

A RIDDLE

A SERMON FOR ORDINARY TIME
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 10, 2013
FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
MARIANNA, FLORIDA
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LUKE 20:27-38

Do you remember the old rhyming riddle that went?

*As I was going to Saint Ives, I met a man with seven wives.
Each wife had seven sacks.
In each sack were seven cats.
Each cat had seven kits.*

Kits, cats, sacks, wives, how many were going to Saint Ives?

I've had kids get out pencil and paper, and even a calculator, to come up with the answer. And of course, the answer is: only one.

The story of the Sadducees questioning Jesus is much like that riddle. It contains the secret, the punch line, in the very first sentence: Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question.

The question, long, drawn out, like the riddle, is about whose wife a woman who married seven brothers will be in the resurrection.

Well, if you don't believe in the resurrection, what difference does it make?

That is probably how I would have answered the question.

Not Jesus.

We faced it head on, and answered it seriously.

Now it seems a ridiculous question, this riddle of the Sadducees. But under Old Testament law, if a man died without leaving children behind, it was his brother's responsibility to marry the widow, and if there was no brother, it might well be the responsibility of the nearest male relative to take the widow to wife.

That is one of the twists to the story of Ruth, in the Old Testament. And of course, the Sadducees, the Pharisees, the scribes, and Jesus would all know the law and would all know the story of Ruth and Boaz.

That a woman could bury all seven brothers, well, that is really stretching to make a point.

But you know, in the world in which we live, a woman could possibly have six or seven husbands. I don't know how many times the Gabor sisters married, or how many times Elizabeth Taylor married. And of course, most of those marriages ended in divorce.

But not too many years ago, one of our dearest friends in the Arcadia church buried her third husband. She lived to be 95, and her first husband was killed in a tragic accident, her second husband lived a long life and died at a ripe old age, and her third husband was past 80 when they married and they had ten good years together..

The question of whose wife she would be in heaven was a very real and pressing concern for her. In fact, she really sort of hoped that we wouldn't know each other in heaven! She didn't want her first husband to know about the other two! Or the second to know about the third! Nor did she want them comparing notes!

Perhaps knowing that someday, someone, somewhere, might indeed question who would be married to whom in heaven, Jesus answered the question, solved the riddle.

But to some, his answer seems like a riddle: that in the resurrection, they neither marry nor are given in marriage. They are like angels, like children of God, and are children of the resurrection, who will live forever.

We are given here a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven. Will child like innocence and purity be restored? Will we all be as content and joyful as little children who simply love each other fully and freely without wondering who belongs to whom? I've seen little hearts broken on the playground at pre-school, when a darling little girl rejected a cute little boy who wanted to be her boyfriend. That, dear hearts, is the loss of innocence. In heaven we will be innocent and pure in our love.

But C.S. Lewis argues that it will still be a mature love, but not a physical love, for this physical body will be replaced by a spiritual body, as Paul told us in I Corinthians 15. Lewis writes, "Those who attain the glorious resurrection will see the dry bones clothed again with flesh, and the fact and the myth remarried, the literal and the metaphorical rushing together." *The Joyful Christian*, pp. 201-202.

William Barclay says that: "we must not think of heaven in terms of this earth. Life there will be quite different, because we will be quite different." He added:

“It would save a mass of misdirected ingenuity and not a little heartbreak, if we ceased to speculate on what heaven is like, and left things to the love of God.”
The Gospel of Luke, p. 261

Heaven and what will happen there, what it will be like, how we will relate to one another, is indeed a topic of speculation, a mystery, a riddle. Books have been written, movies made, stories told.

And we will always wonder at what heaven must be like until we see it for ourselves. Wondering, we will ask foolish questions like the riddle of the Sadducees.

But in the end, Barclay is right: we must leave things to the love of God. The One who loved us first and best, who created us in His own image, to whom we belong in life and in death, will care for us and provide for us even better in heaven than He has on earth. That is all I know, and all I need to know.

Let us pray.

O Loving God, help us to trust in you in this life and the next. Help us to know that all riddles will be answered, and mysteries solved, in your abiding love, made known to us in Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.