

Blessed Are the Witnesses

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How many of you have seen the movie, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*?

It's a fun movie, isn't it? I mean, it's a little twisted. Seven brothers kidnap seven sisters and over the course of however long, I believe it's through a winter season, all the sisters end up choosing a brother to be married to. And at the end it's a shotgun wedding times seven because one of the sisters gives birth to a baby girl and all the sisters claim to be the mother. So everyone has to get married just to cover all the bases.

This morning's scripture isn't like that. This morning's scripture is *one* bride for seven brothers and no children, and a question designed to be unanswerable.

If you're really someone who's into the law and likes to dispute and argue and ask, 'Well, if this is the case, then what happens in this situation?' these Sadducees might be your group. I know people like that. I've been someone like that. Sometimes I still am someone like that. It gets a little tedious, yet sometimes it's kinda fun.

In this Luke passage, though, the Sadducees come to Jesus, and they have this idea in their mind of how to trap Jesus in a quandary, 'We're gonna get him on this one.'

'So, rabbi, if you *are* a rabbi, we've got a question for ya. One woman marries the oldest of seven brothers. He dies before the woman can bare any children with him. Now, according to our laws, the next eldest brother has to marry that same woman so she is taken care of, and he has to have children with her in the oldest brother's name so all the property is held in trust and does not pass from the family's ownership. That brother also dies having fathered no children with the woman. So the third brother marries the woman and dies. Then the fourth brother has to marry the woman and he dies...'

You'd think the fifth, the sixth, and the seventh brothers would have caught on.

The Sadducees then ask Jesus, whose wife is she?

Sometimes I look at this passage, and I realize the ideas around marriage has changed over time. Marriage in that day was more of a proprietary arrangement and had strict rules. While marriage in today's culture is more about love, the sacred marriage bond is not always as valued as it once was. Or perhaps it's valued but the practice of marriage isn't as strict or as clearly defined as it once was. There're all kinds of different ideas about the flexibility of marriage and to what it looks like and how long it should last. Should marriage last a few years and then we reassess? Does it have a bare minimum of ten years? Should a joined couple continue on in marriage till they're dead? Should marriage only last until you can't stand each other anymore?

In the Sadducees view, marriage is an eternal bond. Does that mean it goes even into the next life and this idea of resurrection? So they ask Jesus, "Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her" (Luke 20:33).

And Jesus, in Jesus' way, just kinda shakes his head. 'You don't get it. You're asking the wrong questions. Here you are concerned with life and death and resurrection. You are concerned with legalities and all of these things that are human constructions.'

Marriage is a human construction. Now, granted, I'll say it's a good human construction. I enjoy being married. I'm hoping my husband Rom enjoys being married too. Marriage is something we as humans do to make this life a little fuller and perhaps a little easier with the partnership and companionship marriage can provide. It's a way of bonding that has a great potential for meeting our human creature-needs. Humans need friendship. Humans need community. Humans need love. Humans need relationships. In those relationships we have a need to care for and be cared for, to communicate, to work with and play with and enjoy life with. So, yes, marriage is a human construction, and it is a God blessed human construction.

But in the next life... In the kingdom to come, and the kingdom of God already here even, marriage is not something that God is worried about. Marriage is not something that Christ is really worried about. What Christ is concerned with is how you live your life, how you promote the kingdom, how you show compassion to others, how you understand God working in the world.

In Jesus' answer to the Sadducees, he refers back to the Torah and brings the Sadducees attention to the account of Moses and the burning bush. Moses heard the voice of God coming from the burning bush, and as instructed, removed his sandals – probably more out of fear than faithfulness. (I mean, when you have a bush on fire, not actually burning up in the fire, telling you to take your sandals off cause you're on holy ground, you do it with no questions asked. That's what I would do anyway. A talking burning bush is a little unnerving.) God, in that moment, having captured Moses' full attention, invokes the name of the Hebrew forefathers. "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." (Exodus 3:1-6)

Jesus points out God did not refer to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as being gone and past, who were. God was referring to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who are. Not *I was* their God. Rather, *I am* their God. This gives us an insight into how God understands life. If I'm given a choice on how humans understand life and how God understands life, I'm going with how God understands life... God being the author of life and all.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob... while their mortal lives ended, they are still alive in God. While the mortal lives of the saints of the church have ended; all the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Ezekiel, Jonah (yes, even Jonah, the winy 'I don't want to' prophet), Daniel, Malachi, Zephaniah, all of the prophets of old – are alive in God. Elijah was a different story. Elijah is the one prophet who was taken straight up to God without having to die a mortal death.

Then there's the saints of the New Testament; the Christian Testament. John the Baptist, Peter and the disciples, the Apostle Paul, Timothy, Barnabas, Cornelius the Centurion, Dorcas, Lydia, Phoebe, Ananias, Cleopas, Joanna, and the list goes on. All of those who put forth the faith and who put forth the work and lived in a holy compassionate redemptive relationship with God are all alive in God, if we look at this scripture and understand what Jesus is talking about.

Beyond those saints, there's the saints of our own lives. I mentioned earlier in "Kid's Time" about my grandfather. Many of his possessions have been passed on to me. I have some of his stoles, his traveling communion set, his field altar from his time in service, his pilot flight records, his church books and hymnals, and his pastoral record. I can look at all this and I can see the work he did for the church in preaching the Gospel truth, in building congregations, spreading the hope of the loving God, and living in the faith of salvation through Jesus Christ. I know Granddad is alive in God.

All of those in our lives who have gone before us are now home in glory with God Almighty. They get to sit back and sip tea with Jesus... or coffee if they're a coffee person, or juice or clear soda if they can't do caffeine, or living water straight from the fountains of heaven. Or maybe a glass of wine if they're a wine drinker. Jesus liked wine.

However, they are spending their time at home in glory, all of them are alive in God for this reason: they walked in faith. They lived, best they could, in truth and compassion and working to build something greater than themselves, facing fears and standing against evil in whatever forms it presented itself. That was a vow our saints took when they were confirmed or baptized into the Church. A vow to claim the ability God gives us to stand against evil in whatever form it presents itself. They are the saints who tried to make this world a more just place. They are the saints who worked in our faith community that it could be built up and be a beckon of hope for the neighborhood around us. It's those saints we remember today.

All of us have our saints. All of us have people who've touched our lives and pointed us in a better direction. All of us have someone who we have cherished and still cherish even though they are gone from this mortal world.

We look at Revelation, the passage that was read this morning, and it tells us, it assures us, our loved saints are still alive for they are alive in God. For I looked, "and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." No one could count it! At this point in John's vision there's a whole lot of heavenly creatures gathered round. Not even they who were celestial beings could count the great multitude. (Revelation 7:9)

Then John was asked by one of the elders about the multitude, "who are they, and where did they come from?" (Revelation 7:13)

They are those who have come through the tribulation (Revelation 7:14). They are those who have worked for good in the world. They are those who have been martyred for the name of Christ. They are those who worked for justice. They are those who worked for healing. They are those who worked for better education. They are those who fought for the rights of peoples whose voice was lost or taken away from them. They are those who worked that the Church would continue to be a beckon of light even at times when the Church steered away in the wrong directions. They are those that worked in faith to show us the love of God, that we might live in the love of God, that we might teach the love of God, that we might share the love of God for generations to come and to come and to come... until the kingdom of God is realized here, now, without petty questions of whose wife is she going to be. Without petty exclusions of 'you don't live the way I think you

should, so you're out.' Without hate and without oppression. But in the name of Jesus who taught love before all else, who taught hope, who taught life eternal in life lived in God.

And so when we come to the Lord's table today, we come remembering our saints even as we remember Jesus. We come remembering our saints even as we remember Jesus' teachings, as we hear the scripture and interpret it, as we look at the work of the saints and ask, 'what can we learn from this today?' We come remembering our saints even as Jesus invites us to the holy feast this day.

The sermon transitions into the invitation to the table and the Great Thanksgiving prayer at this point.