

“THE GOD OF THE LIVING”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Luke 20:27-38

(11-10-19) Remembrance Sunday

I remember being at a conference addressing the decline of our denomination. It seems that we’ve been having these kinds of conferences for a long time now. We know the numbers and I won’t bother to repeat them now. One of the devotional speakers suggested that part of the problem why many of our congregations are in decline **is that our churches are very good at coming up with answers to questions that nobody’s asking any more.**

And maybe our text from Luke this morning contains one of those questions. A woman married seven brothers and all of them died. Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? This was the question posed to Jesus by some Sadducees, a group of religious leaders who didn’t even believe in the resurrection. Remember that the Sadducees differed from the Pharisees in that they didn’t believe in the resurrection and so they were sad, you see. The broader context of our reading this morning makes it clear that the Sadducees were only interested in trapping Jesus with a question which they thought he could not answer. The issue of whose wife the woman would be in the resurrection was rooted in the Mosaic Law, in something called levirate marriage, which stated that when a man died leaving his wife without a child, it was the duty of the next brother to marry the widow and try to produce a child which would be heir to the older brother.

So in this case, seven brothers took up the cause, all without success, leaving the question of whose wife the woman would be in the afterlife. Of course the whole question was merely a straw man for the Sadducees, just a ruse in order to entrap Jesus. Jesus doesn't fall for their trap, however. He won't answer their question; at least he doesn't answer it on their terms.

Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? It's not a question that people ask, but there are questions that people **do** ask, questions about what happens when I die, what happens when this life is over? These are questions that people do ask, and they ask it often. Jesus uses the occasion of the Sadducees' question to teach a bit about what happens when we die.

There's a movie called "Hereafter," starring Matt Damon which in part explores one vision of what happens when we die. Damon is a reluctant psychic named George who is able to make contact with the dead. The whole premise of the movie is that we can have contact with those who have predeceased us. In one part of the movie George meets a woman named Melanie in an Italian cooking class. They have a mutual attraction to one another, but when Melanie discovers that George can contact the dead, she asks for a reading.

George warns Melanie about the risks, but she insists. When George holds her hands, he sees the figure of Melanie's deceased father, who tells him to ask Melanie to forgive him for what he did to her as a child. Melanie is overcome with emotion and is unprepared to deal with the consequences of the psychic reading and flees the apartment in tears, never to see George again.

In another part of the movie, George is contacted by Marcus, a twelve year old boy, whose older twin brother Jason dies after he's hit by a car. Finally pressured into making contact with the deceased twin, George is able to tell Marcus that Jason is happy in the afterlife and that it is more wonderful than he can imagine. Jason also wants George to tell Marcus that he can no longer look after him and that he must now start looking after himself and not fear being alone.

Part of the assumption of the movie, and of just about every other movie made or book written about the afterlife, is that when we die, we largely maintain the same sort of relational structures that have defined us in this life.

We are still parents, still siblings, still husbands and wives. The movie "Hereafter" makes the point that even those who have passed on into the life to come, **are still consumed by the need to address issues of relationship**, whether in seeking forgiveness, in giving encouragement, in providing direction.

Yet Jesus' answer to the Sadducees' question seems to provide an entirely different outlook. Whose wife will she be? Your question presumes wrongly, Jesus seems to imply. **Those who live here and now, they marry and are given in marriage. But those in the life to come, those who are resurrected from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage.** Rather, they are like angels and are children of God, children of the resurrection. If there are relationship structures in the life to come, **Jesus seems to say that there is really only one primary one, we are children of God.** Our relationships in the life to come are not defined around us as the center, **but around God as the center.** The focus is not on us as husband or wife, son or daughter, brother or sister, or any other human relational construct, but rather on God.

We are children of God. That's the only relationship that truly matters in the life to come. Thomas Merton, the Trappist Monk, wrote

“All sin starts from the assumption that my false self, the self that only exists in my own egocentric desires, is the fundamental reality to which everything else is ordered. That false self, or ego, targets its own satisfaction as the exclusive focus of this life.”

(Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*)

And it's not a big stretch to see how this focus can carry over into our expectations of the next. Whose wife will she be assumes that one of the brothers will be able to say that she is my wife, or that the woman will be able to say that he is my husband. **But this sort of imagination still holds at the center, our egos, ourselves.** Jesus says that God is at the center, we are children of God. To know the resurrection life in God's presence, is to know that just as the grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, so too we have to die to ourselves so that Christ can transform our egos into his likeness. Following the words of John the Baptist, Christ must increase, but we must decrease.

In the book, *The Five People You Meet In Heaven*, the author Mitch Albom writes of a man who encounters in heaven 5 people who have significantly affected his life, whether he knew it at the time or not. The novel has sold over 11 million copies in 35 different languages. It is the bestselling hardcover first-time novel ever. Part of our fascination with novels like this and with movies such as *Hereafter*, *Ghost*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Contact* or a host of other books and films, is that it revolves around our need to make everything about ourselves.

I don't know whether I'll meet five people in heaven or whether I'll meet 50 or 50 million. What I do know, what Jesus tells me, is that I will, for sure, meet one person in heaven. **What I know Jesus tells me is that I will be a child of God.** I will be in relationship with God, in a relationship that centers around God, not me.

One time Jesus told a parable about a rich man and Lazarus, and after both die, the rich man recognizes Lazarus at the side of Abraham. Does that mean that we will recognize one another? I don't have a definite answer to that question, **but I do think that the question again presupposes our centrality, our need to know. It's so hard to let go of that desire to satisfy our need, to address our wants.**

This is not to criticize or to minimize our concern for human relationships. Jesus is clear that while on earth people marry and are given in marriage. And there are genuine questions that are asked about the future that are rooted in sincerity, sometimes in pain and hurt seeking healing and reconciliation. If you've lost your first spouse and you've found the blessing of another love, perhaps the question of the Sadducees might hold some level of interest. If you've ever lived with an irresolvable guilt or pain, perhaps the thought of some future where that guilt can be absolved, where that pain can be healed, holds enormous power and hope. **All these things and so much more, hold our attention in this life and we imagine that they must in the life to come as well.**

But as hard as it is to admit, **the life to come with God for eternity is a life with which we are wholly unfamiliar.**

Eternal life will be qualitatively different from what we know in our present temporal existence. Just as being in the womb for 9 months cannot possibly prepare a baby for the life to follow, so our life here on earth cannot possibly prepare us for the life to come. As inconceivably different life would be to a baby who for months has breathed and been fed through a cord from mother to child and now has to learn to eat and breathe in a wholly different manner, so also our life to come with God is inconceivably different from the life we know now.

There is so much we don't know.

What we think we know is often merely speculation and imagination. I've often said to grieving people who have lost a loved one that I believe that the God who blesses us with love in this life will somehow honour that love in the life to come. But what form those relationships might take is unclear at best. But there is one thing we do know. Jesus tells us that we will know God, that God will know us and that anything else, and everything else, will take second place to that primary relationship and connection.

For most of us, the question of whose wife will she be in the resurrection is hardly compelling. A better question might be whether we treated each other, husbands, wives, children, parents, siblings, friends, what have you, with love and care while we do know each other here on earth. **Why focus on what we can't know when we should be putting our maximum effort into doing our best with those who we do know?**

If part of the problem of declining churches is that we have become so good at answering questions nobody asks, then perhaps part of the solution is to get better at addressing the questions that people do ask. What happens to us when we die? The temptation is to do what we always do, to put our false self, our egos first, to center everything around us and our needs. But that's so much speculation and imagination.

And ultimately what would be so good or compelling about an eternity in which the same old problems and the same old painful issues still plague and perplex us?

The good news is that in God, with God as our center, we are promised a life we can't even begin to imagine. The good news is that we can share with others the one certain truth, that in the life to come, we will be children of God, children of the resurrection. Life does not end when we breathe our last. In God death does not have the last word and we will be resurrected. **God is not God of the dead, but God of the living, and to him all of us are alive.**

On this Remembrance Sunday, we give thanks to God for those who faithfully served our country for the cause of freedom, those who risked and those who sacrificed their lives so that we might know the freedom to live as we do and to worship any religion freely and without threat. Just as Jesus affirms that God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, that because God is God of the living, to him all are alive, so also those who have faithfully served and have died in the Lord are also alive, **for our God is God of the living.**

The good news is that those who have gone before us, those who know resurrection from the dead, know a relationship with God, rooted deeply in God's love, God's grace and God's joy. What happens to us when we die?

The good news is that because God is God of the living, when we die, we pass from this life and all our complex and complicated relationships, to a reality where our primary relationship is with God our Creator and everything else just flows from that amazing central relationship.

In a world full of people who so desperately seek insight into life and eternal life, but who so often cannot see beyond their own needs and desires even in the life to come, the Christian contribution is to share the good news that it's not all about ourselves, but that it's about God, a God who loves us and desires a relationship with us. **I don't know who you will meet when you die and what level of recognition we will have, but I do know that God is the one person you will definitely meet in heaven,** the God of the living, for to him all are alive.

Thanks be to God!

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim
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