

us a rare opportunity to learn what such necessarily sensitive observers can teach us about ourselves.

## “To Celebrate the Marriage Feast Which Has No End”

*Wendy S. Lee*

FRIENDS OFTEN ASK ME what it is like to be an active Lutheran layperson married to an active Latter-day Saint. I think I can best describe my marriage experience by addressing my comments to my husband.

Dick, sometimes I think that the best times and the worst times of our marriage have nothing to do with our two religions and our two faith systems. But I can't say that, because upon further reflection I don't believe that it's true. The best times *have* had a great deal to do with our two religions, and so have the worst times.

Let me talk first about the best times. When we met, I had just begun the process of becoming a Lutheran minister. I had recently completed the application to enter seminary, and I was agonizing over having to endure four more years of school beyond college and moving to a different city in a different state where I didn't know anyone. Most of the time, I worried that I would never learn Koine Greek, that I would never be able to translate the New Testament, and that I would be sent down from seminary.

That was when you became my friend, and I was glad to have that friendship. A number of my college friends had stopped talking to me because I had suddenly become too religious for them. Some even ridiculed me for devoting my life to service in the church. But you went out to dinner with me and talked about being a Latter-day Saint in Chicago and how it was different from being a Mormon in Montana or in Utah. You told me, perhaps in not so many words, that the

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people who really cared about me would do so whether I became a minister or something else. When so many of my friends and relatives were telling me either that I was completely unsuited for the ordained ministry, that through my inadequacy I would bring shame upon the church, or that I was wasting myself in service to the church and should look elsewhere for a better career, you simply assumed that what I was doing was right for me. I remember you asked me what my duties would be as a parish minister, what I would learn in seminary, and how many other women ministers would be in my seminary class. You accepted my entrance into seminary as perfectly natural, and I stopped thinking about it as strange.

The best times of our life together have been the intimate conversations we've had about ourselves and our ambitions and dreams for the future. When we talk seriously, usually lingering at the table after dinner or a late-night snack, our faith is always present. We talk about what you believe in, and what I believe in, and how the two are the same and different. We talk about your church on Fifty-fourth Street in Chicago and in Salt Lake City, and we talk about my church on Fifty-fifth Street and on Higgins Road in Chicago. We talk about singing in and directing choirs, about church music, teaching Sunday School, preaching sermons, and the women's group and the men's group. We talk a lot about our faith, our growing up in the faith, and people whose faith we admire and try to emulate. I think that during these conversations you've been honest with me, and I with you; and that has made these the best times of our marriage.

And now I must talk about the worst times. This time while I've been waiting for a call has been a very bad time for me. I've waited patiently for my bishop to nominate me to a parish, and then for the members of that parish to interview me, at great length and in great depth, and then I've waited for them to extend a call to me to serve their parish as a minister of Word and Sacrament. You've watched me literally sit by the telephone, waiting for someone to call. You've watched them not call, and you've watched me not cry. Thirteen times this interview process has fallen through.

I don't know any other profession in which this kind of passive waiting for nomination or placement takes place. Imagine wanting to be a doctor or nurse full time, being guided into the profession by mentors and teachers, putting yourself through school at great personal expense in order to be knowledgeable and well trained. Imagine feeling called, ever since you were a young child, to be that doctor or that nurse, feeling within yourself called by God to heal, to give comfort, to bind up wounds. Then imagine yourself, fully qualified and

graduated, with nobody interested in you — no clinic, no hospital, no doctor's office, no school, no corporation willing to hire you. Imagine that calling, undiluted by time, now even more powerful as you have been surrounded during your studies by medicines, surgical instruments, and machines designed to monitor vital signs. Imagine that calling so powerful in and of itself that not to use it, not to be able to give it expression, causes you to self-destruct. You're trained to watch for vital signs slipping; and now they're your own vital signs, slowly rotting from disuse, from frustration. Imagine eventually being diagnosed as barren. I have spent the past two and a half years trying to prevent myself from self-imploding under the strain of this frustration. They have been the same two and a half years that we've been married. I feel quite often that you've been shortchanged; you haven't been married to a happy woman.

I could hide behind you and blame you because I haven't been able to get a call to serve a Lutheran parish. That would be the easy way to deal with this situation. I could simply say that because you're a Latter-day Saint, I'm not eligible to serve as a pastor.

But you're not the problem, not really. I am the problem. I'm the terribly misguided Lutheran ministerial candidate who thought she could marry anyone she chose. As a result, I've encountered the insurmountable obstacle of one of the most firmly entrenched traditions in Protestant America, the stereotype of the impeccable minister's family. In the rapidly changing culture of twentieth-century America, fewer and fewer nuclear families have a mom, a dad, three children, a dog, and a station wagon. Unfortunately, parishioners deciding the kind of pastor they want, and the kind of pastor's family they want to see living in their parsonage, inevitably envision a Norman Rockwell family and won't settle for anything less. The pastor should be male; some congregations prefer him to be a Lutheran since birth, although some are attracted by a convert. The pastor's wife should be a Lutheran since birth, be able to teach Sunday School and sing in the choir, become active but not dominating in the women's group, and be plain but well groomed. Their children should be very smart, very well behaved, and passably athletic; each should be a miniature version of their father, should be caring toward their friends rather than competitive, and should become ministers or college professors when they grow up. Variations upon this theme are permitted only in regard to the dog and the station wagon.

I think when a parish takes a good long look at me, they see a chipped dish; and they're not about to plunk their money down for imperfection. I'm not a man. While most of my classmates who have

had difficulties obtaining a call have also been women, all of them have received calls. And I'm not married to a Lutheran. Although there are male Lutheran pastors who are married to non-Lutherans, none of them are married to Latter-day Saints; and I know of no female Lutheran pastors who are married to non-Lutherans. Members of call committees have told me that they're concerned about my orthodoxy; they're afraid that my Lutheran theology is not as sound as it could be, or perhaps they're even afraid that you and I have put together a half-Lutheran, half-Mormon religion to suit the two of us. Of course nothing could be further from the truth, but it's still difficult for me to convince them. Then there's the practical issue that parents in these Lutheran congregations simply don't want their children marrying outside the faith; and if their pastor has done it, where will the children look for a correct role model? I've begun to resign myself to the fact that I am a chipped dish in an antique store, still sitting on the shelf, still wasting space.

In the past two and a half years, this has been the worst of our marriage. I know that I am not living up to God's expectation of me, and it's hard for me to contain this knowledge within myself. I've taken it out on others around me, but primarily it's been you who has suffered. If there can be a worst part of the worst part, it's that I simply haven't dealt with this as well as a pastor should. This is the kind of crisis that I want to spend my life meeting, but when it's on my own doorstep, I am hiding my head under the blankets. I avoid and neglect my friends because they always ask me how the call process is going, and I can't be cheerful or optimistic, or even sanguine or patient. So I don't write them, and they probably think that I don't care about them. I don't clean off my desk, because underneath the junk mail I know there are congregational profiles and letters from committees who called other candidates, and I don't even want to look at my failures. You really have been shortchanged, Dick; you haven't been married to a happy woman.

It makes me angry that my marriage, which has been so very good for me throughout these lean times, has made me look somehow flawed to others. I am ashamed of other Lutherans who are too intolerant to accept you as my beloved husband. I resent that their hypocrisy has such an opportunity to put unnecessary stress on our marriage and has spoiled our marriage feast which should have no end. But I believe that each pastor waiting for a call, and each Christian, is imperfect in some way, flawed and not the ideal we all hope to become. That is who we are. But who we are doesn't matter because what is really important is *whose* we are. We are not Christians because we

have already met the criteria for perfection. Rather we are Christians because someone else has met the criteria for us and has given us love as a free gift.

As I sit in a pew at Augustana Lutheran Church on Sunday mornings, I look around at the people worshipping with me, and I don't see a great many nuclear families in the fifties tradition of mother and father and children. I see childless couples, some whose children have grown up and moved on, and some who have not been blessed with children. I see double-parent and single-parent families, and a great many single people of all ages, sitting so close in the pews that it's hard to distinguish who belongs to whom. At Augustana I've been so completely welcomed as a single member that it's hard for me to realize that other congregations and other churches do not completely welcome a married woman without her husband or children. In all honesty, Dick, I'd rather see you go to a different church on Sunday morning, two blocks away from mine, than to have you listed as a member at my church and never attend. I would not want you to be the kind of Christian who thinks he's a member in good standing even though he hasn't been to worship in years, and nobody knows his name. It is of greater value to me that you are a faithful member of a church, even if it isn't mine.

I believe that in every extended family in America it is possible to find at least one person who is a different faith from all the others. I certainly hear about it constantly. Every time I mention that you're a Mormon I hear silence, and then a short while later the person with whom I'm speaking will tell me that her sister-in-law is a Presbyterian, or his father-in-law is a cultural but nonbelieving Jew. I've become somewhat of an expert on interfaith marriages, and I am convinced that this subject needs to be addressed in American church life. We have been told for too long that any nontraditional marriage threatens the family or the church. It's time for caring people to show joy and pleasure when they hear that someone is a faithful member of another church, rather than disdain or discomfort in their presence.

Having discussed the best times, and then the worst times, now I come to the best part of the worst times, and that is that you're with me going through all this. There would have been a long wait for me to get a call anyway. There might have been thirteen call possibilities which fell through no matter whom I was married to, or perhaps even if I wasn't married. I'd rather have it this way: that going through this terribly rough time, and going through all the anxiety and angst and anger, I've had you beside me. It has made the bad times endurable, and the good times very good times indeed.