

SEVEN WEDDINGS AND AS MANY FUNERALS

a sermon delivered by the Rev. Scott Dalgarno Oct. 9, 2022

based on Luke 20:27-38.

A Lutheran minister friend once told me of a very “together” lady in his congregation who volunteered to take over doing the children's sermons for a month.

“She was very organized,” he said. She planned for everything. Her first Sunday she told this very elaborate story about how we are all traveling through this world and the Bible is kind of our guide, a road map, which give us the instructions we might need to navigate successfully through this life and make it eventually to heaven.

She had several props: a raincoat, an umbrella, a compass, a suitcase. Very creative, but it went on much too long. And then when it came time for summing up she said, “So, what do I have to do to get to heaven?”

A little brown-eyed, 5 year-old piped up and said –

“Die.”

Listen to this poem of Carl Sandburg’s It’s called, LIMITED

I am riding on a limited express, one of the crack trains
of the nation.

Hurtling across the prairie into blue haze and dark air
go fifteen all-steel coaches holding a thousand people.
(All the coaches shall be scrap and rust and all the men
and women laughing in the diners and sleepers shall
pass to ashes.)

I ask a man in the smoker where he is going and he
answers: “Omaha.”

I think the Sadducees who play such an important role in this morning’s text would love that poem. “Wake up” they would say with condescending glee. “This is all the life there is.”

Let's look again at the text for this morning. One day these religious leaders come to Jesus and pose a question. "Rabbi," they say, "A widow died and she was preceded in death by her seven previous husbands. "So," they wanted to know, "in heaven, whose wife will she be?" Their eyes twinkle.

Jesus, never the fool, recognizes a "set up" when he sees one. He knows that these Sadducees are "strict constructionist" types.

Unlike the young Turk Pharisees who believe in resurrection, the Sadducee motto is, "If something is not explicit in the scriptures, forget about it."

Their principal text on the subject of mortality comes from 2 Samuel 14:14: "We must all die. We are like water spilled upon the ground that cannot be gathered up again." "Once dead always dead," they would say. Anything else is just wishful thinking.

You know, the Bible is not afraid to bring up uncomfortable ideas. That's because the Bible doesn't speak with just one voice. No, in fact it's integrity is dependent upon the fact that it has made room for many voices.

I mean, look, if some idea comes to your mind (I mean, any idea at all) you'll find it somewhere in the Bible. That's why people can prove anything with a Bible text.

Anyway, I find it interesting that the Sadducees talk about death in the context of marriage.

Let me tell you about two people I once knew -- Edward and Alma -- backbone church folk who were part of a rural Presbyterian church I served as a student pastor decades ago. These two saints, nearing 90 at the time, had the daily habit of clearing the breakfast dishes and then sitting down with a devotional guide and the Bible.

Alma told me that one morning Edward, who had been suffering from multiple health problems, concluded their time with an especially earnest prayer.

He asked that God, in God's infinite mercy, would reach down and take the two of them home "soon." He said their "amen" and then, squeezed Edward's hand. At which point Alma asked him if, in the future, he would please pray to God about his own mortality and leave Alma's alone.

A couple of years later Edward died. Their pastor at the time (Judy) told me that she visited Alma regularly after Edward's passing and each time Alma would refer to Edward in some way. "He's out puttering in the shop," she'd say, or "Edward's out in the garden." She'd chuckle when she'd say such things.

Judy never thought this odd. The two had been married for more than sixty years. They had become very much "one flesh" in that time. Even death had not served to fully separate them. Then a day came when Judy visited and Alma met her at the door wearing a completely different countenance.

She said, "Edward spoke to me and said that he can't linger here anymore. He said it's time for me to go and be with him." A week later Judy was preparing a memorial service for this woman who had seemed the picture of health the week before.

That's one side of the marriage question -- I also know of a woman that the noted preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor tells of. The elderly woman was dying of cancer when her husband suddenly died of a heart attack. At his funeral, someone leaned over her wheel chair to console her, reminding her that it would not be long until they were together again. Later, when she was alone with Barbara, who happened to be her pastor, she said, "I am never going to get away from him, am I?"

Well, questions about life posed by these two stories aren't in the purview of the Sadducees. Why? Because for the Sadducees, women are creatures that are meant to be controlled by men.

In her sad earthly life the poor woman in the Sadducee's story has been passed from one husband to the next, with no thought of her grief or her wishes in the matter. They could be talking about the ultimate fate of an antique side-table.

This woman has no identity or meaning other than as the wife of the man she's shackled to in this life. "Whose property will she be in the resurrection," they are asking? The resurrection, they assume, if it exists at all, is just more of the present, stretched out forever.

Jesus responds that their assumptions are just wrong. The resurrection is not just more of this world; it is a whole new existence. Everything, including all of our social arrangements, our relationships, everything, will be transformed. "There's no marriage in heaven," he says. "Get over it."

If we know one thing for sure about old-world thinking, it is that everything that lives dies, and what's dead stays dead. But in the resurrection, all that somehow is reversed, overcome, turned upside down.

For far too long the world has been in the grip of death. For too long death has tried to call the shots, tried to be the last word on everything. Death rules the world through fear, violence, hatred, and lies. But the resurrection is God's great announcement that all of that is a lie. None of death's great power is ultimately powerful after all.

Paul, in his letter to the Roman church says, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."

A number of physicists, including Frank Tipler and the recently deceased, John Polkinghorne agree that life after death is a "perfectly coherent hope." Their point is that the mysterious nature of time and the idea that our souls might function along the lines of DNA, carrying whatever is unique about us on beyond our physical existence, is not unthinkable.

Now, of course, this can't be proved. But, you know, it has been said down the ages that nothing worth proving can truly be proved, nor disproved.

I like how William Sloan Coffin put the conundrum of life beyond this one –

He said, “As a child in a womb cannot conceive of life with air and light – the very stuff of our existence – so it is hard for us to conceive of any other life without the sustaining forces to which we are accustomed. But consider this: If we are essentially spirit, not flesh, if what is substantial is intangible; if we are spirits that have bodies and not the other way around, then it makes sense that just as musicians can abandon their instruments to find others elsewhere, so at death our spirits can leave our bodies and find other forms in which to make new music.”

I like that. But still, there is a little Sadducee in me. Like them, I have questions too. If the resurrection is real, what part of us will be resurrected? Will we be preserved as all-mind only?

More, will we be able to recognize one another as distinct beings, or will we all be morphed into some huge amorphous living whole, like drops of water merging into an ocean?

Yeah, and I want to know if my old lab-mix will be there with me, because I loved that dog, and she’s more worthy of eternal life than a lot of people I’ve known.

You understand, don’t you, that I’m asking these questions out of love, and not like the cynical Sadducees.

To the Sadducees, Jesus says, “There’s a little too much glee in your cynicism about this tender subject. Your God is too small. Why not a life beyond this one? Mystery is everywhere. The unjust social arrangement where women have no hope, no standing, no control over their own bodies, no safety net outside of marriage, needs to pass away, too. The age to come will be a whole new way of life that the Sadducees can’t begin to comprehend.

Jesus continues . . .

You remember Moses and the burning bush story, don't you? Moses invokes the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. God is not God of the dead but of the living. " Meaning . . .

Get a life, Sadducees. Wake up about God, for the God who created this sweet old world has nothing but its redemption in mind.

Look around and let the mystery and magnificence of the creation seep into you. There is something of the eternal fused into the most delicate green leaf, if you have eyes to see.

The poet, Wallace Stevens, says, "Death is the mother of beauty." And this may be the most important truth of all when we are speaking matters of death and life.

Death is the great daily wake-up call. Well, at least it should be. But, you know, there are many people who have walked this earth who have never really lived. They are afraid of death, but their lives . . . what do they amount to?

Susan Ertz has said this of such people, "Millions long for immortality who do not know what to do with themselves on a rainy Sunday afternoon."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Protestant minister, was jailed in 1944 by the Nazis for taking part in a plot to kill Hitler. Shortly before his execution in the last days of the war he had something to say concerning his probable execution, something to say about the planet he would soon be leaving behind.

Was it, "Thank God I'll will soon be clear of this miserable world?" You might think so, having seen all the suffering he had seen; having had to endure the excruciating torture of waiting for his own inevitable execution. No, he said this instead:

"It is only when one loves life AND THE EARTH so much that one may believe in the resurrection and a new world" (Letters and Papers from Prison).

He is saying that the very signs of goodness and God's grace that are shot through this creation give one hope in the first place of resurrection and a new world that might exist beyond this one.

And to people who are glib, unthinking “believers,” he is saying that if you don't find signs of God and goodness here, you surely won't have eyes to see them any place else, so don't bother packing for it.

Many years ago I asked the one of the most spiritual men I've ever known what he thought of death and what might come after. His comment was to say that he spent just as much time wondering about his birth. That's an equal mystery,” he said. “Where did I come from?” he wondered.

That was a revelation to me – and also something that prompted me to think larger thoughts about these large questions.

The Bible . . . refuses to approach resurrection as a rational kind of thing at all. It approaches it as mystical. It's based not on our belief in God as much as God's belief in us, and on God's investment in the creation.

Finally, it means that we need not worry about where we will go because of who promises to be with us, always and forever because, in some sense the most important marriage is the one we have with our creator.

That's how Jesus gets the last laugh over the Sadducees on the question about marriage and death.

The wonderful poet, Mary Oliver, put every little and big thing I've spoken of this morning into one short little poem. It's called . . .

“When Death Comes.”

When Death comes

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,

and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

Amen