



## **Luke 20:27-40**

### **“Something Greater than Marriage”** (11<sup>th</sup> in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

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(Last Sunday after the Epiphany)

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### **“Following Christ From City Center!”**

LUKE 20:27-40<sup>1</sup> "SOMETHING GREATER THAN MARRIAGE"

Resurrection Is Politically Dangerous: Martyrs Live!

1) v.27a APPROACH OF SOME OF THE SADUCEES. Accept Only First Five Books Of Moses, Aristocracy Philosophical School In Judaism, Reject Oral Tradition Of Pharisees:

27 There came to him (i.e. Jesus) SOME SADUCEES, Acts 4:1-2, 26:6-10, No Angels, No Resurrection, Afterlife Hostility Is Rising (20:1-8, 20-26)

2) v.27b 1st ISSUE: NO RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD. Discredit Jesus?

This Life Is All, No General Resurrection, contra Dan. 12:2-3, 2 Macc. 7:9 those who say that "there is no resurrection," Acts 23:7-10; Josephus Ant., 18:14, para. 2:8:14

Taunted Pharisees With Resurrection Riddles! bT. Niddith 70b

3) vv.28-33 2nd ISSUE: MARRIAGE IN HEAVEN?

28 a and they asked him a QUESTION, saying, "TEACHER,"

Texts/Premise Moses wrote for us Dt. 25:5-10 + Gen. 38:8, Ruth 3:12-13, 4:1-10, Brother-in-law Marriage that if a man's brother dies/, having a wife/ but no children, Name Blotted Out the man/ must take the wife/ 'and raise up children (seed) for his brother.' For His Name To Continue = Type Of Physical Immortality

Test Case 29 b Now there were seven brothers; Hypothetical Test Case: Big Family, A Bit Risque! // Tobit 3-7 the first took a wife, and died without children; 30 and the second (31) and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Seriously Obedient Men! Duty Before Life! 32 Afterward the woman also died. (Too many men!)

Question 33 c In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? Big Joke = Reductio Ad Absurdum For the seven had her as wife. Wrong Assumption = Resurrection Implies Polyandry vs. Mosaic Law How Will She Face 7 Resurrected Spouses?

3') vv.34-36 2nd ISSUE: NO MARRIAGE IN NEW AGE (Theological Argument)

Argues For 2 Ages/ Resurrection/ Discontinuity, Not Mere Resumption

34 And Jesus said to them, vv.34-35a (L), Longer Than Mt. 22:30 // Mk. 12:25

a "The sons (i.e. inhabitants) of this age Present Evil Age Contrasts To The Coming Good Age b marry (men) and are given in marriage (women); Women Understood As Property

35 a' But those who are accounted worthy Not All, So Prepare! Worthy Because Of Trust/New Life! to attain to that age and to the resurrection of the dead 17:27, Jesus Knows God, New Age

b' neither marry nor are given in marriage, Marriage Ends! Continuity Of Personal Identity, Discontinuity Of Function, Not Just Extension Of Life Now

36 for they cannot die any more, 2 Bar. 51:10, 1 Enoch 104:4, No Need For Procreation because they are equal to (like) the angels Do Not Reproduce: Fixed Number, Dig!

and are sons (children) of God, Includes Women, Primary Relationship Is With God being sons (children) of the resurrection. God Parents All, Offspring Of A New Reality, 1 Cor. 2:9

Jesus Adapts To Their Limited Canon In vv.37-38

2') vv.37-38 1st ISSUE: REALITY OF RESURRECTION (Biblical/Rabbinic Argument).

They Do Not Reckon With God's Continuing Relationship

37 But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, Exodus 3:6, 15 where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. 3 Generations

38 Now he is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for all live in him." 4 Macc. 7:19, Theological Summary Saving Relationship With God Not Terminated By God's Enemy: Death

1') vv.39-40 APPROACH OF SOME OF THE SCRIBES.

Resurrection Means Transformation! New Embodiment

39 And SOME OF THE SCRIBES answered, Acts 23:6-7, Pharisaic Law Experts: Believed In Resurrection "TEACHER, you have spoken well." Here Jesus Agreed With Them

40 For they (i.e. the Saducees) no longer dared to ask him any QUESTION. They Had Been Burned!

<sup>1</sup> Parallel to Matthew 22:23-33 and Mark 12:18-27. Italics indicate changes to the Markan source. The Saducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead at the end of the age; the Pharisees and Jesus did. Marriage and procreation are part of this age, not the next. Marriage is thus good but limited. The best of marriage is a glimpse of creaturely fulfillment in God. This is why the vows are "Till death us do part." and not, "into the kingdom of God." Sexuality is retained in the resurrection body; only its function changes; it is not longer reproductive. The principle is that grace heals, fulfills and exceeds nature. We must wait and see how good it is!

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 20:27-40

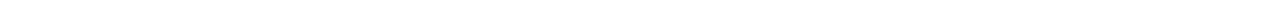
This paragraph is one in a series of controversy stories (20:1-8, 9-19, 20-26, 27-40, 41-44) set in the last week of Jesus’ life in which he is portrayed as superior to accusers. Several terms are repeated at the beginning (vv.27-28) and end (vv.39-40) of the paragraph as an inclusion (*some Saducees // some scribes, Saducees; question // question; Teacher // Teacher*). The surface structure is a 6:2 concentric pattern (1-2-3 // 3'-2'-1') in which two issues are raised, then answered in reverse order. The outer frame introduces the Saducees as hostile (v.27) and the Scribes as friendly (vv.39-40).

Second temple Judaism was diverse in theology, practice, and in the limits of the canon. The Saducees were prosperous Jerusalem elites associated with the temple. They accepted only the first five books of the Torah and- unlike the Pharisees, another religious party- rejected the doctrines of angels, the general resurrection of the dead, and the afterlife. This life is all there is. Think of them as conservative Jewish secularists who loved to tell ridiculous stories about the foolish new doctrine of resurrection. They approach Jesus, and Luke notes that they are those who say (teach), “there is no (general) resurrection (of the dead).”

They come, politely enough, calling him *Teacher*, but their motive is to ridicule him in public. Their strategy has three parts: 1) a blended text on *levirate* (brother-in-law) marriage (v.28), 2) a funny and suggestive anecdote of seven brothers and one wife (vv.29-32), 3) a pointed public question (v.33). When Jesus is confounded and the people see how foolish he is, then the Saducees win the day against this upstart. Their position has two parts: 1) there is no resurrection of the dead, and 2) it would lead to impossible, ridiculous situations. Jesus addresses the second issue first.

Jesus’ strategy is instructive. He first undermines their presuppositions (vv.34-36), then argues for resurrection from within their limited canon (vv.37-38). The next life, should there be one, is not merely an extension of this one. Marriage, says Jesus, is a good but limited institution of this present, evil age, the primary purpose of which is the replacement of persons who die. Marriage is for babies. Since death is overcome in the age to come, there is no need for marriage as we know it. No longer do they marry (males) or are given in marriage (females). We do not become something else, i.e. angels, but while retaining our gender and sexuality are now *like the angels* in that we do not reproduce (there have never been any *baby* angels!). There is continuity of personhood across the two ages, but discontinuity of function because some things are no longer necessary. The coming kingdom of God is not the mere continuance of the world as we know it but its radical transformation. All our fulfillments are finally with one another but in God.

Jesus’ argument for resurrection as consistent with Torah is grounded *in the passage about the bush* (Ex. 3) where Moses is addressed by *the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob*. While dead to us, they are spoken of as alive to God. God’s relationship with them is not terminated by death, and the God who gave them bodies will one day give them new resurrection bodies to demonstrate the enduring power of a trusting relationship with God. To be fully alive is not to be a disembodied but a re-embodied person, of which Jesus will soon be the initial prototype. That the scribes agreed demonstrates that Jesus was not alone his reading of God’s intentions for the healing of all creation. Marriage is a good but limited reality; resurrection is better!



## SOMETHING GREATER THAN MARRIAGE

*“The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage....”*

Marriage is for time, not eternity.

L U K E 6 : 3 4

A man finally saw his doctor after weeks of symptoms. The doc examined him, then called his wife aside for a private word. “Your husband has a rare form of anemia. Without treatment, he’ll be dead in a few weeks. The good news is he can be treated. You’ll need to get up every morning and fix a hot breakfast- the works, then a home cooked lunch and an old fashioned meat-and-potato supper. It would be especially helpful if you baked frequently. Cakes, pies, homemade bread- these will allow your husband to recover. His immune system is weak, so it’s important your home be spotless and that the immune system be stimulated by lots of personal touch and affection- the details of which I leave to feminine ingenuity. Any questions?” She shook her head. “Do you want to break the news, or shall I?”

“I will,” she replied.

As she walked in, her husband asked, “It’s bad, isn’t it?” She nodded.

“What’s going to happen to me?”

With a sob, she blurted out, “The doctor says you’re gonna die!”

A pastor once visited the fourth-grade Sunday school class and asked the kids, “What does God say about marriage?”

A boy piped up, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!”<sup>2</sup>

Much humor springs from the ever-fascinating and never-exhausted mystery of male and female, Mars and Venus. Finding delight in our differences and foibles is a form of grace. Lori and I laugh a lot.

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<sup>2</sup> R. Paul Stevens, “Marriage,” *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity* (Downer’s Grove, ILL., 1997), 603.

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Marriage is a public and a private good. The problem is it's about the only public good I know over which no one is keeping watch. Water and air quality are a government responsibility, as is national defense. Schools are a state responsibility, but who monitors marriage quality. This is a gap the church should fill. What if we became the experts here in Greenwood?<sup>3</sup> It's high time to offer a clear alternative to the thin way marriage is currently construed in our culture, time to re-link Christian marriage with Christian discipleship. Let the JP's and Notaries handle secular marriages that from the beginning do not have a commitment to our vision or who, though pre-nups, are from the start planning for divorce. *Being in love* according to current cultural romantic standards is not sufficient reason for Christian marriage. Pastors who marry persons with whom they have no ongoing relationship, or who perform marriages without significant pre-marital counseling, are- on my read- engaging in malpractice. If the same percentage of children were dying in America before age seven as there are marriages ending before that time, we would declare a national emergency. But we stand by with nodding heads and wagging tongues as marriage after marriage dies and is buried. Why this neglect of something so central to our common life? Why not prepare? Why not support? Why not intervene? Why not grieve when one is broken? Why not bring church discipline to bear when there is infidelity and spousal abuse. When we define marriage as only a private matter and forget its public dimension and its effect on us all, something is lost and the church weakened. Marriage is intimately personal at the deepest level, but it is not private. From the beginning it is a public institution for which there must be a license and a public ceremony. Marriage is by design a public institution given by God to guard and guide intimate energies towards stable family life. Don't you find it oddly perverse that people can discuss the details of their sexual escapades on afternoon TV, and yet to ask, "How is your marriage?" is to risk offense.

Christian marriage with the blessing of the church is not a right to be demanded because we do nice ceremonies in impressive buildings. It is a privilege for those who aspire to our vision of marriage as a holy vocation- as a call from God. By

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent theology of marriage, see Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (New York, NY: Dutton, 2011). For an church-based enrichment program, see Nikki and Sila Lee, *The Marriage Course* (Deerfield, ILL: Alpha Resources, 2000). For a history, Rebecca Janey, *Then Comes Marriage: A Cultural History of the American Family* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 2010).

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church law, United Methodist clergy do not have to marry everyone who applies.<sup>4</sup> It's our call; same with church membership. We're not Baptists, and you don't get a vote. Several years ago I was disturbed when a hip colleague performed a wedding for a Buddhist in a Unitarian Church. It may have been *trendy*, particularly since it involved a member of *Hootie and the Blowfish*, but it was not well founded. Much that was distinctive in the service was minimized or cut out. We do not do *marriage-in-general for all comers*; pastors do Christian marriage which is distinctive. Sadly, we pastors are often cowards who cave in to the pressures of the powerful. We wimp out when others want to use the church and its liturgies for their temporary, social purposes with no commitment to our Lord or his church. *Rent-a-preacher* is a bad business to be in. Sort of like *rent-a-woman*. When I look back on the few marriages I have performed for social convenience, I feel a keen sense of shame and betrayal. "Oh Yes, Pastor Phil, we plan to join the church soon." Most you never see again. Rent-a-preacher cheapens the faith and the church that upholds marriage as a sacred covenant in which God remains a permanent partner.

Read the wedding service in our hymnal<sup>5</sup>; it presumes both parties are baptized believers who share faith in Jesus Christ, and it sets marriage in the context of church worship, not in the context of an isolated, romantic relationship with the service as an afterthought.<sup>6</sup> We would be better off and more faithful if we did fewer, and that the ones we did were committed on the front end to our distinctive vision. Do not marry someone who doesn't share your faith. You cannot build a shared life on two different world views. Never marry someone in hopes of converting them.

We also know that the current glut of *cubic zirconia* relationships where

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<sup>4</sup> "The decision to perform the ceremony shall be the right and responsibility of the pastor." *The Book of Discipline 2012*, 268.

<sup>5</sup> 864-869.

<sup>6</sup> The preface to the Declaration of Intention reads, "I ask you now, in the presence of God and these people, to declare your intention to enter into union with one another *through the grace of Christ*, who calls you into union with himself *as acknowledged in your baptism*." A flagrant omission in our otherwise excellent service is the lack of any reference to procreation and children. The most realistic and earthy preface to the marriage service remains the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer*.

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couples live together without the commitment of marriage are inherently unstable.<sup>7</sup> It may look like a diamond, but it's an imitation, and here's why: forty percent disintegrate before marriage and those who marry have a fifty percent higher divorce rate. They also have significantly higher rates of alcoholism, substance abuse and domestic violence. The sexual abuse of children in such arrangements is higher. The annual rates of depression are three times the married. It's not just a moral issue but a public health concern, so many are the negative outcomes.

When some make it to a church altar- and we are glad to help- they think of it as a first marriage, but it is not if they've already had several of the live-in variety. It may be the first legal and officially blessed relationship with all the customs associated with marriage, but in some ways it's a third or fourth or fifth marriage in terms of the risk factors and character formation. Bond and tear, bond and tear, bond and tear, bond and tear till much of the capacity for an exclusive bond is gone and scars all over a fragmented heart with pieces scattered here and yon with old lovers. Such persons know more about how to break a relationship than keep it, more about heat than light, more *me* than *we*, and that is why they need such special care and encouragement all along the way. They see themselves as modern sophisticates, playing the field before settling down, but what they are is fragile with little capacity for endurance and working through difficulties. They have believed the lie that the goal is to find the right person rather than be the right person. Forgiveness and restoration are possible if there is forthright confession of sin and a new appreciation for God's wisdom, but often there is an unwillingness to face issues of bad character and intimate misbehavior. It's one reason the first of three sets of vows in our service contains this loaded phrase, "... *and forsaking all others*, keep thee only unto her/him, so long as you both shall live." And when I send them home with an assignment, for each to get on their knees alone before God so that their history may not spoil their future, it's very quiet in the room; they know I'm telling the truth. You don't want a bedroom full of ghosts. The church is not prudish or punitive. We are wise because we know the author of marriage, and there is much accumulated wisdom in faithful pastors who deal with the cultural casualties and point them to healing.

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<sup>7</sup> For two treatments that cover the research and its implications for the church, see Mike & Harriet McManus, *Living Together: Myths, Risks & Rewards* (New York, NY: Howard Books, 2008); Glenn T. Stanton, *The Ring Makes All The Difference* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, 2011). The most recent report on the status of marriage in the U.S. is *The State of Our Unions: Marriage in America 2012* (Charlottesville, VA: The National Marriage Project, 2012); the report is found at [www.stateofourunions.org](http://www.stateofourunions.org).

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The sociological research is in; shacking up is bad for you in every way, but if you bring it up, as I have today, people are offended- a some of you are right now. Cohabitation is not practice for marriage but practice for divorce, and it is inherently more dangerous for women. It's one more way for men to have access to privilege without responsibility, and with more and more young men postponing maturity to thirty and beyond, women need to be increasingly wary of *boy-men*. Casual commitment is a logical contradiction. It simply doesn't develop the character, self-control and virtue marriage requires. Sociologist David Popenoe says:

“The longer you cohabit, the more tolerant you are of divorce. You're used to living in a low-commitment relationship, and it's hard to shift that kind of mental pattern.”<sup>8</sup> Sex therapist Mary Ann Mayo says the couples most likely to succeed in marriage are those who bring the least amount of previous partners into the relationship.<sup>9</sup>

The best hope for a loving, lifelong marriage is God's way: pre-marital chastity, shared Christian faith and a commitment to a community of believers for lifelong support until one of the two lays the other in the earth and the covenant between you is ended. Where there are failures, honesty and the medicine of forgiveness are the divine therapy. Teach it to your children. Pray now for the one they may marry. Shape their thinking so that they would not even consider a serious dating relationship, must less marriage, with someone who was not a faithful follower of Christ. Let them know what *the real thing* is about by observing it in your life. Take them to weddings. One of the most enduring memories of my Cheraw childhood are weddings that were about the only form of public entertainment between April and June. Let them follow the vows as you renew your own. I never saw my parents attend a wedding without taking each others hands and renewing their vows. Take them to funerals and funeral homes. Let them view the corpse and ask disturbing questions. Saturate them in the blessed mysteries of creation and acquaint them with their final enemy, death.

But there are some new challenges in the culture. One is the attempt to redefine marriage. Polygamy is making a comeback in some quarters and already in the courts. The Mormons are on the move! Even have a TV show for guys who

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<sup>8</sup> Nadya Labi, “A Bad Start?” *Time*, February 15, 1999, 61.

<sup>9</sup> William Mattox, “Rebuilding a Marriage Culture,” *Good News*, Jan./Feb. 1999.

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fantasize about the restoration of legal harems. How about two men married to three women, or the reverse? Why not consensual incest among adults? Can't a man have feelings for his daughter? because- as we know in this culture- my feelings and urges and the legal right to express them without censure or limit are the only thing that matters. Not Scripture, not tradition, not the witness of natural law, not accumulated human wisdom, only what I want and what the courts will allow under pressure! Once the Scriptural vision of male and female in monogamous marriage is ranked as only one among other options, there is simply no place to stop because logically the arguments are the same. If you do away with the male-female polarity and with it the necessary hardware for children, then why keep the number at *two*, why not three or more? Two of complementary gender is God's design. The biblical and Christian vision of marriage, grounded in Scripture, blessed and taught by Jesus himself, practiced as holy tradition in the church, and confirmed in healthy cultures, is steadily being demoted in a dangerous social experiment, and churches that decide to go along to get along, who see themselves as religious decorations on whatever the culture decides, are unfaithful.<sup>10</sup> May we not be found among them. Have we forgotten our holiness roots, that we are to be an alternative to a self-indulgent world? As the church we must extract ourselves from the political agendas of the left and the right and stake out our own distinctive options that will chafe both ends of the political spectrum, though in different places.

Perhaps there was a day when we could assume family marital stability and then teach the faith on top of that. No longer; we cannot assume anything. We must re-teach the biblical basics: the creation of male and female as equal and complimentary, the important of chastity outside marriage and fidelity within it, the church as the larger loving family for the married and the single. Christian marriage is a glorious form of discipleship for those God calls to this form of faithfulness. But beyond all these good things we must, with Jesus, teach that marriage is not the ultimate human experience, resurrection is! In our defense of marriage, we must not make of it less than it is (what the culture wants to do), nor more than it is (what some conservative believers do). Marriage, biblically understood, is both very good and clearly limited. It is not ultimate. It cannot meet all human needs. Your spouse is not divine, and to demand of them more than they can, with grace, provide, is sin. I know some who expect too much of their marriages because they do not have a living

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<sup>10</sup> On the checkered history of United Methodists in this regard, see Karen Booth, *Forgetting How to Blush: United Methodism's Compromise with the Sexual Revolution* (Fort Valley, GA: Bristol House, 2012). Karen is a U.M. pastor and courageous friend.

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relationship with God that allows them to live with another sinner in realism and forgiveness. Character counts. Faith counts. Self-control counts. Basic mental health and maturity count. And if you never marry, or if after marrying you divorce, you can still follow Jesus Christ in a full life and *be* the kind of person God calls you to be whatever happens. *Following* him is more important than *finding* a partner, the first time or any subsequent time. The church in our day is called to uphold marriage but also to teach the integrity and equal call of the single life. In a healthy church marriage will be honored by all, as Scripture commands, but the divorced will not be treated like second-class citizens and the single will not be seen as defective.

Jesus said it clearly: marriage ends at death. We must uphold marriage, but we must not make of it an idol, as the Mormons do who teach that marriage extends beyond death. Faith in Jesus Christ and being found worthy of the resurrection is the ultimate goal of life. My relationship with the God the Father, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit in the community of the church is what will last, not my marriage or natural family. The *communion of the saints* is in the third article of the Creed, not the eternal communion of the married and their children. Yes, we will know each other. Yes, we will see our common history through a new lenses, but No, there will be no exclusive unions in the kingdom of God. Lori and I will be brother and sister, not husband and wife. Our fulfilment will be *with* one another but *in* God.

Don't worry, as many of you do; it will not be less but more! The best of marriage: it's laughter, it's tenderness, its ecstasy and passion, its security and safety, its generativity and creativity, all these will be exceeded in the new heavens and the new earth in ways we cannot now imagine. The kingdom of God is earth and more, not earth and less, not less substantial but more so, not less but more real, not less joy but more and different. In a real sense we will not be fully and authentically human until the resurrection. Now we have wounded souls and broken bodies; in heaven we have healed souls and no bodies, but in the new age of the kingdom of God healed souls will be rejoined to resurrection bodies fit for the new reality, and then the party begins. Someone once asked a preacher, "Will we know each other in heaven?" to which he replied, "Brother, we will not know each other *until* we get there." Now in this age the deep goodness of our creation is infected with sin, assaulted by evil, blinded by ignorance, buffeted by temptation, misshaped by dysfunction, and headed for the corruption of death. Here every virtue is hard won; there we will blossom when all anti-God and anti-human influences are peeled away from our encrusted humanity by the great power of resurrection.

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Lori and I have a standing joke. As a faithful husband I solemnly promise not to bring a date to her funeral! Marriage is good, but not the ultimate good. We must keep it in its proper place with biblical boundaries: heterosexual, monogamous, the intent of permanency, fully embodied, rooted in shared faith, full of respect, ended by death, but only as a prelude and practice ground for what truly ultimate, resurrection and the new life of the age to come beyond sin and evil and death where gender will be retained but fulfilled by God in ways we cannot now comprehend. Thus marriages, even among Christians, that turn in on themselves and do not find a purpose and mission beyond themselves are dead ends. By turning inward they go sour. All they have is each other, and that is not enough; they frustrate rather than fulfill the purposes of God. Mature marriages must find a mission that includes, but goes beyond, the emotional and physical satisfaction of both partners and the raising of children, if these are given as a gift. Marriage is for the sake of something greater, and that is the kingdom of God where all the structures of this creation will be drawn into a glorious metamorphosis. We shall be filled with the glories of God for which the best of this life is only an appetizer for the coming feast, which will be- at the same time- both more spiritual and more sensuous than we can imagine.

At resurrection the tomb was empty; Jesus was both re-embodied and transformed so he could appear in locked rooms and perhaps at different places at the same time.<sup>11</sup> He is the model for what will happen to us when we are freed from the limits of space and time for a new existence with God. And because we are then beyond death, one of the purposes of sexuality, which is reproduction and the continuation of the race, will no longer be necessary. We will not become angels; we will always be redeemed human beings, but we will be *like the angels* in that we do not reproduce. In the angelic realm there are different rankings but no parents and children. Gender will be retained; male and female continue, but reproduction will not. The resurrection body is designed for pleasures beyond imagination. We will all just have to wait and see. It promises to be good.

### WALKING AROUND THE TEXT

There were a number of theological options in first century Judaism regarding the

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<sup>11</sup> For a defense of resurrection as bodily transformation, see N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1999), Chapter 7, “The Transforming Reality of Bodily Resurrection,” 111-128. The revisionist position (i.e. the tomb was not empty and not necessary) is by co-author Marcus Borg.

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afterlife, and the Saducees were one of them. They were a priestly, aristocratic movement centered in Jerusalem that vanished after the destruction of that city by the Romans in 70AD. They tended to be rationalistic, and were- by and large- prosperous and elite. They accepted only the first five books of the law as authoritative. They did not accept the general resurrection of the dead and did not believe in angels. This life is all there is; the soul perishes with the body.<sup>12</sup> Think of them as Jewish secularists. If there was any immortality, it was in one's children.

Other Jews of the day held to the ancient idea of *sheol*, that shadowy abode of the dead where the delights of life were past and there was no praise of God. Others held to the idea imported from Greek philosophy of the immortality of the soul, that a death the non-physical self escapes from the trap of body to rejoin the heavenly realm. And while that is a sort of hope, the problem is that it treats the body, and thus by extension the whole creation, as a bad thing, as something to be cast aside so that the true self can find fulfillment. It is a denial of the goodness of creation and a sundering of the unity of the person God created.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, accepted a larger selection of Jewish writings as authoritative and believed in both the resurrection of the dead and angels. Evil and sin were so much a part of history that they could not be dealt with within history. All attempts at reform within time were necessary but preliminary. The immortality of the soul might be an intermediate state, but there had to be more. At the end of the present evil age God would raise the dead, purge the evil and reward the righteous. Creation is good, and God is both powerful and just. Jesus was with the Pharisees on this one. Creation will be preserved but transformed; this age of sin and death will yield to a new one without either; God the just judge will sort out history once and for all. The Pharisees intended to be prepared by a strict keeping of the law, but for the followers of Jesus that is not the way. We are counted worthy not first by what we do for God but by what God does for us in Jesus Christ whose resurrection makes the cross a sign of love and gives us a preview of coming attractions so we may live in hope. The Jesus who knows the future and who speaks for God did not just speculate on the doctrine of the resurrection; he taught it and then experienced it and came back in a series of appearances to launch the church. Jesus shows us our own

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<sup>12</sup> Josephus wrote, "As for the persistence of the soul, penalties in death's abode, and rewards, they do away with them" (*Jewish Wars* 2.165); "The Saducees hold that the soul perishes along with the body" (*Antiquities* 18:16).

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future in order to motivate us to live in faith and be found worthy at the end.<sup>13</sup>

In our day Clemson and Carolina fans bait each other with jokes, Rebels and Yankees mock each other roots, and Democrats and Republican compete for political high round, but in Jesus' day the rivalries and joustings were theological. The Saducees thought the Pharisaic doctrine of the resurrection was silly, and they loved to make fun of it in stories like the one before us. So they tried out their best conundrum on Jesus in order to embarrass him as a theological lightweight and show the people what a phoney he was. Surprise! Those who try, then and now, to make Jesus into a fool end up fools themselves. He is no lightweight.

Because of the reasons we have outlined, ancient Judaism placed a premium on offspring, so much so that if a man died without children his brother was to impregnate the widow and then name the first male after him. It was called *levirate* marriage and regulated in Deuteronomy 25. This was common biblical ground between Jesus and the Saducees. It was in the Torah. A man wants offspring to preserve his name; his wife will not be fulfilled without them according to cultural norms; God needs an ongoing people to tell his story, so a brother in law must do his duty. In a setting of male privilege and immortality through ones children, it makes a kind of sense, and it gave the widow a kind of social security in her children who would care for her when old. So on top of this common ground the Saducees posed their conundrum to the Lord.

Seven boys in the same family. The older brother marries but dies with no children. The next youngest, being a faithful brother, steps up to bat, strikes out, then dies. Same with the next five. No children; all die. Finally, when there were no more men, the woman dies, and on her tombstone is written, "Only one I loved, but seven did try, and now I die." Apparently no one thought to ask, "Is marrying this woman dangerous to your health?" But the intelligence of the men or the endurance of the woman is not the issue. The real issue is beyond death, where all seven plus the woman find themselves raised from the dead. So they asked Jesus for his verdict,

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<sup>13</sup> For an summary of the early Christian position, see Jeffrey Burton Russell, *A History of Heaven* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), especially chapter 3, "The Heaven of the Early Christian," 40-63. Charles Talbert, *Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 195, summaries the theological meaning of the resurrection position of the Pharisees, Jesus and Paul *pace* the Saducees as follows, "God will not allow an enemy of his, death, to destroy that which means so much to him (cf. Romans 8:35-39)."

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“In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will she be? For the seven had her as wife.” They all laughed together as they cornered Jesus with a suggestive little story. “Let’s see how he gets out of this one.”

Jesus’ first move is theological. He goes beneath their clever story to its presuppositions. Their story presumes that the structures of human relationship in this life, namely marriage, continue into the next one, which is wrong. There is continuity; there is also discontinuity. If indeed there is a resurrection, it means that we inherit immortality, and there is therefore no more need for procreation. That aspect of marriage is nullified. Our intimacies and our creativity are now in and with God, and through God with others. Marriage is a good gift, but limited to this age. Marriage points beyond itself. Notice that Jesus presumed that the partners are male and female. What he presumed, we have to defend in our day when the pressing issue is not marriage beyond the grave but what is the nature of marriage in this age over which the church can pronounce God’s blessing. The culture can do as it wills, but the church has a higher loyalty. Jesus gives us an insight into the next life. Listen with new ears:

“The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection of the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die any more, because they are equal to the angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.”

Life is headed somewhere. You did not have a past life, and you will not be reincarnated. The occultists, Hindus and New Agers are wrong. You only go around once; death is the end of this life and the doorway to the next, so grab for all the grace you can get and set your course to be counted by God as worthy of resurrection. Believe in Jesus Christ; follow him with all your being; pursue him; absorb his words; trust him as the source of truth and love; get to know him; believe his realistic and hopeful picture of marriage. Marriage is a good structure of creation, but it is not ultimate. The never-married, widowers and widows, the divorced and those who for some reason are physically incapable of marriage are not second class citizens in the church or in the kingdom of God. To pitch the church as a *couples club* is to distort it. When we get there, only one thing will matter: did you walk with Christ whatever your station in life? So in all our attempts to rebuild a pro-marriage culture through training and classes and public advocacy and counseling and support- which I intend to do, we must not make of marriage, for all its benefits, an end in itself. Jesus put

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**Luke 20:27-40 . . . . . 15**

marriage in its place- a noble place, an important place, but also a limited place in service of something much greater.

Jesus’ second argument in verses 37 and 38 is biblical, and here he goes to the very turf of the Saducees, to the second book of Moses which is Exodus. When Moses stood barefooted before the burning bush he addressed by “the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob,” all of whom had died one after the other hundreds of years before Moses came on the scene. But God speaks as if they are alive, and since God cannot lie, they are alive *to God* and *in God*, which God intends to give them new resurrection bodies to be fully restored at the shift of the ages. Ponder the immensity of verse 38, “For he is not the God of the dead,” said Jesus, “but of the living, for all live in him.” Those who have died and are said to be now alive in God will received new bodies like that of Jesus. Thus Jesus trumps the Saducees from within their own limited canon. The Torah is read by Jesus in a way to support the resurrection, which he then validates after his own death. This man is worth listening to. He tells us the truth about ourselves, about this world, about the Scriptures, about God and the age to come. Rather than just admiring Jesus, we need to listen to what he says as a description of the ways things are, what the will be, and how that effects the here and now.

Some of the intellectually sophisticated bystanders, the scribes, were impressed with the depth and quality of Jesus’ answer. “Teacher,” they said, “you have spoken well,” while the Saducees were reduced to silence. Their whole system of doctrine had the rug pulled out from under it by this pipsqueak from Nazareth, and they were glad a few days later when a Roman death squad strung him up. What a total paradigm shift would have been required, what a complete reworking of their world view and lifestyle, if they had accepted his teaching. How hard it is for Methodists who have been reared on a modern, reduced version of the faith to deal with the fullness of classical Christian teaching on the nature of the resurrection. Many of our people are practical deists who think that God wound up the world and then abandoned it for us to run according to good, democratic principles. But that is what sins does. It is easier to believe a lie you’ve heard a thousand times than to believe the truth you have only heard once.

Remember that the one about whom this encounter was told is not dead but alive. God’s preliminary Yes to Jesus was resurrection; his final vindication will be

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his triumphant return and the descent of the kingdom of God to transform and heal the whole creation. One day we meet him face to face. And in that moment, just as with the Saducees, all our little lies will be exposed, and we will know what of the truth we believed and acted on during this life. Jesus is the truth, and those who cling to him will be counted worthy of the resurrection and the life of the world to come. You will always be either male or female, and with one another we will be totally and increasingly filled with the life and joy and love of God.

CONCLUSION

In the book *Mortal Lessons* Richard Selzer tell as story:

“I stand beside a bed where a young woman lies, her face postoperative, her mouth twisted in palsy, clownish. A tiny twig of a facial nerve, the one to the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. The surgeon had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh; I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut the little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stand on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. Who are they, I ask myself, he and this wrymouth I have made, who gaze and touch each other so generously, greedily. The young woman speaks, “Will my mouth always be like this?” she asks “Yes,” I say, “it will. It is because the nerve was cut.” But the young man smiles, “I like it,” he says. “It is kind of cute. All at once I know who he is. I understand, and lower my gaze. One is not so bold in an encounter with a god. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works.”<sup>14</sup>

Happy Valentines Day in a good but limited creation that will one day open up into the glories and ecstasies of the kingdom of God. Truth is never easy.

Phil Thrailkill  
Main Street UMC  
February 10, 2013

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<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Stevens, “Marriage,” 609.

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