

Luke 20:27-38

It is easy to hear the Sadducees words as insincere - even though Luke doesn't say they were trying to trap Jesus. What if they were serious? And what if Jesus is not chastising them, but sincerely telling them, "That is not a God problem. That is a being-too-pragmatic-down-in-the-weeds-problem."

The Sadducees, a religious group we don't actually know too much about, ask Jesus a question about the woman with 7 husbands. Their question refers to an ancient belief, prior to a belief in resurrection, that after death you live on through your descendants and in their memory. So, if a man died without children (obviously this is a very male-centric, patriarchal system) his brother was obligated to take his wife and have children for him. This ensured that the deceased man's property would stay within the immediate family, and would also offer security for the dead brother's widow. In fact, if a brother refused, his house would be publicly shamed in front of the elders.

So, the Sadducees ask, if all seven brothers "do the right thing," marry the widow, and die, how does that get sorted out in heaven? A very practical question.

Now, I have two brothers and I'm sure my wife is 100% not compatible with either of them; it is hard for many of us to relate to this hypothetical.

Maybe something nearer our hearts that we can relate to is our pets - the four-legged creatures that join us on our earthly pilgrimage. Let's look at our whole life and all the companions we get - first, the dog we grew up with that we loved more than all others who died when we were still kids. (substitute "cat" if needed), my childhood dog was a spaniel named Fritz, and by him all other dogs are judged. After our childhood dog dies, there are the dogs we love as teenagers, until they die. Then there are the dogs we loved as a young adults, the dogs who support us in the trials of grown-up life, who come running to comfort us when we were upset, and then after a number of years, they die. And so on, the family dog who is good with the kids, the dog we love in the golden years of our career, the dog we love in retirement. Eventually, our last companion keeps us company as we drew our final earthly breaths, and they too die a

few years after we do. Eventually, everyone is dead and goes to heaven. Which one will be ours? Which one will be our favorite? A very practical question.

Jesus' graciously answers the question before dismissing it. He says, "there is no marriage in heaven," or, in my elaborately spun analogy, "there are no favorite dogs in heaven," but instead of sitting with that, Jesus continues into a discourse about God, about life.

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I think Jesus is showing us a template for a way to be faithful that is as relevant today as ever. We all have our lists of legitimate questions - many of those lists are quite long. Questions like, why do bad things happen to those we love? God, what were you thinking when you created those awful stinging yellow-jackets, anyway? How much money should I give away? How do we save our church? How do we "attract" young people? Why does everything need to be so hard? If the bible is God's word, why is it so confusing? If church is a place of practicing God's love, why are the people there so mean? How are we supposed to support all these ministries without enough funds? What would we do if we didn't have this building?

It is good to ask God these questions - and if you haven't asked God all your questions yet, you aren't ready to hear the rest of my sermon. Go, ask God 1,000 questions, and revisit what I'm about to say in a few weeks. There is a link on the website.

It is good to ask God these questions, in that it is important that we show all of the different parts of ourselves to God, and it is important for us to know that she sees us and all of our different bits - the parts we are proud of, and the parts we don't want her to see - but there is more to being faithful than even such a vulnerable inventory. The question from the Sadducees was, I think, a good one, but as Jesus pointed out its focus was too narrow; they had a one-dimensional view of reality and the rules it was thought to obey. They were stuck on a technical problem that blinded them from seeing the bigger picture, that God is God of the living and of angels, not bound to a thought experiment or practical problems.

Our lists of questions fail under similar scrutiny: they just seem more legitimate to us because we have so much invested emotionally in them, but they too are one-dimensional in that they are only focused on us as individuals and us as this parish

body, focusing on technical problems so much they eclipse the miracle of life, they distract us from the magnificent gift of God being God of the living and of angels, calling us beyond our problems.

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Our questions are always with us:

Why do we have to move the pews? Why don't young people (everyone under age 50) go to church? Why don't we have enough money? What will we do if we make a big change and people leave the church? How do we get people to pledge more? How do we get more people to sign up for stuff? How do we trick more people into coming here? Why can't things just go back to the way they used to be? What does this place look like in the future?

The anxiety is real. The fear is real. The questions are real - and I'm not here to tell you shame on you for thinking these questions or even praying them. They are questions that I think everyone here who really cares about this community has asked, they are questions I have asked, and they are questions we ask together.

They are good questions. But today Jesus reminds us not to get stuck there. It is almost like he is saying, "those who belong to this age are completely wrapped up in worrying about buildings and money and numbers - but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither worry about buildings or money or attendance. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 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 God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but the living; for to him all of them are alive."

God is alive, and invites us to participate. We don't have to invent this life, create it, think it into being, or implement it. We don't have to succeed, in our individual lives or in our ventures together. We don't need to wonder why God doesn't seem to want to join our church. What we need is to be alive, joining in the life of God. We need to be free as the children of light. We need to go and join God's church.

Amen.