

One Bride for Seven Brothers

*Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Olentangy Christian Reformed Church
Columbus, Ohio
November 11, 2007*

Luke 20:27-40

After a long journey, Jesus finally reached Jerusalem. That's when the real trouble started. The scribes and the chief priests wanted to do away with him, but they had to wait for the right moment. While they waited, they watched from the sidelines as others sparred with Jesus.

Some Sadducees came — they're the ones who deny the resurrection — and they had a question for [Jesus]. They said, "Teacher, Moses wrote to us that if a man's brother has a wife, yet he dies childless, then the man has to take his brother's wife as his own and sire a descendant for his brother.

"Suppose there were seven brothers. And the first one took a wife, but died childless. Then the second one took her [as his wife], as did the third one, and so on. The seven of them died, leaving no children. Finally the woman died, too.

"Now, in the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be? Because the seven of them each had her as his wife."

Jesus said to them, "The children of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of reaching that age and the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. And they can't die any longer, because they are like angels, because they are children of God, children of the resurrection.

"That the dead are raised even Moses discloses in the story about the bush. He says, 'The Lord, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is not the god of the dead, but of the living, because they all are alive to him."

Some of the scribes responded by saying, "Teacher, you have spoken well." Because they no longer dared to ask him anything.

Sermon

I suppose the story is familiar enough, though it is very strange. It's that ancient custom of *levirate marriage*. The custom was practiced by the Canaanites, the Hittites, and the Assyrians, as well as by the Israelites. The custom shows up most famously in the story of Ruth and Boaz, even if what happens there doesn't tightly fit the regulations given in Deuteronomy 25. The goal of levirate marriage was to preserve your brother's family line, to keep his branch from falling off the family tree by marrying your brother's wife and having a son with her for your brother. The Sadducees have a question for Jesus, and it concerns this custom of levirate marriage.

The question comes at the end of a story, a hypothetical story about one bride, seven brothers, and zero children. The question is this: Whose wife will the woman, who has married all seven brothers in succession — whose wife will the woman be in the resurrection? It's a loaded question at the end of an absurd story, both in service of the Sadducees and their theological and political agenda.

Now, that's not so unusual. Because everyone comes to the gospel with an agenda. We all bring our issues to the gospel. We all bring our concerns, our fears, our dreams to the gospel. We expect the gospel to calm our fears. We expect the gospel to fulfil our dreams. Or we expect the gospel to collapse under the weight of our concerns. We all bring our agendas to the gospel, even to the living gospel, Jesus himself.

And so the Sadducees brought their agenda to Jesus. We know very little about the Sadducees. They faded from view after the Jewish War of A.D. 66-70. From the New Testament and from the Jewish historian Josephus, we know that the Sadducees rejected the idea of resurrection. Resurrection was not present in the books of Moses. It only showed up later in upstart texts, like the final chapter of Daniel. Resurrection was not for the Sadducees.

Josephus goes farther than the New Testament. He says that the Sadducees rejected any idea of life continuing after death. It was their view that souls die with their bodies. It also appears that Sadducees had no use for angels.

All of this lies behind the Sadducees' story and the question they put to Jesus. And all of this lies behind Jesus' response. The absurd story told by the Sadducees was designed to make the whole notion of resurrection look ridiculous. Jesus' answer to the question that came at the end of that story was given in such a way as to make the Sadducees look ridiculous.

First, Jesus says, "You don't understand what resurrection life is like." Then he hints at the reason why. "In the resurrection," he says, "people will be like angels — which you, of course, don't believe in. Right."

Finally, Jesus uses the Sadducees' most revered source against them. "Just listen to Moses," Jesus says. "[Moses] says, 'The Lord, the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'" In Exodus 3, "the Lord" is a substitute for "I AM." So Moses says, "I AM the God of Abraham," not "I WAS the God of Abraham." The relationship between God and Abraham continues, Jesus indicates, because Abraham continues. God is not "the god of the dead, but of the living," Jesus says. "So the first plank in your anti-resurrection platform, the plank that says souls die with their bodies — that first plank is removed, and you have no place to stand."

Besides the Sadducees and their agenda, another agenda is at work in Luke 20. Luke writes his gospel — and the book of Acts — to a well-placed Roman official. And certain Roman concerns are evident in the way Luke tells the story of Jesus' encounter with the Sadducees. Luke's telling is similar to Matthew's telling, and it's similar to Mark's telling. But Luke's telling is also different in noticeable ways. And if we bear in mind certain Roman concerns — a concern for maintaining proper social order and stratification, a concern for preserving family religion, a concern for rightly honoring and communing with one's ancestors — if we bear in mind certain Roman concerns, we can see how Luke has shaped the story in his telling.

Here's what I mean. All versions of this story involve the custom of levirate marriage. Perhaps that custom was as strange to the Romans as it is to us. But they would have appreciated the need to maintain a family lineage. All versions of this story also invoke revered ancestors: Moses, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. This would resonate with the important concern within Roman culture that one's ancestors be remembered honorably and that their place in the family story be recounted.

But then, unique to Luke's telling, is the statement that only some people are considered worthy of the coming age, that only some people are worthy of resurrection. I don't think that's a distinction for us to worry about. Here I think it's more likely a way for Luke to shape the story to fit with certain Roman sensibilities. It assures socially fastidious Romans that the coming age and the resurrection were not for the social riff-raff.

Also unique in Luke's telling of this story is this statement about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob: "They all are alive to him." All tellings of this story affirm that God is not the god of the dead, but of the living. Only Luke adds explicitly that the fabled ancestors are alive. Family religion was very important for Roman culture and character. At the center of this religion was giving proper honor to one's parents and to one's ancestors. They were thought still to be alive and present with their families. And the families crafted and took with them small representations of the departed to anchor their ongoing presence. (If you've seen the movie *Gladiator* you may recall the little figurines that Maximus took with him and set

up on a makeshift altar in his tent, the figurines were of his departed family members.) Luke's affirming that the ancestors are still alive connects with a powerful Roman concern.

So, here's what we have. Jesus spoke to the Sadducees and responded to their agenda. He conveyed to them a core message about life continuing after death — at least for the children of God. Luke took this encounter and shaped it to connect with a Roman agenda. Yet he kept the core message intact. Life continues after death — at least for the children of God. And there was a little more to the core message shared by Jesus and by Luke: in its final form, beyond death, life would be born from resurrection.

Now, what does that core message say to us? We don't come to Luke 20, or to the gospel in general, like the ancient Sadducees or ancient Romans did. We don't come wanting to score theological points. We don't come wanting to preserve the health and structure of the empire. That's not us. We come, I think, with a more personal agenda. We want answers to questions about life and death. We want answers to questions about life after death. We want answers to questions about what someone has called life *after* life after death.

My mother died thirteen years ago. My grief-stricken father died two and a half years later. Their bodies are buried in Pine Grove Cemetery in Whitinsville, Massachusetts. My mother and father are in the ground! What more can I say than that?

Earle Stanley Morgan died in Canton, Ohio, eight days ago. (You don't know him.) He died eight days ago. His wife Mabel died thirteen years ago. His obituary says that they are "together again." Are they?

Paul David Myers-Barton (you don't know him either) died fifteen years ago at age nineteen. Recently, in their local paper, his family have expressed their confidence that one day they all will be together again. Meanwhile, they say that Paul David is their guardian angel. Oh, really?

A little over a year ago, Tom Grubb died. Eve Padavana died. Some time back, Paul Spee died. Your mother died. Your father died. Your friend and co-worker died. Where are they now? Where will they be in the end? Will there be — have there already been — any grand reunions? Are they all asleep, in suspended animation, while they wait for the end to come? Are they praising God? Are they watching us?

We come to the gospel with questions like these. It's our agenda, our personal agenda. But when we come to the gospel, we meet Jesus. Jesus, who towers over us. Jesus, who towers over our agenda. Jesus, who gives us something to cling to.

"What comes next," Jesus says, "won't be like anything you know well. You know all about marriage, for example. But that won't be part of it." Actually, there's probably little we know well that will be part of it!

"What it will be like," Jesus says, "is what you know only dimly, or what you only guess at." He says, "People will be like angels." But what do we really know about angels? About what they are?

"What it will be like," Jesus says, "is hard to say." He says, "People will be like angels. They will be children of God." But that's two ways of saying much the same thing. He says, "In the resurrection, people will be children of the resurrection." But that doesn't say anything at all!

The heart of what Jesus says is this: "They will be alive. Death is not the end. Death will not be the end." And what Jesus says is not just theory. When he speaks to those Sadducees, Jesus is only a few days away from death himself. He will die. He will be buried. (In the words of our catechism, he will "sanctify the grave for us.") And he will live again, the first to be raised!

All of this doesn't satisfy our agenda, not really. Instead it replaces our agenda. It takes our questions and places them in trust, in trust with Jesus. It also challenges our flights of fancy and speculation, reminding us of how little we know, and of how little we need to know. All we really need to know is Jesus. Because his agenda leads all the children of God to the other side of death.