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Luke 20: 27-38

THOUGH WE DIE, YET SHALL WE LIVE

Scene one, Act one. There is an upstart rabbi in the neighborhood. He's filling people's heads with all kinds of nonsense like they must care for one another, the law is only there to point you to love as the orientation of your life and the real kicker - you can have a direct and personal relationship with God, who this guy has the gall to refer to not only in a common term like "father", but even more intimate...he calls God "papa". Who is this guy? Now, we've already tried to beat him on his knowledge as a rabbi...that's not happening. He's good. And we've tried to set him up to look bad, but he wiggles his way out of all of our traps. So, now it's time to divide his audience. Let's get them good and riled up on things that really have nothing to do with what he's trying to teach them, but will get them on edge. If you can't beat 'em, talk about the things that scare the heck out of people and get them worrying about something else.

Wedge issues. It's the political strategy where one side plays up what are often fringe concerns in order to rally the voters. So, when the election season rolls around we get the old standards brought up again - gay marriage, abortion, welfare moms. Even much closer to home with no imminent threat suggested we had a ballot measure to place a Constitutional ban on the use of Sharia law to interpret state law. It's like a ballot measure to ban the use of muzzle loading rifles to hunt unicorns. It is a wedge issue. It passed, by the way, by an overwhelming majority despite a single case of Sharia law being used in state courtrooms. As the great pseudo-pundit Stephen Colbert said, "Just because something isn't real, doesn't mean you shouldn't ban it." Playing on people's fears or insecurities is a time-tested way to confront opposition, especially when you're much more concerned about defeating an opponent than making a case or arguing actual points.

Wedge issues. It's what this text is really about. Oh some people will say this is about resurrection, but I don't think so. This is about wedge issues. Jesus is kind of campaigning - only his is a message profoundly more important than political

styles or even budget deficits. He is campaigning for our souls. But the same rules seem to apply. So the author we call Luke has Jesus confronted, sort of town hall style, on several occasions. But this one is special. Up until now the accusers trying to bait Jesus into a slip-up have been Pharisees, but here come the Sadducees. And they want to question him about resurrection, not because they're debating resurrection, but because they're trying to discredit him.

Now listen, you have to know this. The Sadducees don't believe in resurrection. I mean it says it right there in the text. Luke, as is his fashion, doesn't leave a whole lot to chance. So we know that this discussion is not geared towards some new understanding, it is a trap. They ask him this ridiculous question - there are 7 brothers, one of them gets married and dies, leaving a childless widow. So, according to the custom at that time, the man's brother marries her. But then he dies, again no children. And the third the same thing - apparently they lived in a very dangerous town. One by one these brothers kick the bucket and the woman is left childless until she too dies. Cheery stuff. Sadducees apparently like those heartwarming human interest stories. Then comes the kicker - whose wife will she be in the resurrection?

What is interesting in this story is that Jesus is taking a pretty Pharisaic point of view. The Pharisees, who he just got done dressing down, believed that while the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) were the primary source for knowledge of God, they also believed that God had not stopped revelation at that time. God continued to be present and speaking and even providing scripture, even today. Sort of the ancient Jewish version of what the UCC calls the "still-speaking God". Founded in this belief, they looked at the difficult times of oppression and occupation and saw that God could not possibly allow this. They saw the martyrdom and thought that God would not stand by idly while such injustice occurred. So, they adapted a common belief in that time - God would vindicate God's people through resurrection and that way the system which held that righteousness was rewarded and wickedness punished would remain intact.

The Sadducees thought that was hogwash. The "Bible" was only Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, and those books said nothing about resurrection. If it isn't in the Bible it doesn't matter. God said it, I believe it and that settles it. And this itinerant rabbi who was filling people's heads with all kinds of garbage had to be dealt with. Interesting that they shared this feeling with the group they opposed, the Pharisees. Jesus was able to make all the organized religious groups angry...he was an equal opportunity offender. And both groups were anxious to silence this troublemaker by defending their truth.

So they go for the ultimate wedge issue - family values. This was a big deal during the time of Caesar Augustus. As the Roman population dwindled because of the massive wars it had taken to secure the empire and Augustus had declared a

marriage policy. Taxes were levied on men who were "of age" and not married. Women who had three or more children received special legal benefits. Widows were given one year to remarry before becoming subject to penalties...6 months if you got divorced. The concept of marriage as the foundational component of society was dominant, despite the fact that the same laws allowed for concubines and slaves didn't count as human beings as far as sex was concerned. But this was more than just Rome, the Judeans (Sadducee and Pharisee alike) saw the commandment to be fruitful and multiply as sacrosanct. So now, the Sadducee accusers thought, they had Jesus right where they wanted him. He had to either violate the idea of resurrection, in which case he was validating the Sadducees, or he had to violate the sacred value of marriage.

One of my dear friends, the late Rev. David Reece, used to teach a method of dealing with people who weren't really interested in dialogue, but just in confronting you with their "truth". He would simply ask them questions. They'd say, "The Bible says homosexuality is a sin!" And he'd respond, "Really, where does it say that?" They would answer and he would ask another clarifying question and pretty soon, guess what? They were having a dialogue. That is a great approach. But Jesus does something else. He turns the conversation around. Sorry to tell you, my dear accusatory mob, but you're asking the wrong question. You are way too focused on the details. The message here is in the bigger picture.

Jesus pulls the Sadducees into his answer by interpreting the story of Moses and the burning bush from Exodus as an example of God being the God of the living and that if that same God claims to be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob then those patriarchs must somehow be "alive" or God is a liar, which isn't a place that anyone wants to go. Having used their own scripture against them, he then cuts loose with the most radical theology yet. Marriage is not an eternal value. It does not define you in the eyes of God.

OK, Sadducees and Pharisees aside, this is still a radical concept. We still live in a culture that places marriage as the bedrock of society. It is the foundational call of the "family values" movement, despite the actual numbers about successful marriage in those same communities. As a minister I am witness to the powerful and sizable wedding industry that still has millions of people believing the wedding day to be the most important day of their lives – one that requires a parallel amount of spending in order to appropriately reflect the gravity of the event. As for the eternal aspect of marriage, I still encounter couples all of the time who see no need for the church in their lives in any other way except when it comes to the wedding day. Then they want a minister present.

But beyond that there is an aura of "respectability" that comes with getting married. Home ownership, a college degree, having children...these are all things that label people in society as "successful". We just saw in our own election of a new

Governor how the example of a single woman was held up as a negative on the campaign trail. In our culture, marriage plays a big role in determining who is trustworthy or respectable – even if that is marriage number 7. It also allows you a measure of identity – so that your property can be held in common, the work that you do together can be held in the same fashion and so that you can do very basic, emotionally crucial things like sit at your partner's bedside while the diagnosis is delivered. That's why I think that it needs to be either marriage for all regardless of sexual orientation or civil unions for all – separate but equal has been tried...it doesn't work.

Jesus' answer to the Sadducees is an esoteric one. Commonly Jesus is translated as saying that people who belong to this world marry and are given in marriage but those who are of the next world do not. That is not what the Greek says. Now normally I would gloss over this kind of trivial detail, but the other night, about 30 minutes after the boys had gone to sleep, my oldest son Ian walked out into the living room and said, "I can't sleep. I'm kind of freaked out because the world is going to end in 2012." "What?!", I said, "Who told you that?" As it turns out it was one of his friends who had seen the movie based, very loosely, on the Mayan prophecy and was spreading the word. Well, this has gotten really out of hand now. Unfortunately for Ian I had more to say on the subject than he really wanted to hear. But I think that by the end of my diatribe on kids watching movies they shouldn't and the nature of fact versus fiction, the mistranslation of a Mayan language we don't even have good information on and the paranoia of a culture that seems to create doomsday scenarios out of thin air because they help us to absolve our guilt he was really ready to go to sleep. Frankly reading a nice story is easier, but I was worked up.

The point is, that Jesus is talking about eras here, not worlds. Just as in the Book of Revelation, the Jewish idea was that God would end an era and bring into existence a new era of God's reign. The destruction of the very creation that God made and pronounced exceedingly good would be blasphemy to the Jewish mind. So, let's not make this a story about eternal life. This is the age of resurrection which the Jews (at least the ones who believed in it) expected to be in the here and now, not in the clouds of a heaven separate from our life.

Jesus tells them that now they marry and make these pairings and covenant relationships, but in the era to come we will recognize one another as children of God and our connections will be different. I don't know really what that means and Jesus is perhaps intentionally vague about it. Again I don't think that this is a detail answer it is a big picture answer. I don't think that Jesus in this passage is being anti-marriage, I just think that he is being pro-big picture. Yes, you can love your partner and should and isn't love grand and all that stuff...but there is something else. And yes there are ways that we are connected to some people more specially than others and there is love and sex and procreation and all that...but that isn't all

there is.

We may view ourselves on the basis of our details, but I think that God views us as something larger. So, if you are single for whatever reason – by choice or not – then one thing you might hear from this teaching of Jesus is that your life in Christ is not on hold until you find someone to share your life with. If the law of the land says you cannot marry, your life in Christ is not bound by that. Your real life of service, of wholeness, of living into the blessings God has given you is now. And if you're married or otherwise partnered, the same applies. We are not defined in God's eyes by our marital status.

My favorite blogger, Sarah Dylan Breuer, says it this way: "Life in Christ is not without loneliness, whether you're single or married. But it's a full life. You were created for love, and love is here. You are not waiting to start a family; you have been set in a community of brothers and sisters in Christ, children of one God. Those of us who grew up in dysfunctional families can find it hard to hear this as good news, but it is. This one's different; it's the place we discover who we really are in Christ, and we learn through mistakes and being forgiven and forgiving others to be who we really are, whom God calls us to be."

So married or single, our details might be different but our call is the same. To take our communities of choice and/or blood and to live out the larger narrative...to take those opportunities to use the gifts and faults that God has given to us to practice forgiving and being forgiven, loving and being loved, praying and questioning and struggling together. To know the bigger picture...that even in the face of setbacks, even when we might see our own details being thwarted in ways that wound us to our cores there is something else.

There was a time, in fact many times, in the midst of the civil rights movement when things were not exactly going well. The movement seemed weak, lost, directionless and maybe even hopeless. In the face of endless threatening phone calls, attempts on his life and successful attacks on those around him...in the midst of fire hoses and jail cells Dr. King made this statement: "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." Somewhere inside him, Dr. King found that sense of something beyond just his own life, something larger than the things that were happening to him. That is what I think that Jesus is ultimately trying to get across here. We live in the details, but the narrative of God is longer than that...it is broader than that...it is not as much about the details as oriented towards the plot. We can experience things in our own life that seem very much to point towards one particular outcome, because we are trapped in a finite viewing of things. But God sees a much more evolving process, and what might seem one way to us is another way to God. Keep in mind that in just a few days Jesus will be dealing with the idea of resurrection far beyond a theoretical concept or an interesting theological debate. It will be life and death for him, a very real detail. But that's not where the story

ends, despite whatever wedge issues you want to jam in there. We are not Good Friday people, we are Easter people, and the Good News is that there is the chance, always, to return to the basics. The details, as hard as they are to take sometimes, do not get the final say. Practice kindness, mercy and grace...they are stronger than hate or death. That's the life of the new era...the thing that is the larger narrative...the thing that is of eternal concern...and also the story of the resurrection. Thanks be to God.

AMEN



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