

A wedding, or church, without God?



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

Have you ever walked into a forest or field, driven into the mountains or along winding country roads expecting to see something in particular? Wishing or hoping to see a certain kind of species or scene that causes you to say, "Ah, good! Now that's why I came here!" It pleases us to find just what we're looking for. If we don't see what we expect, what we anticipate, we come back with disappointment, wondering why we missed the "real reason" we went out in the first place.

And what about a congregation or celebration? If we go into a sacred space or religious community we bring expectations, too. We expect to sense some sacredness or hear words that give us the feeling we are not simply in a house but "God's House." At the least we know we'll hear something about God or the divine. At the very least we'll hear someone mention God!

I used to think that way. It seemed obvious that a person cannot have a spiritual or meaningful experience without hearing, singing, reading special words that set apart a place or a people as especially sacred. Without hearing or saying "God" or "spirit," without hearing a prayer or statement of faith, it can feel empty and meaningless. We think, "Where is GOD?!"

Gradually over time my views changed. I asked myself, "Does 'God' need to be spoken to be present, to be pleased, to be praised?" Would God show up if we didn't say His or Her name?

Take the wedding ceremony as an example.

Tradition has conditioned us to expect a wedding to be a "service" or even some kind of "worship." Though some clergy feel they need to give sermons, prayers and blessings – to make the wedding a religious experience – I've never done that. Well, to be honest, I have



What are we expecting? CHRIS HIGHLAND/COLUMNIST

said a few prayers and blessings, but they were not exclusive. Couples asked me to officiate because I was sensitive to their beliefs, or non-beliefs, as well as family members who may believe, or not. Presiding doesn't have to be preaching, and in my view a wedding is not the time for preaching or proselytizing.

Which brings me to several recent weddings when the focus of my words, the readings, the songs, the vows, was Love. Sounds appropriate, doesn't it? It was clear that these couples were not religious (no surprise they were young), and though they might have a sense of faith, they were not interested in "God-talk" during their ceremony. They were not trying to shock their families, but they wanted their special day to reflect who they really are, not to please parents or The Parent.

As I left the celebrations I wondered whether some family and friends who attended were thinking, "Where was God in the ceremony?" (since I wore a robe and hood in one wedding, an attendee asked what "order" I belonged to. I smiled and said I was "out of or-

der"). I thought of the readings in another ceremony, from Song of Solomon and First Corinthians (rather traditional). Both center on Love and neither mention God or make any theological statement. You could say they're "neutral" – but is love neutral?

Why wouldn't Love be good enough? What if there was even a scripture that says "God is Love" (actually there is: First John 4:8).

Words like God, Spirit or Jesus can almost seem like magic for some people. They must be spoken to let God know, and everyone around us know, we are acknowledging God's presence. Wouldn't God already know that? What if we just spoke of Love and Inclusion, of Equality and Justice, of Peace and Goodwill? If "God is Love," can't someone "celebrate Love" or honor and reverence Love itself?

This would be a very interesting experiment: Let's say a church decided one Sunday morning to make no mention of God (a synagogue or mosque could try it too). Prayers, hymns, statements, sermon—no one says the word "God." Would God be there? Would people leave thinking, "Gee, why no God today?" I doubt that. And it might be a wake up to call attention to our attachment (I won't say "obsession"—except I just did) with specific words that we like to hear, that we must hear, in order to "feel spiritual."

Wedding ceremonies are perhaps one of the best venues for creative expression. After all, they are personal, meaningful celebrations of love, life and the human community (oddly similar to memorials). I'm not suggesting couples and clergy have to drop God from the invitation list. But why make a joyful commitment of union all about beliefs instead of what love actually is – patient, kind, truthful, and not insisting on its own way ... ?

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