

Sermon Text: Luke 20:27-38

Let us pray. Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of every heart be acceptable unto You, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Every time someone tries to pull something over on Jesus, he turns the tables on them, sometimes literally, and sometimes metaphorically. He turns the question; he turns the trickster inside out. Usually because they are starting from the wrong place or asking the wrong question or missing the big point. Now, all of these are evident today in today’s Gospel, which is about marriage, but it really isn’t. It’s about Heaven, but not exactly. Finally, it is about something else more important than both.

Years ago, the story is told as a true one, at Duke University four chemistry students on the eve of a major exam took a road trip to Virginia. The students partied there longer than they should have, and got back too late for the exam. They got together and colluded and concocted a sad tale of woe that they had left Virginia in plenty of time to get back, but they had a flat tire, and then lo and behold, they discovered that their spare was flat, too, and by the time they got the whole thing sorted out and got back to Duke, they had missed their exam. They were sorry. The professor listened, and was amazingly compassionate, and he agreed to give them a make up exam the next day. When they arrived for the make up exam, he separated the four out in different parts of the classroom, and he handed out a sheet of paper to each. On the sheet of paper, the make up exam had just one question! The question was, which tire?

In today’s lesson, the Sadducees, who were a wealthy and powerful group, and did not believe in the resurrection, did not believe in angels, and accepted only the first five Books of the Old Testament as inspired Scripture, this group, this faction within Judaism, these teachers challenged Jesus with a question about the resurrection, which they didn’t believe in anyway. They wanted to make up the most outrageous, the silliest, and the most outlandish scenario possible to try to make Jesus look foolish. They especially wanted to ridicule the very idea of Heaven or of an afterlife as many people do today.

Two things you need to know before I go on, and that is #1, women in this day and age were extremely vulnerable unless they had a husband or some family to look after them. Number #2, being fruitful and multiplying as far as children was taken very, very seriously. In fact, they were almost wed to the idea that they would be remembered not by living after this life, but remembered by their children’s children. The only sense of ongoing memory in the culture for the Sadducees was to have many, many, many children. It was extremely important.

Combining these two cultural facts, there was a Jewish practice based on Deuteronomy, the 25th chapter, called levirate marriage. You don’t have to remember that. There’s no test. It protected women by requiring that a living brother take his widowed sister-in-law as a wife, and it protected the memory and the property rights and the bloodline of the

“Like Nothing You’ve Ever Imagined!”
The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.
Sunday, November 11, 2007

dead brother by requiring that the living brother raise the children unto his brother’s name, his bloodline. That attempted trick on Jesus with the seven brothers.

The Sadducees took the practice of levirate marriage to an extreme! They asked, after seven brothers take their brother’s wife, and then they all die, and the woman is still childless, whose wife will she be in the resurrection. Tell us, Jesus. Tell us if you can. They smiled sarcastically. Now, this hypothetical woman in a hypothetical situation, they didn’t care about her or anyone like her. They were just using the made-up woman to make Jesus look bad, but Jesus redefines the test, redefines the question. He offers an alternative exam, one that reveals that Jesus starts from a very different place, a very different perspective than his questioners. The Sadducees couldn’t conceive of a possibility of a resurrection because they couldn’t see beyond business as usual. The Sadducees assumed that the resurrection or life everlasting would involve only more of the same. If it existed at all, it would be just an extension of the world, as we know it. The Sadducees could not grasp that resurrection is God’s way of speaking of a new creation, a time when justice and peace will become real instead of just words, a time when the power of evil shall be decisively broken, a time when God’s creative saving work would come to full fruition.

The Sadducees, like most of us here, had it good – *here*, and they thought if there was a *there* in Heaven that it would be just more of the same. Jesus said, no, no, no! Your assumptions are wrong. Everything is so different in the resurrection that you cannot even imagine. Life in the resurrection is so different that your question has no meaning.

As Sarah Brewer keys in on the issue of marriage here, she wrote that what Jesus is saying is that marriage is not of eternal importance. It does not define who you are in God’s eyes. You know, people have all sorts of funny ideas about Heaven based on life here. I met a woman once in my very first church, and when I was speaking to her, and she was very upset that I had people of other races coming to my church, and I said to her that I know that in Heaven all of those who believe will be in the same Heaven. She said, “I don’t believe that!” She actually thought there would be some sort of a balcony or separate area for people of different races or nationalities or such.

It reminds me of a joke that my late Southern Baptist, very staunch Southern Baptist aunt from Knoxville, Tennessee told. I think I can. She said that a man went to Heaven, and they were showing, okay, this is where the Methodist are, and this is where the Episcopalians are, and this is where so and so is. They tiptoed past a room. The man asked St. Peter why they tiptoed past the room. He said, “Oh, that’s where the Southern Baptists are. They think there’s no one else here.” Did that go out on the radio? I’m not sure.

Well, people have all sorts of strange ideas about Heaven. There was a man once who had been married twice, first to a lady named Mary, and then later to a lady named Tillie. He had outlived both of his wives. Finally, he was a very old man. He was planning the sermon and the funeral and his burial plans, and he said, “All right. I want to be buried

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 11, 2007

right in the middle between Mary and Tillie.” He thought a minute, and said, “But tilt me towards Tillie just a little bit.”

People have strange ideas. Jesus tells us that life there is not simply a continuation of life here, so we often frame the wrong questions and define ourselves in inadequate ways. The bigger picture is that first and foremost and always, we are children of God. That is who we are. I am a child of God. You are children of God. At the end of the day, and at the end of our lives, what defines us is our relationship with God. Nothing else. That means that even now, the God who is God of the living wants us to live as though our first identity is as God’s child. Now, claiming this identity plays out in how we prioritize our lives, the choices that we make, the paths that we choose, we choose as children of God. That makes a difference. We can live in the knowledge that in our living and in our dying, we belong to God. The resurrection is a place and a way of being where our primary identity is child of God.

Our primary relationship is with God, and then Jesus goes on to say, marriage that is for here and now, but not for there and then. Jesus says as far as marriage in that regard, you will be like the angels. Not an angel, no one gets wings. That’s Hollywood, not Scripture. But like the angels in that we don’t marry, there is no need for marriage. Referring to angels irked the Sadducees, irked them because they did not believe in angels. Then he went even further, and he used some verses from the first five Books of the Old Testament to make the point that even Moses believed in an afterlife. His point is here. He says in Luke 20:37, “But that the dead are raised even Moses showed.”

In the passage about the bush where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, now God, Jesus says, is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living for all are alive to him. That still may not satisfy you. It may not fit in your head.

It reminds me of a short story by H. G. Wells, the science fiction writer. It’s called “The Soul of a Bishop.” There was a conversation in this short story between an angel and a bishop. The angel tells the bishop that religion is man’s way of trying to define truth, which he doesn’t fully understand. The bishop says, but you can tell me. I’m a bishop whereupon the angel tenderly strokes the bishop’s head, and says truth, yes, I could tell you the truth, but could this little brain box hold it? No.

Jesus rejects the Sadducees’ effort to read the conditions of time and space into the unknown eternal. He rejects their effort to place earthly limitations on eternal life. Tomorrow belongs to God. We can only glimpse eternity within the limits of our finite understanding.

A little boy named David once told his mother what many children tell their mothers. I don’t want to go to Sunday school. The mother asked why, and he said because we’re learning all about Heaven today. The mother said, but don’t you want to know about Heaven? David replied, no, Mom, I want Heaven to be a surprise!

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 11, 2007

It will be. It will be. There is no way you’re going to learn all about Heaven in Sunday school because God himself seems to want Heaven to be a surprise. There is an obscure little verse, which some of you will look up later because you won’t believe it’s in your Bible. Second Corinthians, 12th chapter, where the Apostle Paul says, “I know a man in Christ, who 14 years ago was caught up into the Third Heaven.” Third Heaven? Whether in the body or out of the body, Paul says, I do not know. God knows. I know that this man was caught up into paradise, and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. The idea that our little brains cannot comprehend what comes next is also in First Corinthians, 2nd chapter, in the Apostle Paul’s words, no eye has seen, no ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived what God has prepared for those who love him. Paul tried mightily as you heard in the reading today from First Corinthians 15 to describe the difference of the life to come. His language is full of poetic imagery that gives us a glimpse of that which we cannot really see and helps us to understand a bit of that which we cannot really know while bound on this earth. He says what is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. What is sown in this honor is raised in glory. What is sown in weakness is raised in power. What is sown in physical body is raised a spiritual body. It implies a complete transfiguring change, which awaits us, not just a continuation of the same.

We often in our thoughts and in our minds make God small enough to fit what we can understand or to fit our prejudices, and we do the same with Heaven by thinking that Heaven will be just more of the same. We’re trying to put a fence around infinity. It cannot be done.

When John Owen, the great Puritan pastor and teacher, lay dying, he was dictating some letters to his friends as his last correspondence. He said to his secretary, “Write I am still in the land of the living.” Then he stopped, and said, “No. Change that to read I am still in the land of those who die, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living.”

In this age where there is death, death, which it says in the New Testament, is the last enemy that God will destroy. In this age where there is death, the focus is on having children, on having houses, on having money, etc., but for those who are considered worthy of a place in that age, says Jesus, the focus is on being children, children of God. Being children of the resurrection. In that age where all are children of God there is no need for having children or having a partner or the having of people one by the other. That will be finished. All relationships will be in some way transfigured. The best that I can imagine is to make a physical analogy. The closer we all are to God, the closer we will be to each other, an intimacy we cannot yet understand. Of course, we don’t know! Of course, we cannot understand! We are left ignorant and unable to fathom completely what comes next.

As it says in First John, it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we will all be changed. This after all is Jesus’ point. Whatever the resurrection is, it is utterly different from anything we have known, and its center will be the one we have always known,

“Like Nothing You’ve Ever Imagined!”

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

Sunday, November 11, 2007

5

however dimly. All that is contingent, all that is cultural, all that is political, all that is earthly will fall away in the great discontinuity of the resurrection, but what is real and what is love will be lifted into God’s life, and all relationships and all faces transfigured for the children of the one whom Jesus called God, not of the dead, but of the living. The children of God and that transfiguration will be at last truly living. The entire Bible only hints of a reality too wonderful to imagine, but promises with comfort that God will be there. For those who truly trust God now, that is enough. For those who see themselves as first and foremost a child of God now, that will be the fulfillment of all we want and all we need. God’s eternal embrace and ourselves changed and made into what we were made for, made into what we were made to be, a true child of God. Amen.