

November 6

Seven Grooms for One Bride

Luke 20:27-38

One of the deep longings we have, as people of faith, is to know what it will be like on the other side of the chasm we call death. Jesus spoke very little about the subject. There is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man; there was a word to the thief hanging beside him on the cross, and this encounter with the Sadducees. What Jesus says here is at once intriguing, reassuring, and disturbing. We will dive into his words in a moment but first we need some context.

The Sadducees' challenge to Jesus is unusual because it is the only time they are specifically mentioned in Luke. Their question is not meant to trap Jesus but instead concerns a long running dispute they have had with the Pharisees. It is almost as if they are seeking another learned position on the subject of whether or not there is a resurrection or eternal life. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection because they could find no proof for it in the first five books of the Bible, the Torah or Law, which was the only part they considered authoritative and binding. The Pharisees believed in the immortality of the soul, and so the two groups had argued over how to govern and what to believe. The Sadducees were also much more accommodating of Greek and Roman culture than the Pharisees and so were viewed by many as not being entirely faithful.

To prove their point that there could not be a resurrection, the Sadducees posed a hypothetical situation to Jesus. They were trying to create a scenario that was so absurd that it would destroy all arguments to the contrary. They begin from a place of solidity. They lift up the law of Levirate marriage which is found in the book of Deuteronomy. When it was first written down, the Israelites believed that one lived on in one's descendants and in their memory. There is still some of this belief in Judaism to this day. If a man died without heirs he would cease to exist both now but also forever. So, his widow was to become a secondary wife to his brother. Any children she would have would inherit the dead man's property but also as important, carry his name and memory forward.

The Sadducees therefore pose this absolutely ridiculous scenario. One woman ends up being married to seven brothers who all die. She never has children. If there is a resurrection, whose wife would she be? Seven grooms and one bride. You can almost see the smirk on their faces as they looked at Jesus and the Pharisees. My hunch is that this was a somewhat well-worn argument they had used against the Pharisees' belief in the immortality of the soul, and now wanted to see what Jesus would do with it. In Jesus' reply we have this brief glimpse into heaven.

We will get back to his words in a moment. But what he does next is unique. He uses the very Torah, that the Sadducees so confidently based their belief that there was no resurrection of the dead, to prove them wrong. Looking at the story of Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush Jesus asks, "If God says I am the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob is not God the God of the living and not the dead?" Well of course God is of the living. These people are dead yet God says I am their God so they must be alive. This means the soul is immortal. The Sadducees ask Jesus no more questions in Luke. For a brief moment he is the champion of the Pharisees, for Jesus has proved their position to be Biblical and authoritative.

Now let us see what Jesus said about eternal life. As soon as I begin talking about what heaven is like, everyone will tell me their theories, what they have read, and more. I am not trying to debunk anyone's beliefs. What I want you to do is listen with openness to the little information Jesus says here about the subject.

The biggest message is that eternal life is real! We are so positive that there is life after death we sometimes miss the importance of this fact. We do not have to doubt if there is life after death. God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. We have his assurance of eternal life. Praise be to God!

So far so good, but now things get a little more challenging. Jesus also says that relationships with others are going to be different. That relationships we currently experience will be different can be good news or bad news. If you have been in an abusive relationship you are glad to think that you won't have to spend eternity with that individual even if they have changed. Or say you were married twice, or like the poor

woman in the example seven times, it is good news to say you won't have to spend an eternity sorting out your relationships. This idea of relationships being different after death for some is very good news. But suppose you were married for many, many years. The marriage was one of mutuality and love. Your partner is your soul mate. You don't want to hear that this loving relationship will not continue in exactly this same way for all eternity. This is not good news.

Jesus, in sharing that relationships will be different was talking out of a cultural norm where marriage had little to do with love, at least initially, and all about property and progeny. In the world to come we won't need to have children and we are not worried about inheritance, so many of the reasons given for marriage go away. That is why he said relationships are different. Here I am going to move outside the biblical narrative for just a moment and give you my take on things. I believe, as it is recorded in I John, that God is love and all love is from God. If you have been in a loving relationship, that relationship was a gift from God. I believe God will figure out a way to bless that love for all eternity, even if our current understandings of what makes for a loving relationship change.

The other thing that Jesus teaches is that life comes from God. Life beyond death is God's gift to those who have accepted God's love and entered into relationship with God in this life. Jesus is not a universalist. He does not think this special relationship with God is open to everyone, no matter what. Eternal life is a gift just as all of life is a gift. He says that those who accept God's love are called children of the resurrection. This for me is part of what Jesus meant when he said to Nicodemus that we must be born anew. We are born to eternal life. We don't earn it by what we do but we receive it by receiving and sharing the love of God.

Words like this are always distressing to hear, for all of us know good caring people who do not go to church. We wonder, what about them? We are worried that we won't see our loved ones after death. We might be angry that this is a possibility. We want our faith to count for something, but don't want to exclude anybody that we really love. It is here that I say to people, "I am glad I am not God." It isn't up to me to decide who has opened themselves to the love of God and are gifted with becoming a child of

the resurrection. Jesus here never talks about what happens to all people after death. He is only focusing on those who are loved and in love with God. We should not then make pronouncements about all of those who do not fall into this category. The penitent thief on the cross shows us that there is some type of last minute chance. He did not live a godly life, but heard that he would be with Jesus in paradise. We forget about the other thief, the unrepentant one. His fate is left hanging. He berates Jesus but Jesus does not condemn him or curse him. He ignores him. Perhaps that is the worst of fates, to ultimately be unable to respond to or appreciate the love of God.

We want more when it comes to talk of heaven. See what we are told and what we are challenged to do. We are told there is eternal life. We are told it will be different from what we now know. We, who love God, are God's children, children of the resurrection. To receive that gift we need to love God which Jesus would tell us also means loving our neighbor. We want more, but this is enough. We trust the one who loves us and we challenge ourselves to be loving to others so they too will accept and receive this wonderful promise. The rest, we leave in God's loving hands believing in the one who love us and all people.