

### *Smoky Mountain Reflections Spring #3*

Bees, flowers, graduations, brisk spring showers, cool sunny days, weddings, baby birds, and other furry baby critters...these are all images we associate with Easter and springtime. A big part of the ceremony that usually accompanies spring, like at graduations or even weddings, is Pomp & Circumstance—what we called in the military "The whole Dog & Pony show". So why do we do such things? Why do we put ourselves through getting all dressed up in clothes that are usually uncomfortable, spend long periods of time listening to long boring speeches or sermons usually given by someone we do not know and will probably never see again? In my years as a military brat, a Boy Scout, as student & the parent of students, a sailor and now as a pastor, I have certainly spent much time in my life dressed in uncomfortable clothes, sitting on uncomfortable folding furniture while struggling to pay attention to another motivational speech on how to be a better \_\_\_\_\_. (Plug in the word that fits the ceremonial situation.)

Why do I find myself reflecting on weddings and graduations? Because I am conducting two weddings this spring and will be attending my third graduation this year, not to mention an Air Force officer commissioning. It is certainly not out of the ordinary for a pastor to conduct weddings in the spring, however in one of these weddings, I will be both giving away the bride and conducting the service (pray for me). It is also certainly not out of the ordinary for anyone to attend graduations in the springtime, however at the third graduation, I will also be observing a young man graduate and later get commissioned, to whom I will be giving that bride that I mentioned earlier. He is a young man whom I look forward to being able to call son. So, as I get teary-eyed even as I write this, I guess I have a love / hate relationship with ceremonies.

I have a stack of certificates and a wall full of plaques from all the times in my life I have had a milestone marked by a ceremony of some kind, and I have attended dozens if not hundreds of similar occasions in the lives of friends and family members. While I may lament getting dressed up or listening to longwinded speakers, I would also have to say I not only enjoyed but have only fond memories of most of the ceremonies I have been a part of or attended in the past five decades. (This is not to mention the celebrations that usually follow.)

I think if we are honest with ourselves, we recognize the value of doing things right and doing them big. We can all acknowledge that in most cases, the ceremony was not the point of whatever we achieved. However, it did serve to hold up hard work and success as a goal for ourselves and others to strive for. We can also see that all societies, even primitive tribal ones, have ceremony and rites of passage to encourage and instill in the whole community the values that serve to keep a community safe, peaceful, secure, just and prosperous. There is a strange parallel between healthy societies of the past and the efforts they took to uphold a code of ethics that in most cases looks and sounds a lot like the Ten Commandments. I would suggest that God designed His creation to work well for those seeking to function in harmony with His will, so even when hard times come, they are able to push through difficulty using His precepts and the peace only He can provide.

So even though I am often not excited about attending another ceremony (I got a lifetime's worth of that in the US Navy), I am never disappointed when I go through the time and effort to adorn myself appropriately for the event because I appreciate what the whole process provides for societal values and stability.

I must take a moment to differentiate between worship and ceremony. While all divine worship is ceremonial, not all ceremony is worship. I bring this up because we have civil ceremony and divine worship coming together in Christian weddings. It is definitely good for a society to recognize and legally protect this divinely established building block for healthy communities and nations. However, all non-worship ceremony is man-centered, while worship is and necessarily must be Christ-centered. This distinctly sets apart Christian weddings from all others. Being legally married is a matter for the state and that is what the license is for. In weddings conducted by other religions, the individuals are central, to the point of excluding the deity, giving him a wink, or prayer, or offering. But a Christian wedding is two people acknowledging before God what He instituted in creation as a great gift. Those who are blessed to partake of this great gift get a small glimpse of what God's pre-sin creation must have been like. As in all divine worship, in a Christian wedding the congregation and the couple are served by God as His sweet Gospel is proclaimed, and all marital relationships are affirmed as a God-pleasing way to live our lives in accord with His will.

So enjoy this spring's weddings and ceremonies with a deeper understanding of their benefit and blessing in your life.