

Another Fine Mess

What a bizarre question. Don't you find that whole exchange a bit bizarre? This is not *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, this is *one bride for seven brothers*. It's creepy.

And of course, the question is sexist to its core – to whom will she belong? Whose *property* is she? This is not a conversation about a merry widow. This woman has endured a life of suffering and heartache, compounded by patriarchy. She may be hypothetical, but someone like her is real.

Moreover, it would be easy for us to ask the wrong question of this text. The question appears to be about the resurrection of the dead. It is easy to jump immediately to wanting some of our most pressing and urgent questions answered.

It is normal that we have curiosity about death – indeed there are times when we deeply need to know that there is *more*, that God has plans for us and that our loved ones are resting in God's care. It is natural and expected that we should wonder these things because we know that death is a part of life.

But that's not what this question put to Jesus is about. Not really. The Bible is far less loquacious on the topic of death than we want it to be sometimes, and while can I promise you the Gospel has something to say about death, that's not the point of this text; that is not the driving question in *this* story. There is much more going on.

That is why the disciples would have heard that question very differently, perhaps than we do. They knew it was a litmus test between two rival factions. This is a doctrinal question, smugly attempting to paint Jesus into a theological corner, forcing him into alienating one group or another.

It's a trap. These co-conspirators have devised the perfect question because it appears there must be a right or wrong answer to it. I'm sure Peter and James and the others were thinking to themselves, "Well, this is another fine mess you've gotten us into."

To understand the doctrinal question at the heart of this story, we need to know a little about *marriage* in the first century.

It is important to start with a Biblical understanding of marriage, and by that I mean: *Fasten your seatbelts, this is nothing like you've seen.*

In the Bible, particularly in the earliest texts we have, *love marriage* is a completely alien concept. Indeed, marriage between only two parties is a completely alien concept. Marriages were arranged; remember Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah/Rachel? Think of David and all of his wives. Husbands and wives may have loved each other, but love was not the end in mind regarding marriage. Preservation of property and preservation of lineage were the primary concern. What's more, there was a marriage debate going in the first century. Was marriage only between a man and a woman, or was marriage between a man and *women*? With

preservation of property as the chief concern, the practice of *Levirite Marriage* developed in the ancient Hebrew culture.

The basic idea goes like this: if a man died without an heir, his property and lineage must be preserved. So, his brother would be obliged to marry his widow and they would produce offspring. It didn't really matter if his brother was already married, or for that matter whether or not the widow could even stand her husband's brother. It had to be done. The first male offspring of that union would become the deceased brother's heir, and would provide for his widowed mother in her dotage.

If you go looking for the practice of *levirite marriage*, you'll find it is all over the Old Testament. Think of the story of Ruth, for example: When her sons died, Naomi released Ruth and Orpah, her two daughters-in-law, from their obligation to her family. Her words were, "Do I still have sons in my womb for you?" It is all over the Bible. Odd as it seems, it was a part of the covenant understanding of the community. To do anything different would be to radically redefine marriage.

So, these sects, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, dreamed up this scenario and questioned Jesus about what happens to a woman so unlucky in life and love. After her brothers-in-law-turned-husbands died, she too, ultimately died.

It absolutely looks like a question about what happens to us when we die, but it's not.

The Sadducees, holding only the Pentateuch as Scripture, that's Genesis through Deuteronomy, say, "There is no resurrection of the dead." It doesn't appear in Scripture; therefore, it isn't so. And that's true. Resurrection doesn't appear in those books. The Pharisees, though, adding the words of the Prophets and the writings, or Joshua through Malachi in the Bible as we understand it, say, "Oh yes, there is." That's a bit of an overstatement because the Old Testament canon was still fluid at this point, but for our purposes, it basically works. They each turn their question to Jesus. No matter how he answers, *someone is going to get mad*.

Another fine mess, indeed.

Twice before in this chapter, Jesus was faced with gotcha-game questions. Twice he was deemed to answer wisely.

Jesus begins by pointing out the question is absurd. Here is a paraphrase of what he said: *That's not how any of this works. You're thinking of how things happen in this world, because we're obsessed with continuation of life. But in the age to come, there is no more death. She isn't anyone's property or problem in the age to come because death is no more. The way you're looking at it isn't the way that God sees it. None of this is the main thing.* Jesus seems to be saying, *Let's make the main thing the main thing.*

You see this isn't the first question that has tripped up folks. They've asked about taxes, they've asked about baptism. What they are really doing is questioning the authority of Jesus. They want to know by what *right* he says what he says.

Now, I *tend* to defend these conversation partners of Jesus. After all, for any of us, we want to know if we cite someone that they are a reliable source of truth.

And to be fair they got hung up on things that were important to them, and they brought Jesus a debate that dogged their own conversation.

“I’m a Sadducee and we believe this...”

Or, “I’m a Pharisee, and this is the right way.”

“Well, we can’t both be right, let’s make *him* decide!”

When we get too hung up on whether we’re right or someone else is wrong, odds are very good we’re headed down a road away from the gospel.

It reminds me of an old Scottish story. You’d think I’d be able to do a Scottish accent by now, but it never comes out right, so with apologies, here goes.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the World Council of Churches, seeing a need for the church to contribute to the reconstruction of the world, sent three ministers from the Church of Scotland to Greece. Why Scotland? Why Greece? I don’t know. But as it were, the three ministers arrived and were taken to the home of a priest in the Orthodox tradition. Seeing that these ministers had come from far away to bring hope and to celebrate the end of the awfulness of war, the priest racked his brain to think of what he could offer to his guests by way of hospitality.

Remembering an old bottle of wine down in his cellar, he rushed down and brought it up and, in his language, said, “I have been saving this for a very long time. It’s not much, but will you share it with me?”

Two of the Scots’ ministers looked somewhat dour and replied, “Oh. No. We don’t drink.” But the third took the outstretched glass of wine and drained it to the bottom, handing it back with a smile.

The priest, not wanting the celebration to end, produced from a dusty shelf an old cigar box, and blowing off the debris, pulled out cigars and offered them to the Scots. Again, two of the ministers declined, “Oh. No. We don’t smoke.” But the third again took the offered cigar and he and the priest lit them and lingered into the evening, savoring the stale cigars and blowing smoke up the stars.

As they were driving away, the two ministers turned to the third and said, “What were you thinking? We don’t drink. We don’t smoke!” The third replied to them, “No. We don’t drink. And we don’t smoke. And I don’t drink. I don’t smoke. But one of us needed to act like a Christian!”

You know, doctrine *is* important. What we actually believe is important. When we study the teachings of the church, we’re learning the common language of faith so that we can talk together about important things *like* what we believe. But doctrine itself is not the main thing.

I suspect very little of what divides us is actually the main thing. And it’s awfully tempting sometimes to define ourselves and divide ourselves by what we believe about something rather

than what God believes about us. It can be theology, but I suspect it's more mundane, things like tax policy, economic theory, politics, you name it.

But across that divide, across all of the things that threaten to separate us from each other, Jesus issues a call to a different way of life.

Around the time of year like commitment season, it's easy to assume that the church is teaching that we're called to a way of life that involves the giving of money and time and commitment. And in our campaign literature this year, we're pragmatic to the point of bluntness about our congregation's finances because we believe 1) you have the right to know and 2) as a congregation we want to be responsible with what we've been given, and 3) that you feel a call to be a part of God's ministry in this place with a tangible expression of commitment.

And that's all true. But what's more important than any of that is that we collectively believe that by being church, we are contributing to God's way in the world. We are staking our claim on what *God* believes about creation.

What Jesus is really saying with these words about life and death is that God is calling us to a sacramental way of life, to a way of life that is set aside from a common to a sacred purpose. That is what it means to live as though our lives could be a means of grace. That is looking for the grace of God in the world and seeking ways to multiply it. As I said last week, the Jewish theologian Martin Buber saw that sacredness in the interchange between I and thou... you and me, seeking to live faithfully together. The sacramental life is always lived between the I and thou, the you and me...

Oh, I get the Sadducees' and the Pharisees' question – they wanted to get it right. We all want to get it right. *When it comes to life and death, we want to get it right.*

But and the end of the day, God isn't looking for doctrinal purists. I'm honestly not even sure that God is obsessed with whether we get it right all the time. Getting tied in knots over that is a great way to get into a fine mess spiritually, when in fact, what God really wants is for us to keep the main thing the main thing.

No, God is looking for sacramental partners, who will seek to take the sacredness of this life, both individually and in our common life together, and offer it as an act of worship, and in so doing, to learn what it means, truly, to *live*.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.