

**Will the Circle Be Unbroken?**  
A Sermon for Every Sunday  
*Luke 20:27-38*

It's not every day that the Bible makes a grown man cry, but I remember one day that it did, and it was today's Gospel reading that did it.

One of my parishioners in North Carolina had asked me to go see her father—begged me really—because his wife had died the year before and the only thing that had kept him going since then was the idea that someday he would be with her again in Heaven. And then somebody told him that wasn't true, had used this passage from Luke 20 to *prove* that it wasn't true because right there, in verse 35, Jesus said “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.” “And so you won't be married in Heaven,” this person had told him. You might as well just get over that idea.” I grabbed my Bible and went to see him but he was on his way out the door to pick up his grandson from the elementary school. “Fine,” I said. “I'll ride with you.” And it was there in his car, while we were waiting in line on Bivens Street, that he broke down and cried. He was a big, strong man. I hated to see it. And so I did what I could to reassure him.

I took another look at this passage.

In chapter 20 Luke tells us that the Sadducees, those who don't believe in the resurrection of the dead, came to Jesus asking this unusual question. They may have been trying to trip him up, or they may have just been trying to settle a long-running argument with the Pharisees, who *did* believe in the resurrection. At any rate they began

with what must have been their standard proof-text on the subject—Moses’ teaching about marriage from Deuteronomy 25. Let me quote directly from the source:

When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel (Deuteronomy 25:5-6, *NRSV*).

The first time I read that passage I was thirteen years old, living at home with my five brothers. I began to imagine how such a thing could really take place: how my brother Ed, for instance, could marry a girl and die before they had children and how my brother Scott might have to step in and “perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her.” And then I thought, “What if Scott died, too, and it was my turn to ‘perform the duty’? How would that be?” And that’s when I began to be very careful about who I let my older brothers date.

“Now there were seven brothers,” the Sadducees began. “The first married and died, childless; and then the second, and likewise the third, and so in the same way all seven died childless and finally the woman died, too. In the resurrection of the dead, therefore, whose wife will she be? For the seven had married her.” You have to admit; it does pose a problem. And not just in extraordinary cases like this one. There are plenty of ordinary cases in which a woman remarries after the death of her husband or a man remarries after the death of his wife. Sometimes I see tombstones that were purchased when the grief was still fresh, when the widow couldn’t imagine ever loving another man. There is her husband’s name with his birth and death dates, and there is her name, with her birth date carved in stone and a blank space where that other date will go. Sometimes those tombstones say things like, “Together Forever,” but the years go by and she meets a

nice man and decides to get married again and then what? In the resurrection whose wife will she be?

And that's where Jesus offers the Sadducees this troubling answer: "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." I sat there in that man's car for a long time, studying that passage. Finally I said. "Look, it doesn't say that you won't *be* married in heaven. It just says that in the resurrection people don't *get* married, see? 'They neither marry (present tense) nor are given in marriage.' It's another way of saying there are no *weddings* in Heaven."

That seemed to help him. But I made the mistake of reading on to find out why there aren't any weddings in heaven and the reason Jesus gives is because there won't be any death there, as if the only reason to get married were to make babies, to replenish the population, and thus ensure the survival of the species. I don't know if that's why you got married, but when I got married the survival of the species was not really the first thing on my mind. I had love on my mind, as I think most of us do these days. But if you read closely you will find that's not really the biblical view of marriage. Marriage, in the Bible, seems to be little more than a stable social structure in which children can be born and reared.

So, when we talk about marriage in America these days we had better be careful not to embrace too quickly the biblical model of marriage in the same way we want to be careful not to embrace "biblical family values." When people begin to talk to me about those values I say, "Which biblical family did you have in mind? Cain and Abel? Lot and his daughters? Jacob and Esau? David and Absalom? Those biblical families had

some terribly twisted values. And when it comes to marriage it's true that if marriage is all about *making* babies then, yes, it would have to be marriage between men and women. We are human beings, after all. We reproduce sexually. But it wouldn't necessarily have to be marriage between "one man and one woman" as people like to say. If making babies is the point then the more wives you have the more effective your efforts. Look at Jacob: he produced twelve sons and at least one daughter through his two wives and their two maidservants. Solomon—who set some kind of record—had 300 wives and 700 concubines (he practiced nation-building the old fashioned way!).

The problem comes for the Sadducees when they try to imagine one wife with seven husbands rather than the other way around. If wives were considered property, which they were, whose property would she be? The seven would be fighting over her in the resurrection, making the whole notion seem ridiculous. That's just what the Sadducees wanted to do, they wanted to make the whole notion of resurrection seem ridiculous, but Jesus sees things another way. They don't marry there, he says, neither are they given in marriage, because there isn't any death there. Remember that child's letter to God that says, "Dear God: Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones why don't you just keep the ones you got now?" In the resurrection that's just what God does—he keeps the ones he's got. And so there isn't any need for a social structure in which children can be born and reared just so the species can be preserved. And there isn't any need to have children so you can secure your social status or achieve some small measure of immortality. And I'm going to bet my bottom dollar that those women who are considered worthy of the resurrection are not going to be treated as anyone's property ever again. Things are different there, thank God.

And resurrection is real. Jesus proves it to the Sadducees by referring to a story from Exodus, one of the few books in the Bible they accepted as authoritative. It was that story from Exodus 3, the one about the burning bush, where God identifies himself to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He doesn't say he *was* their God. He says he *is*, right now. For he is not the God of the dead, but of the living. "You want to know if there's a resurrection?" Jesus asks. "Take that!"

It's a good answer. At least it works for them. In the very next verse the Scribes who were listening burst into applause. And after that no one dared ask him any more questions. But I've got one: I accept the fact of the resurrection but what about reunion? Will the circle be unbroken? Will that man who wept in his car that day be reunited with his wife? And in what way? Will they have a little cottage right there beside some golden street in heaven where they can sit on the front porch in their rocking chairs as they hold hands and watch the sun set over the crystal sea? And if so what about the second wife that same man later married? Where will she sit? And whose hand will she hold?

As far as reunion goes—I'm sure of it. Not only from this passage in which Jesus speaks of the eternal family reunion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but also in that passage from John 14 where he tells the disciples that he is going to prepare a place for them so that where he is there they may be also. If that's not reunion I don't know what is! And as far as the kind of relationship we might enjoy in that place? Is it possible that the most loving and intimate relationships we have known in this life are but a taste of the relationships we will enjoy in the life to come? I can imagine that man seeing his first wife in heaven and embracing her with tears in his eyes, telling her how much he missed

her and how glad he is to see her again. I can imagine that all the best memories of the life they lived together would be fresh and new for him there. But I can also imagine him introducing her to his second wife without any fear that she would be jealous or angry. All that small and fearful, greedy and grasping love would be gone, replaced by the kind of love God has for us—abundant as the ocean and just as full of grace. Maybe the two of them would go strolling off hand in hand—those two wives—while he stayed behind shaking his head with wonder.

Who knows? Only God. The best we can do is speculate. But we can know this much at least, thanks to Jesus, that resurrection is real, that reunion is real, and that in that resurrection reunion things really will be. . . different.

The circle will be unbroken.

—*Jim Somerville* © 2016