

Big Top Theology

May 3, 2026

It's pretty rare that I celebrate secular weddings. My rationale is fairly simple: I've been empowered by the state to officiate weddings because I'm a faith leader. To divorce those two roles feels disingenuous.

But every now and then, I find compelling reasons to bend the rule. The first time I did it was for two dear college friends—two nonbelievers, yes, but also two of the quirkiest, most imaginative, justice-loving people I've ever known.

And let me tell you, this was not your standard wedding. The bride carried a “bouquet” made entirely of rainbow-colored candy. The groom's sister proclaimed the “Love” (or should I say “Wove”?) passage from the Princess Bride. Guests were handed kazoos to play the wedding march.

Though the ceremony was outdoors, instead of one of those elegant white reception tents, they rented a giant red-and-white striped circus tent—a full-on big top. And because they were already financially comfortable, they asked for no gifts. Instead, guests were invited to donate to one of two causes: an animal rescue, or a group that was working to reverse the ban Wisconsin had on same-sex marriage.

Now, if you hand a pastor a microphone, even at a secular wedding, she's going to pontificate a bit... So standing there, surrounded by rainbow candy and kazoos, I was inspired to reflect on that giant tent and the way they were encouraging generosity that didn't impact themselves directly.

You see, at its best, marriage makes our lives bigger, not smaller. At its best, marriage expands us, stretches the canvas wider. Love creates more room. It expands two hearts' capacity for generosity, courage, and compassion. It turns private commitment into public blessing. Marriage, at its best, becomes less like a locked gate and more like a big top—bright, expansive, a little unexpected—where there is room for delight, room for justice, room for holy mischief, and room for a wider world to be loved more fully because these two people chose to love one another.

Since then, every time I read about Jesus saying, “In my Father's house there are many dwelling places,” I think of that circus tent. Because too often Christianity has acted like Jesus said, “In my Father's house there are a limited number of luxury condos, protected by fences, security cameras, and theological gatekeepers.”

But that is not what Jesus says at all. He says there are many rooms. Many dwelling places. Many places to abide.

The old King James translation gave us “mansions,” which honestly did us no favors. Because “mansions” makes it sound like heaven is some celestial gated community—private moated estates in the sky.

But the Greek word here – **monai** – isn't about luxury; it's about belonging. Abiding places. Resting places. Home.

Jesus is not describing an exclusive subdivision for the spiritually superior. Jesus is describing the breadth of room in God's household. And that matters, because Jesus says these words to people whose hearts are troubled, and troubled hearts don't need real estate fantasies. They need reassurance. They need belonging. They need to know that when the world feels like it's falling apart, they have not been abandoned.

You see, in John 14, the disciples' world is unraveling. Because we typically read this passage during the Easter season and at funerals, a lot of folks don't realize that this is part of the Last Supper. Judas has already gone out to fetch the authorities. Peter's bravado is cracking. Jesus is talking about leaving. The whole thing feels like the snow globe has been shaken.

And maybe that sounds familiar. Because our snow globe feels pretty shaken too. We are living in troubled-heart times. Wars rage. Democracy feels brittle. Christian nationalism keeps trying to turn Jesus into a mascot for exclusion. LGBTQIA+ neighbors are targeted. Migrants are demonized. The planet groans.

And on top of that, many of us carry private griefs too—diagnoses, losses, fears, exhaustion. Life, as Anne Lamott says, gets “so much lifier” than we were prepared for.

So when Jesus says, “Do not let your hearts be troubled,” he is not saying, “Calm down.” He is not shaming our anxiety. He is not saying faithful people never tremble. He is speaking directly to trembling people. He is saying: Your fear is real. But fear does not get the final word. You already trust God. Keep trusting. Stay with me. There is still room for you. I promise, there is always going to be room for you. And not just for you. For many.

That word – **many** – may be one of the most important words in the whole passage. Many rooms. Not just room for people who look like you. Not just room for people who vote like you. Not just room for people who worship like you. Not just room for people who fit comfortably into religious respectability. Many rooms.

This is not scarcity theology. This is not “there's only so much God to go around.” This is divine abundance. A house big enough for the doubter Thomas. Big enough for the confused Philip. Big enough for Peter, who will fail miserably, but later will be given the chance to not allow his failures to define him.

Big enough for people with troubled hearts. Big enough for the outsider. Big enough for the poor. Big enough for queer kids wondering if church has a place for them. Big enough for migrants looking for home. Big enough for all of us.

So maybe the question for the church is this: Are we building our life together to look more like God's big top.....or a gated subdivision? Because gated subdivisions are built on fear. Fear of outsiders. Fear of scarcity. Fear that if “those people” come in, there won't be enough for us.

All too often, we build fences. We write exclusions. We protect privilege.

But Jesus keeps stretching the tent. Jesus keeps setting bigger tables. Jesus keeps washing feet. Jesus keeps crossing borders. Jesus keeps saying, “The way is not domination. The way is love.”

And that matters, too, when we hear Jesus say, “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” Because these words have too often been used like a locked gate. As though Jesus is saying, “Here is the password. Get it right or stay out.”

But Jesus is not talking to outsiders here. He is comforting insiders who are scared that their way of life is crumbling before their eyes.

Thomas says, “We don’t know where you’re going!” And Jesus says, essentially, “You do know the way because you know me.”

And what is Jesus like? He heals. He feeds. He tells the truth. He welcomes the marginalized. He confronts empire. He washes feet.

So if Jesus is the way, then the way cannot be cruelty. The way cannot be exclusion. The way cannot be nationalism wrapped in a cross.

The way looks like courageous love. Which means the church is not called merely to admire Jesus. We are called to continue his works. “Greater works than these,” he says.

Not to imply we become more powerful than Jesus, but that love multiplies. What one embodied Christ began, whole communities can continue.

Which means our calling now is to become living stones, as 1 Peter says. Not decorative stones. Not stones thrown at enemies. Living stones, building a spiritual house where more people can find shelter. A church where more people can breathe. A church where justice matters. A church where troubled hearts can heal. A church that looks less like a mighty fortress and more like a circus tent of grace.

So here’s the thing: The world does not need more gated Christianity. It does not need more fear-based religion. It does not need more locked doors.

The world needs communities audacious enough to live as though Jesus meant it—that in God’s house there is room. Room to question. Room to grieve. Room to grow. Room to resist cruelty. Room to practice kindness. Room to protect one another. Room to become.

Because when our world is shaken...When hearts are troubled...When the night feels long...Our call is not to barricade ourselves inside smaller and smaller certainties. Our call is to help pitch the bigger tent. To trust that love is wider than fear. To trust that God’s household is larger than empire. To trust that the risen Christ is still making room. So may we be people of the big top. People who stretch the tent. People who widen welcome. People who practice the kind of love that makes more belonging possible. Because, after all, in God’s house there are many rooms.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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1 Peter 2:2-7; John 14:1-14
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