

ST BART'S



A Sermon by:

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Are Marriages Made in Heaven?

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, November 10, 2013

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost—Based on Luke 20:27-38

Several years ago, my ex-wife's grandmother died. This was the grandmother who raised her after her own mother died of cancer at a young age, and so the sadness was very deep. We travelled to her small hometown of Utopia in the Hill Country of Texas for the service and many meals. I was asked to co-officiate at the service with the minister of her Baptist church, which I was glad to do. I stuck out like a sore thumb, in my vestments and with my sort of prayers. But God was praised. At the graveside, in the bright, temperate winter, more prayers were said, and more respects were paid. And after the committal, some of us made our way to another grave, which wasn't far away: the grave of my ex's mother, Anna Josephine. Tears fell to the dust, and we made our way home. But I'll never forget the gravestone. Because Anna Josephine's stone had not only her name, but also the name of her husband, and space for him as well. But, her still-living husband had remarried. He had started another family, in fact. And so, despite the well-meaning carver, we knew that the stone would never be completed. Despite the well-meaning plot surveyor, one space would always lie empty. If we take the grim logic of the cemetery at face value, to whom is she married now?

Jesus is asked a similar question not too long before his arrest in Jerusalem. The Sadducees, a group of Jews that counted themselves among the political elite of the temple and the capital city—a sort of inside the Beltway set of Israel—asked Jesus what he thought about this scenario: a married man dies without having a child, and so, as the law of Moses demands, his brother marries his wife. That brother dies without having a child, and so the next brother in line marries the wife. This happens five more times. All seven brothers die, in the end. The poor woman does, too, God rest her soul. And in light of this concocted scenario, the Sadducees ask: Riddle us this, Jesus. At the resurrection, to which of the brothers will the wife be married?

They probably asked it with a smirk on their face, for they had no interest in the wife's heavenly welfare. They had no interest in the brothers' status. They had their sights on exposing the ridiculousness of the resurrection. Not just because they were wise in the ways of the world and had set their hearts on this life as the ultimate horizon of our existence but also because they sought to be loyal to Moses. And Moses had not once mentioned the resurrection. And you would think that God would have bothered to tell Moses about such a thing when they met on Mount Sinai. Does this Nazarene bumpkin think he knows more about God's plans than Moses? They have Jesus in quite a bind with this loaded question. Most any answer is a trap. He has no basis to name any of the brothers. If he dismisses the scenario, then they have caught him dismissing the resurrection.

For the Sadducees' party, this is why marriage was so pivotal for them, and why they were set aside to manage domestic disputes. There is no immortal soul. And so the only gateway to immortality left, for the men at least, was to perpetuate one's name through getting married and having children. Having descendants was how you overcame death and the grave. This is why, the Sadducees insisted, that Moses' Torah was wise to make it the law to have a younger brother step in upon a husband's death, so that the husband might not die a second time.

But Jesus is unimpressed by the Sadducees' clever story of the wife with seven husbands. In other gospels, he says that they are wrong because they don't know the power of God, how much bigger it is than the ups and downs of our marriages. He says this: "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but 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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”

Whatever marriage is, it is an earthly institution, not a heavenly one. It's not that we stay married after we die, and live happily ever after, and after, and after. That is too small. That is for this time. Jesus says it will be more like we are a host of angels who don't do that sort of thing. Or, another image that Jesus uses, that I like better, is that we will be children of God, all born again into a second, larger life, with God as our one parent, and all of us as one great company of sisters and brothers. All of us, sisters and brothers before God.

Sure, Jesus enjoyed marriages. He loved a good party. And he went to great lengths to be sure that the wine was flowing in Cana. But I can understand his frustration with those who wanted to make marriage and children the be-all and end-all of finding eternal life. True life is not that limited, not by a long shot.

We do marry people in the church. We share this privilege with the state. A wedding is one of the most uplifting things we witness as people of faith. I am much more comfortable with the blessing of a marriage than being involved in all the legal boundaries that the courts enforce. These legal and economic benefits have evolved throughout history. Thankfully, we have expanded the bounds of those who can get married, no matter the gender. But I would emphasize that this institution can only lift us so far. I remind you that the marriage vow in our Prayer Book is “to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death.” Whatever marriage is, it ends at that final point. And, as we know, some marriages don't even make it that far.

When my marriage ended, even after the best of intentions, I discovered with horror how far I had gone down the path of believing that my marriage defined something ultimate about who I was, not only physically, but also that it was my ultimate spiritual reality. This is why I sympathize with the Sadducees, because I know what it is like to ground your hope in marriage and children, to the exclusion of something larger than that. And given how marriages end, how we can lose our children, and how not everyone is married or has children, we must ground our hope in something larger, for life in God is so much more robust than marriages and children in the house, boyfriends, girlfriends, and Norman Rockwell paintings. Our anxiety about living the perfect, respectable life, our anxiety about having descendants and our wealth passed down through the family, our fear of being alone, forgetting that we are never alone because God is with us; if we believed in this, our relationships would be different, more full, and more free.

After all, Jesus was a child out of wedlock, he never got married, never had children, and yet he lives among us to this day. Look at Job: he lost his children, his wealth and his health, and his friends wanted to blame him for it. Yet he found in the whirlwind of his broken life the prayers that he wanted to carve in stone and that we would do well to cherish, prayers we repeat at every funeral:

“For I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that at the last he will stand upon the earth;
and after my skin has been thus destroyed,
then in my flesh I shall see God,
whom I shall see on my side,
and my eyes shall behold, and not another.”

Even though Job lost so much—and if he had lost more, even the skin on his back—he found a way to trust that God was still his friend and companion. He could speak of Life in God that is not destroyed by destruction. Jesus wants to share this Life with us today, a Life that lasts even beyond his life being broken apart, a Life that makes us more full and free. As he replied to the Sadducees, God is not of the dead, but of the living. In other words, decay and loss can't touch what God has given us. Or, in other words, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia.