

What's Next?
United Church of Broomfield
November 10, 2019

Luke 20:27-38

²⁷ Some Sadducees, who deny that there's a resurrection, came to Jesus and asked, ²⁸ "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that *if a man's brother dies leaving a widow but no children, the brother must marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.* ²⁹ Now there were seven brothers. The first man married a woman and then died childless. ³⁰ The second ³¹ and then the third brother married her. Eventually all seven married her, and they all died without leaving any children. ³² Finally, the woman died too. ³³ In the resurrection, whose wife will she be? All seven were married to her."

³⁴ Jesus said to them, "People who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage. ³⁵ But those who are considered worthy to participate in that age, that is, in the age of the resurrection from the dead, won't marry nor will they be given in marriage. ³⁶ They can no longer die, because they are like angels and are God's children since they share in the resurrection. ³⁷ Even Moses demonstrated that the dead are raised—in the passage about the burning bush, when he speaks of the Lord as *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.* ³⁸ He isn't the God of the dead but of the living. To him they are all alive."

Jenna and Candace did all the right things in all the right ways and in the right order. They met immediately after they had graduated from college, when Jenna was starting to climb up the ladder in a banking career and Candace had taken a job as a petroleum engineer in a company that had its office in the same building as Jenna's bank. They discovered friendship first, then love. They married, surrounded by all their family and friends and the prayers of support they brought to the wedding. They joined a church and sang in the choir. They bought their first house. And three years later, Jenna was artificially inseminated. After Jenna's uncomplicated pregnancy and childbirth, they welcomed little Haley into their lives.

They were truly grateful for all that they received, even as Jenna did not recover from such a normal birth as quickly as her doctor thought she should have. They counted their blessings even as the hardness in Jenna's abdomen was labeled "mass of tissue," then "tumor," then "cancer." As their mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers cared for Haley, Candace and Jenna sought one opinion and its matching treatment after another. And they thanked each doctor, each technician, each nurse who treated Jenna as they traveled from hospital to renowned cancer center.

Then came a day when gratitude and good manners could carry them no further. On that day, Jenna stood alone in front of the bathroom mirror and studied her head, nearly bald from the

chemotherapy, and her body, burned out from radiation, and faced the single fact that most of us spend our lives avoiding. She was dying — sooner rather than later. And then what?

It is the “then what?” question that the Sadducees were asking Jesus in the story we just heard from the gospel of Luke. By the time this conversation occurred, Jesus has already entered the city of Jerusalem, cleansed the Jewish temple of the moneylenders and engaged in several controversies with various groups of authorities who question his right to be viewed as such a prominent teacher.

The Sadducees, a group of Jewish priests who rejected belief in the resurrection, were the conservatives of their day — the people who wanted to conserve an ancient Israelite understanding that there really is nothing beyond the grave, that life ends with the close of the coffin lid. Other Jewish groups like the Pharisees, in the Sadducee view, were innovators, daring to challenge this ancient belief. And as far as those conservative Sadducees were concerned, Jesus was one of the innovators. So, they approach him with the last of the contentious questions that Jesus will answer before his death. And when Jesus responds, he not only effectively silences those who would trap him, but he also speaks, the only time that Luke records, about resurrection.

The Sadducees ask, “In heaven, in the resurrection, to whom is a woman married if she has wedded a man who has died, and then, in accordance with our law, has wedded all six of his brothers, all of whom also have died?” That is the question the Sadducees asked, drawing upon the law of levirate marriage expounded in Deuteronomy 25:5-6: “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 wife’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a wife’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.”

The way they frame the question is actually quite silly. The Sadducees knew as well as Jesus knew, as we ourselves know, that marriage in heaven is not really an important issue. It’s important for us to believe that the loving relationships we have here on earth will continue into eternal life, even though we don’t actually know for sure, exactly how earthly relationships will exist beyond....well, beyond earth.

But the question behind it, the “then what?” question, is very significant. For who does not want to know what happens when we die? And who does not want to be remembered, want her or his name to never be blotted out of our family’s history, our children’s memory? As Alan Culpepper explains in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, “Prior to belief in resurrection, the

Israelites believed that one lived on in one's descendants and in their memory."¹ The central point of levirate marriage is that of being remembered by one's family for generations.

Back to the story with which the sermon begins: As she looks at herself in the mirror, Jenna recognizes that her daughter will be in good hands. Her wife, Candace, will give that child everything she needs, and she will be helped by their families. So, she's not worried about that. What is really nagging her is this question: How will Haley remember her? Her little girl is just an infant, still a few months shy of her first birthday, without the developmental ability to form cognitive impressions of her mother. How will she come to know her mother as a living, breathing, dreaming, caring human being?

And so, what Jenna worries about are the things she will not be able to pass on to her daughter. From the simple matters: her taste for dark chocolate; her need to read *The Lord of the Rings* every seven years; the happiness she finds in a good walk through the park down the street. To the truly significant issues: her love of the creator as she has learned about God through worship and the experience of human love; the joy she knows in her marriage to Candace; the practical wisdom she has learned — listen first, laugh often, do good. How will Haley ever understand her mother? How will she remember her and tell her grandchildren about her, if she is not with her daughter as she grows up?

To be remembered. Isn't that a concern we all share? Don't we want people to remember us — as we leave a workplace, as we leave a church, as we leave this life? And isn't memory a way to live forever, or at least beyond the borders of death?

In this story that Luke is telling us, we see that even if Jesus doesn't accept the silliness of what happens in the resurrection to a woman married to seven brothers in this life, he does understand the impulse behind it. We want to live on in the memory of our descendants and of people whom we love. He accepts the basic desire — and then he enlarges God's response to it. For even as we live beyond death in the memory of our loved ones, we also live into the memory of God. And this is a memory that has little to do with how we might be remembered on earth — to whom we were married, what we accomplished, to whom we gave birth. It is a memory that refuses **human definitions** of the relationships and triumphs — and failures — that we think should matter. It is a memory that reaches from far beyond the borders of this life and holds us close, even now, just for being the children of God.

In Jesus' view, God is saying, "I love you and I keep you close to me even after death, not because of who you know and what you do but because you are my child. You are always alive

¹ *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. IX, 388.

to me and you will live in my memory, even as you live eternally in my presence. For I am the God of the living. I give you eternal life and so you are never forgotten.”

Jenna and Candace do not know what the future holds for them. They can do their best to make sure that Haley remembers each of them, regardless of when or how they leave this life. And we cannot know our future, any more than we can control how people will remember us. But, through the grace of the one who taught us to look beyond our silly yearnings into God’s very heart, our Lord Jesus Christ, we can know this: As surely as we all will die, we will also live again in the enfolding and eternal presence of a God who calls each one of us “beloved child of the resurrection.”

May we all cling to this our hope. In the name of Jesus.

AMEN