
Is Jesus Really Interested in Marriage?

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Proper 27A
Luke 20:27-38

*"In the resurrection from the dead they neither marry nor are given in marriage.
,God is God not of the dead, but of the living." -- Luke 20.35, 38*

Is Jesus really interested in marriage?

I do not mean was he interested in getting married! Contrary to the idle tale that seems to titillate us every generation, Jesus was not married himself. In fact, neither Jesus nor Paul -easily the two greatest figures of early Christianity-- was married.

No, I mean, "Was Jesus interested in the subject of marriage?" He discusses it only once, and that was when some Pharisees asked him about divorce (Matthew 19). Jesus quotes Genesis 2.24 and says, "For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife."

Other than that relatively minor instance, Jesus does not much talk about marriage. It is generally agreed that the matter on which the Sadducees test him today is not marriage. Instead, the Sadducees are really trying to argue logically against the doctrine of resurrection.

If resurrection were true, they claim, consider how logically absurd it would be if a woman had seven perfectly legal marriages on earth and then died. (Remember, there was legal precedent for a brother to marry his deceased brother's wife.) If they were all legal marriage, whose wife would the woman be in the resurrection?

As is usual with Jesus, he does not answer directly the question of his accusers. (Sometimes, remember, when folks are accusing you, there is no answer to the types of questions they ask! They frame the question wrongly!)

This question is not answered by Jesus. He says simply that the kingdom of heaven, the resurrection, is larger than our structures of marriage.

He knows that the real question, the real test he is receiving, is not about marriage, but about resurrection. It turns out that Jesus, too, is not interested in marriage. Jesus is interested in resurrection.

I believe that Jesus is still interested in resurrection. Thus, resurrection should be the subject that interests us. What do people really believe today? Do people believe in resurrection today?

We might think that the folks who do not believe in resurrection are the atheists, and especially these "new age" atheists whose books are popular now. But I propose this morning that we look a bit more deeply into this matter. It is not the new age atheists who do not believe in resurrection. I think there are lots of Christians who do not believe in resurrection.

Today, the people who do not believe in resurrection are the people who do not, or cannot, hope. To deny resurrection is to refuse to live for the future. The people who do not believe in resurrection live only in the present or the past. Indeed, they live in the past so regularly, that they may as well be dead.

For the doctrine of resurrection is not simply a doctrine about Jesus, though we do believe that Jesus was raised. And the doctrine of the resurrection is not simply a doctrine about what happens to us when our physical bodies stop operating.

No, the doctrine of resurrection is really a doctrine about what happens when we wake up tomorrow. To believe in the resurrection means that we have hope. No matter what changes in our lives, no matter what adjustments we must make in life, resurrection means that there is always hope. There is always new life. The doctrine of resurrection is that no matter how tragic life is, no matter what kind of death we face, there is always new life. To deny the resurrection is to abandon hope, to give up on life itself

Therefore, the doctrine of resurrection affects everything we do in this life of change after change. And the doctrine of resurrection certainly affects every relationship we have in life. And, yes, the doctrine of resurrection definitely affects marriage.

I do not believe that Jesus speaks specifically about how to structure a marriage, but he does speak specifically about how to live in a marriage. Jesus speaks about how to live in marriage whenever he speaks about resurrection. Because Jesus implies that any commitment, and thus any marriage, is about holding on to life, holding on to hope, for the future.

The woman in today's hypothetical test case had been married seven times. But I have a confession to make today that is not hypothetical. I have been married seven times myself.

In fact, I may have been married many more times than just seven times. I have been married to the same woman for twenty-seven years, but I think I have married her many times.

I have married her many times because, during twenty-seven years, we have changed a great deal. And we have changed together. Every time we change, we must find a way to re-commit ourselves to each other. Every time she had a baby. Every time we moved to another house. Every time I took another job. Every time someone moved in. Every time someone moved out. Every time we cooked a dinner together. Every time we negotiated who would wash the dishes (usually her!).

Relationships are about holding on to each other in the midst of change and also in the midst of routine. And every time we re-negotiate our lives together, we go through something like another marriage together. We decide to hold on to each other. We commit ourselves, again, to each other.

We do this because we believe in resurrection. We believe in hope, no matter what the issue is, no matter what it is that has changed. No matter what may have died, there is always the possibility that new life will be reborn. Something dies, and something is re-born. That is resurrection. "And the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former" (Haggai 2:9).

Yes, marriage can happen seven times. Maybe, like forgiveness, marriage can happen seventy times seven times.

So, is Jesus really interested in marriage? Yes, Jesus is *really* interested in marriage; because Jesus is interested in commitments of hope. Jesus is interested in commitments of new life together.

This is why Jesus was so willing to turn water into wine at a *wedding*. Turning water into wine is what marriage is. Turning water into wine is what the commitment of resurrection is. Jesus takes ordinary material, two separate human lives, and turns them into miraculous love. And he does it again and again.

Jesus does the same with this bread and wine this morning. We do it ourselves, again and again. We re-commit to hope and resurrection and commitment. Not just seven times, but seventy times seven times.

When we take communion, we are declaring our belief in new life. We are committing ourselves to each other in blessed

relationships. We are renewing marriage commitments. We are renewing family relationships. We are renewing church commitments. We are committing ourselves to resurrection.

Sure, it is hard to image what the structure of all these relationships will be in the afterlife. There is no way to answer the Sadducees' hypothetical question of accusation. Who knows what families or marriages or churches will look like? Who knows how we will eat or drink, for that matter?

What we do know, is that these structures and institutions here on earth -these families and marriages and banquets and feasts and even these simple communion services""these are all opportunities for resurrection. They are opportunities for us, here on earth, to receive a foretaste of the age to come. These are all opportunities for us to believe that God is the God not of the dead, but of the living.

If we practice hope and renewed commitment in the midst of the most dramatic changes, if we taste enough new life here on earth, if we can wake up every morning, determined to taste resurrection again today, then we will certainly be prepared for that eternal resurrection, that heavenly home, and "the latter splendor of this house shall be greater than the former."

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip