

Luke 20:27-38 (NRSV)

The Question about the Resurrection

(Mt 22.23—33; Mk 12.18—27)

²⁷ Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸ and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man^b shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰ then the second ³¹ and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³² Finally the woman also died. ³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

³⁴ Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵ but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶ Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”¹

^b Gk *his brother*

¹ *The Holy Bible : New Revised Standard Version*. 1996, c1989. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.

Set Free from the Futile Mind, the Senseless Heart and Death

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Text: *Luke 20:27-38*

Our passage this morning is not the easiest in the Bible to understand. Some passages are relatively easy to grasp, even if they are hard to live by. “Love your neighbor,” “love your enemies,” are clear enough; although most of us have a hard time doing it. But what are we to make of this morning’s passage, this rather opaque and silly argument between Jesus and the Sadducees about resurrection and seven brothers marrying the same woman in sequence? How are we to understand the argument, and even if we understand it, what importance does it have for you and me? Believe it or not, we can make quite a bit of it, and what we make of it will speak to the deepest part of our religious faith and our ways of living in the world. And I think we will have some fun of discovery along the way.

When the Sadducees engage Jesus, they look to an ancient Levirate law that requires that if a married man dies before he has any children, it is the responsibility of his brother to marry the widow and bring children into the world. The Sadducees used the Levirate requirement to pose an ingenious puzzle for Jesus. The Sadducees were very smart lawyers. And in a sense they put Jesus on the stand. They got him to agree with a few things, like lawyers do. And then they used their logic to prove that his beliefs were ridiculous. Listen in on the courtroom.

Sadducees: “Rabbi, we have heard that you are preaching about the truth of the resurrection. Is that true, Rabbi? Do you believe in the resurrection?”

Jesus: “Yes, that is true.”

Sadducees: “Good. Thank you. Now, rabbi, I would like you to read for the court this passage from Deuteronomy 25:5. What does it say?”

Jesus: “It says that ‘If a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.’”

Sadducees: “Thank you, Rabbi. Oh, by the way, you do accept the Bible, don’t you, rabbi? Please answer yes or no, if you don’t mind.”

Jesus: “Yes, I agree.”

Sadducees: “Good. So, now let be sure we understand you. You believe in the resurrection.

You also believe in this passage from the Bible. So tell me, rabbi, let’s suppose such a marriage happens seven times. Let’s suppose a man marries a woman and dies without children. Let’s suppose his next brother marries her, but he also dies without any children. Let’s suppose, one after another, his brothers marry the same widow and die without children. Suppose that, finally, when the woman dies she has married all seven brothers.

Then the Sadducees, with a smirk on their faces, ask “So Rabbi, if there really is resurrection, whose wife will the woman be in the afterlife?” The city lawyers easily trapped the bumpkin from the rural Galilee. This Jesus might attract crowds out in the country, but about 10 seconds with the Jerusalem experts, and he was mincemeat. They waited to see if he would answer at all.

Now, on the surface this interchange between the Sadducees and Jesus looks like a silly word-game. But there is actually a lot at stake. The Sadducees were not choosing an obscure law from Deuteronomy. And though it looks like it is, the law is not principally about marriage practices. The Sadducees rightly understood that this ancient law came from a time in which it was thought that life ended with death. The law comes from the time of Moses, or before, when resurrection was not even thought of yet. The old Levirate law was designed to cheat death in the only way the people could conceive, through children, through passing life on through the generations. A man had to marry his brother's widow, *if* they had had no children, *only if* they had had no children. The requirement was all about assuring the continuation of one's life through offspring.

Jesus, it would seem, was painted into a corner. What could he answer? Not much, at first glance. He says that marriage is in this life; in the afterlife people don't marry. Not a very strong retort. And then Jesus goes on to say something that seems even less on point and convincing. He says, "And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Jesus' response appears to be weak, hardly enough to escape the trap the Sadducees have sprung on him. But the Sadducees themselves would have realized that in fact it was they who had been outwitted, outwitted by the country bumpkin. For Jesus turned to the same part of the Bible the Sadducees held sacred, the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, the same part of the Bible they had used against him. Jesus turned to Exodus 3:6, where God says, "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Jesus then goes on to make the obvious point that God would not be claiming to be the God of the dead. He says, "Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Jesus is claiming that while this life ends in death, God has a notion of life that does not end in death, a notion of life that is very different. Jesus pointed the Sadducees, and his disciples, too, for they also did not understand, Jesus pointed all who would hear to God's notion of reality, reality that had nothing at all to do with death. The concept is a little hard to describe. How can I say it? Maybe it's something like this. Newton described laws of physics that seemed absolutely true. In fact, today, you can use Newton's laws to accurately calculate all kinds of things. If you drop a ball from the leaning tower of Pisa, like Galileo did, you can calculate how fast it will be going when it hits the ground. Newton's notions of gravity and acceleration allow you to do it. But then when Einstein came along, he realized that, in fact, Newton's laws were not absolutely correct. In fact, though they appeared correct, they were wrong and misleading in some very important ways. And it wasn't just a small measurement here, or a small idea there that was wrong. The whole thing was. Einstein developed his general theory of relativity and other scientific theories, and they utterly changed the world of physics. I will leave to the scientists among us, such as John Gish, to explain Einstein to you. But suffice it say, though most of us still act as though we live in a world described by Newtonian physics, Einstein proved that the Newtonian view of physical reality was wrong. Similarly, Jesus was saying to the Sadducees that although we act as though we live in a world in which death is the ultimate reality, the reality of God, which is as different our ordinary sense of reality as Newton's physics was from Einstein's, the reality of God says that our ordinary ideas of life and

death are simply incorrect. In the true version of reality, death as we know it simply does not exist.

The apostle Paul has argued that this misapprehension about who God is infects all of us, that it is part of the human condition, and that it causes us to wreak such havoc in the world. It is ironic that our ordinary perceptions of God and life and death lead us to such painful and futile ways of trying to protect and save ourselves. Like the Sadducees, we imagine what God is, or what the correct path is, and then we seek to punish and exclude those who are not with us. And we do it in the name of justice and goodness and even mercy.

The author James Alison uses the story of Salman Rushdie to make the point. Alison says,

This author, who is technically a Muslim, because his father was one, was judged by some of the competent authorities to be blasphemous against Islamic belief on account of some remarks of his in a book entitled *The Satanic Verses*. The Ayatollah Khomeini, then, applied to him formally the death sentence which Islamic Law prescribes for the Muslim who blasphemes: any Muslim who comes across him has not only the right, but the duty, to kill him, and this in the name of Allah, the just, the merciful.

Behind the *Fatwa* or decree of the Ayatollah, which began with the invocation of Allah in the form I have just quoted, there is a certain understanding of God which is absolutely bound in with a mechanism of violence. That is to say: God keeps the group pure and clean by expelling from its midst any contaminating element. When the Ayatollah pronounced his sentence against Rushdie in the name of Allah, the just, the merciful, it was not ... something ironic. For the Ayatollah, Allah precisely shows his mercy and his justice to the group by expelling the evil one. His mercy is shown to the community of the faithful by cleansing it of whatsoever impurity²

But we hardly need to turn to Islam to find the mechanisms of violence, purity and exclusion at work in the name of God. Our recent presidential election was filled with the rhetoric of God who is on our side. The religious arguments against same-sex marriage and against the appointment of a gay Bishop in the Episcopal church are all about protecting the purity of the in-group.

Jesus, in the interchange with the Sadducees meant to say that we are all infected with this sad capacity. Before Paul converted on the road to Damascus you may recall that he was a persecutor of the followers of Jesus, . And so Paul argues this same point, and from the vantage of personal experience and without kidding himself. Alison says it this way:

[Paul] therefore knew very well that “you are greatly mistaken” is not just something which some people are, some of the time, but something we all are, all of the time, and that the fatal secret at the heart of this our being in error is our need to kill, to persecute, to purify and cleanse so as to maintain security and order. So he writes in the first chapter of his epistle to the Romans, in what is one of the most powerful critiques of who we humans are to be found in literature, that we have all become futile in our thought, that our senseless hearts have

²*Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination*, New York: Crossroads, 1996, pp. 34-48. Quoted from http://girardianlectionary.net/res/ra_ch2a-b.htm

darkened. Furthermore, since we will not recognize God, God has handed us over to a reprobate mind and an improper conduct. It is not just some people who are like this (and the use of this passage to fire off at some people rather than others is surely one of the great ironies of Christian history), but all of us.³

The UCC, our own denomination, is beginning an advertising campaign in the next few weeks. Its tag line is, “God is still speaking.” The line refers to the Gracie Allen quote, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” Never place a period where God has placed a comma, for God is still speaking. The ads will appear on TV, and many churches, including ours, will hang posters and flyers in line with the theme. I have heard from several people that some other denominations are planning a counter-campaign. They are planning to put signs outside their churches that say, “God has spoken.” I take it that for the most part this reaction is one of good-natured rivalry. ‘God has spoken’ suggests that we in the UCC are only part way through the conversation and that these other churches have God’s full message.

I do have some worry about this counter-campaign, though. For this ‘we have God’s full message’ or ‘we alone are on the side of the right answer,’ these ideas are exactly where all of us as religious communities and religious people, all of us of religious communities and people of good intention are most vulnerable to self-delusion. It is where we are most vulnerable to capture by the futile mind, the senseless heart and death. Throughout human history these ideas have led to much misery and suffering and exclusion in the name of God, or in the name of purity, or in the name of the supposed good.

When Jesus answered the Sadducees in that rather obscure conversation about marriage, the widow and the seven brothers, he took a rather academic argument to another level. He suggested to the Sadducees that they, and all of us for that matter, are naturally inclined to settle for life that is actually death, that in our rush to be certain who God is we miss God altogether, that we rush to punctuate the sentence with a period when a comma would allow God to keep speaking to us. Jesus implores us to let God keep speaking. For then, and only then, may we begin to glimpse the incredible truth that Jesus spoke so simply of God: Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive. All of them are alive, not just Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but all of them, you and me included, if we but let God keep speaking to us. For when we let God keep speaking to us, then are we set free from the futile mind, the senseless heart and death. Those who have ears, let them hear. Amen.

³Ibid