
I've Been Married Seven Times!

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Proper 27 – Year C

*“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*

If this sermon were about marriage, then I would begin my remarks with a very funny joke about marriage. Because serious subjects sometimes need a light-hearted beginning!

But, I have discovered that there is no way I can tell a joke about marriage without offending someone, mostly my wife! There is no way any husband can tell a joke about marriage without offending his wife, and most every other wife around, too.

So, that's the joke. There is no joke! I am so glad, then, that this sermon is not about marriage. In fact, this sermon is about resurrection.

The Sadducees are back! The Sadducees are testing Jesus, using a hypothetical example of a woman who was married seven times. But, is Jesus really interested in marriage?

No. This intriguing story needs some background information, some data about who the Sadducees actually were. Unfortunately, we tend to group all the enemies of Jesus together. Since he sometimes combined the Pharisees and the Sadducees together in his condemnations, we tend to think they were generally the same sorts of people.

But they weren't. They were two different groups, and it was the Sadducees who were far more conservative than the Pharisees. In fact, we might say that the Sadducees were the fundamentalists of the Jewish groups, and the Pharisees were the progressives; the Pharisees were more liberal than the Sadducees.

A key reason for the difference between the two was the different scripture they regarded as authoritative. The Sadducees regarded only the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, as authoritative; that was the Torah, the Mosaic Law. The Pharisees, though, were much more liberal; they regarded newer writings also as scriptural, writings like the Psalms, the Prophets, and even some Wisdom literature. The Pharisees were progressive!

Now, those newer elements of the scriptures actually do contain some hints, some notions, of resurrection and the afterlife. Thus, the Pharisees, in general, believed in some sort of resurrection. It was thought that the *first* five books of the Bible, do not give any indication of resurrection and afterlife whatsoever; thus, the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection.

My grandmother used to ask this question: Do you know why the opponents of Jesus were so unhappy? “Because they were so Sad-you-see.”

So, in this bible passage, the Sadducees are not really interested in marriage; they are actually putting Jesus to the test. They are asking him a hypothetical question in order to disprove his belief in resurrection and the afterlife. In fact, they are

rather taunting him!

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. Whose wife would the woman be in the resurrection?

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 is not that 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 that it is not the new age atheists who do not believe in resurrection. There may be many Christians who do not believe in resurrection.

For the doctrine of resurrection is not simply a doctrine about Jesus, though we do believe that Jesus was raised. And the doctrine of 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 *now*, what happens when we wake up tomorrow. To believe in the resurrection means to live in 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, in this life of change after change. And the doctrine of resurrection certainly affects every relationship we have in life, including marriage.

Jesus may never speak specifically about how to structure a marriage, but he does seem to say 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. Here’s my confession: 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 thirty-nine years, but I think I have married her many times.

I have married her many times because, during our years together, 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 we had a baby. Every time one of us got sick. Every time we took another job. Every time someone moved in. Every time someone moved out. Every time we realized again how much older we have become. Every time we cooked a dinner together.

For any of us, relationships are about holding on to each other in the midst of change, and also in the midst of routine. And every time any of us re-negotiate our lives together, we go through something like another resurrection 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!

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. I am not sure Jesus is interested in the “after-life” at all. Jesus is really interested in the “Now” life – the life of here and now. Someone once asked a friend of mine, “Do you believe in life after death?” “No,” my friend responded, “I believe in life *before* death!”

Sure, it is hard to imagine what all our earthly relationships will be like in the afterlife. There is no way to answer hypothetical questions about what families or marriages or churches will look like in the afterlife! 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. Because they are opportunities for commitments to life. These are all opportunities for us to believe that God is the God not of the dead, but of the living. God is interested in the “Now” life!

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, that ultimate life.

AMEN.

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