

Luke 20, vs. 27 to 38. Resurrection. 2019

Alright, a slightly tacky joke to get us started this morning, apologies if you've heard it before: A woman asks her husband, "Honey, if I were to die, do you think you would ever marry again?" He replies, "Yes, dear, I suppose I might." "Well, do you think the two of you would sleep together in this same bed that you and I have shared?" she asks him. "Yes, dear, I guess we would," he responds. "Well, do you think she'd even use my same golf clubs?" his wife asked. "No dear," her husband responded, "she's left-handed."

Re-marriage is an interesting topic and is partly the subject of that joke and partly the subject of our gospel lesson this morning. Both the joke and the lesson involve remarriage after *death*, rather than divorce, and so I did a little research about widows and widowers remarrying, curious to know if my anecdotal observations were statistically accurate. Who do you think is more likely to remarry: a widow or a widower? I guessed widower, simply because I've seen it happen far more often than widows remarrying. In fact, I've had some rather humorous conversations with widows, when I've asked if they've considered remarrying, and quite often the response is spontaneous laughter; make of that what you will! As it happens, though, my guess was correct; more widowers remarry than widows. One study, for example, showed that 2 years after the loss of their spouse, 61% of the widowers were romantically involved or married, as opposed to 19% of the widows. Quite a difference! And yet in our gospel lesson, it is this *widow* who keeps re-marrying; not once, but 6 more times after the death of her original husband. She almost sounds a bit like a black widow, doesn't she? And certainly she

goes against our contemporary trends for remarriage statistics. Of course, what we need to recognize is that her culture was *completely* different from ours. And that actually, our Gospel lesson isn't really so much about remarriage as it appears at first glance. It's more about politics.

We just had an election day this past week of mostly more minor political positions, although Duluth reelected Mayor Emily Larson. But a year from now we'll have survived the 2020 presidential election and we know all too well the kind of political grandstanding we will endure for the next 12 months. Not only will candidates try to win our hearts and wallets and votes with their merits; they will also try to discredit or even villainize their opponents. This kind of dynamic is nothing new and is present in our lesson from Luke, set about 2000 years ago. The intent lying behind this question about remarriage is actually a desire to embarrass Jesus publicly by asking him a question he won't be able to answer. Not that Jesus was running for political office, but he was gaining enormous popularity as a grass roots leader, and the other powers that be most definitely felt threatened and wanted to bring him down.

So, who were these powers that be for 1st C. Palestine? Consider that just as our country has political parties, so did First Century Palestine, except that their political parties were primarily religiously oriented political parties. This is partly because the Jewish faith so influenced every aspect of Jewish life, and partly because the genuine political power for governing lay in the hands of the Roman occupiers of their country. That only left the hierarchy of religious power available to the ambitious Jewish man. The leading religious/political groups of that day included the Pharisees, whom we often

read about. They were actually not such bad folks, contrary to the press they receive in the Gospels. They were those who took very seriously the laws of the Old Testament and sought to find ways to make obeying those laws possible in the daily life of the average Jewish person. Then there were the Essenes, a group of ascetic Jews who lived in hermit like conditions of simplicity and deprivation. John the Baptizer seems to have had ties to this group. You remember how he wore camel skins, ate grasshoppers, and lived in the desert in a hermit-like way. Finally, there were the Sadducees. They tended to be men of priestly and wealthy descent who took an incredibly literal approach to the laws of the Old Testament, making obedience to the law only a possibility for folks of similar wealth and leisure and education. The very ascetic and hermit-like nature of the Essenes meant that they played less of a role in public affairs, but the other two groups did. The Pharisees were more of a populist group; the Sadducees were the elite. The Sadducees had a tendency to disapprove of beliefs which brought comfort to the masses, among these, a belief in the resurrection of the dead.

All of these groups were genuinely faithful people who took seriously their Jewish faith and looked to live right before God; but all of these groups found Jesus to be a problem. He didn't fit into any of the groups, he refused to align himself with any of them, and yet he was drawing a huge popular following. None of these groups welcomed a new competitor for religious/political allegiance. And so it is that we read of numerous conflicts between Jesus and either the Pharisees or the Sadducees and in this case, it was the Sadducees.

The purported subject of the conflict—remarriage--, therefore, was not actually of much interest to those asking Jesus the question with which our lesson begins. They likely didn't care what Jesus believed about the resurrection of the dead; quite likely they already knew that answer. But, they want to pose a question for him that presents a conundrum, a situation so complex and absurd, that Jesus will be unable to respond. So they choose the belief of the resurrection of the dead, coupled with the tradition within Judaism that a man would marry his brother's widow in the case of his brother's death, particularly if there were yet no children to carry on the dead brother's blood line. Men and women died early and often in the 1st C. Which was a problem for everyone involved. A young widow without a husband or a male heir had no financial safety net to fall back on. And if the man died childless, he leaves behind no heirs to carry on his name, an all important consideration for this patriarchal society. The tradition therefore evolved that the brother of a man who died without an heir would marry that brother's widow, in order to provide that heir for the now dead brother. At its best, this law provided some protection for the widow and it carried on the line of descent and the family name for men. At its worst, it turned women solely into vehicles of providing heirs and put men under obligations to their dead brothers that limited their ability to make their own choices. But such was the law, and it was not unusual for a brother to marry a dead brother's widow for this reason. In this instance presented by the Sadducees, however, the situation has been taken to an extreme. The first husband dies childless, then the second has a go at it with the first brother's widow, but also dies childless, and so on through all 7 brothers, until finally that poor, worn out widow of 7

husbands also dies. And now here's the problem, the perplexity that Jesus will be unable to answer that will prove the Sadducees right in their denial of resurrection after death and that will make Jesus look foolish: Whose wife would she be in heaven, when she was married to all 7? The Sadducees expect Jesus to shuffle his feet, scratch his chin and be stumped.

But, Jesus is not stumped. Instead, he turns the table on his opponents with his reply. She will be no one's wife, he explains. Because while in this age, men and women marry and that's of great significance, in the heavenly realm, in the resurrected life, that doesn't happen. There is no state of matrimony in heaven, Jesus tells them. Neither do people die there. They are like angels, he says. Notice he says, like angels, not that they are angels, since angels are a whole separate order of creation from us. But in heaven, we are children of God and children of the resurrection, Jesus says.

Then he leaves behind the remarriage topic, in order to address directly the underlying issue of whether or not there is a resurrection of the dead. He looks back to the Old Testament passage where God identifies himself to Moses in the burning bush as being the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Since God is God of the living, not of the dead, that demonstrates that those great patriarchs who had died long before, had, in fact, been raised from the dead. So, the gist of what Jesus tells them is that there is a resurrected life, the point this lesson drives home is clear: Jesus believes in the resurrection of the dead. Jesus will himself be raised from the dead. Which might encourage us to ask ourselves if *we* believe in resurrection and hope to be raised ourselves.

This talk of resurrection may seem misplaced right now. Mother nature has been extremely clear in communicating that this is the season of autumn, of death and dormancy in nature, of freezing temperatures and long, dark nights. It's much easier to think about resurrection in the season of Easter, when spring holds promise of rebirth and renewal. On the other hand, there may be greater value in reflecting on resurrection right now, when cold and dark do press in on us. Late October into November is a time when we focus on death, as in different ways Halloween, All Saint's celebrations, even Veteran's Day observances, may all bring to mind those who have died. And any liturgical geek (like myself) could tell you that regardless of the season of the church year, *every* Sunday is to be experienced as a little Easter, a little celebration of resurrection. That's why we worship on Sunday, because that was the day of resurrection. So it actually does make good sense for us to ponder this morning---do we share this belief with Jesus? Do we believe in resurrection? Do we believe that God can bring life out of death?

While there is much in this broken and sinful world that would look to snuff out that hope of resurrection and renewal, there are also any number of witnesses that would encourage it. Every time we experience the resilient and powerful Spirit of God at work, we are pointed towards resurrection, towards a God who can bring hope from despair, order from chaos, and life from death. I would have to say that the nearly 2 weeks we were without a furnace or hot water in this church offer up an excellent true parable of God's Spirit providing resilience, renewal and hope. In spite of no heat or hot water, coupled with unusually cold temperatures for this time of year, coupled with some of the

most significant events of our year; God made a way. On Nov. 1, we served 288 Fishcake dinners and hosted a most marvelous celebration of community and heritage. We observed a big and meaningful All Saint's Sunday, Nov. 3, highlighting both our grief for those who have died and celebrating our hope of resurrection. Several dozen community women met on last Wednesday, Nov. 6, to make enough lefse to sink a Norwegian fishing boat, laughing and talking all the while in the cold. Numerous church members provided space heaters or ran down to meet workers or came by to turn on or off heaters to keep pipes from freezing. Good humor and positive attitudes abounded. And let's face it; we're good; but we're not *that* good! That reality testifies to the presence and power of God's Spirit. The God who can turn around the most stalled out situations, who can inspire generosity and hard work under discouraging circumstances, who can create boisterous community around fishcakes and meatballs, who can put songs in the hearts of those grieving or despairing, who can even bring life out of death. Yes, *that* God; the God we know incarnate in Christ; the God whose care for us extends from our life in this realm to our life in the next. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, Jesus assures us. In God, we live now and we also live in some radical, unimaginable, and marvelous way after death. Sounds a little crazy; sounds too good to be true; that's why it's a hope and belief that we take on faith. It all comes down to trusting God in the end. Which is the same element of faith we have to practice again and again every day of our lives. As Christians, we affirm that God is good and that God's gift of life to us never ends. We believe in a God Who can bring life from death. We believe in renewal, rebirth, and resurrection.

Amen.