God and have grown deeper in love with Him as a result.

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’” And he added, ‘These are the true words of God’” (Revelation 19:7-9).

The wedding plans are under way. The banquet is being prepared. God is sending us out as His invitations, asking the world to share in His joy and eternal fellowship with Him. You and I are carriers of those

invitations. One person at a time, will you join in the “Ablaze! Initiative” of sharing the Gospel with 100 million people by the year 2017?

“All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

“God, the shy and proper lover” is still seeking to catch the attention of His bride and His lover. Our lives have been blessed by those handkerchiefs He has dropped along our path to catch our attention. Now it is His desire to use you in the same way, in the hopes that through your life and witness others might “notice God and fall madly in love with God and talk with God, laugh with God, cry with God, even fight with God and fall asleep in His embrace.”

Prayer: Father, I thank you for all those whose lives and service have caused me to notice you and to fall in love with you. As you desire, I am willing to be used in this same way to draw someone's eyes toward you. **Amen.**

Challenge: Who has been a “handkerchief” of God in your life? If possible, let them know. Buy a handkerchief and give it to them as a way of thanking them.

Scripture Reading: Revelation 19-21

From the Book of Concord: “Our confession approves giving honor to the saints. This honor is threefold. The first is thanksgiving: we ought to give thanks to God because he has given examples of his mercy, because he has shown that he wants to save humankind, and because he has given teachers and other gifts to the church. Since these are the greatest gifts, they ought to be extolled very highly, and we ought to praise the saints themselves for faithfully using these gifts just as Christ praises faithful managers [Matt. 25:21, 23]. The second kind of veneration is the strengthening of our faith. When we see Peter forgiven after his denial, we, too, are encouraged to believe that grace truly superabounds much more over sin [Rom. 5:20]. The third honor is imitation: first of their faith, then of their other virtues, which people should imitate according to their callings. The opponents do not require these true honors. They only argue about invocation, which, even if it were not dangerous, is certainly not necessary.

In Your Own Words: Write below or in the margins the key thought or lesson you have learned in this chapter on Celebrate and/or a thought you would like to explore further.