

## ONE BRIDE FOR SEVEN BROTHERS

**TEXT:** Luke 20:27-38

One of my all-time favorite movies was the fast-paced musical “Seven Brides for Seven Brothers”. This happy, hand-clapping, foot-stomping country type of musical with all the slickness of a Broadway show, told us that the bluest skies are in Seattle and told us all about the “Sobbin’ Women”.

Well, today’s text reminded me of that movie, even though the story is a far cry from the musical extravaganza. I don’t remember that the movie ever mentioned a word about resurrection. But that is really what Jesus is talking about here. He is asked a question that perhaps we are asking as well. He is confronted by a Sadducee, one of the priesthood who did not believe in any sort of resurrection. They were strict followers of the law of Moses. He confronted Jesus with an interesting question. “Suppose”, he said, “a man dies before his wife bears him any children?” He continues the story. Per Mosaic law the husband’s brother now marries the woman in hopes of producing a child in the name of the deceased brother. But again, the wife is widowed and, by law, is married to the next brother. And again, no children are born of this union. This scenario is carried on until the last brother marries her and, again, no children are produced.

Then comes the “resurrection” question. I think that, for starters, we need to acknowledge that this discussion focuses on the question of resurrection – not that of Jesus, but a general resurrection of the dead. When, at last, the woman dies, with which brother will she be united in heaven? In the “Sweet Bye and Bye”, when “We All Get to Heaven”, how will God decide who will be in the Circle that we want unbroken?

Now, the purpose of the law regarding a widow’s remarriage was to assure that each family and tribe in Israel was perpetuated by the bearing of children. But the Sadducees did not have this purpose in mind when they cited this text. Their question was, as usual, to put Jesus on the spot. They saw this scenario as a prooftext for their denial of the resurrection of the dead. Since this Mosaic law made provisions for the

perpetuation of a dead Israelite's family line, the Sadducees seemed to have come to the conclusion that immortality was not attained by resurrection from the dead, but by the carrying on of an Israelites' family line through his offspring.

The Sadducees wanted to see what kind of a biblical interpreter Jesus was. Was he a good traditionalist or was he a liberal? Since in their reading of Scripture there is no resurrection, such a belief poses a most interesting problem. Their question about the one bride for seven brothers in their minds shows how silly this idea of resurrection really is.

But, as always, Jesus sees through their subterfuge. He knows that they claim not to believe in the realm of God to come. For them, this life is all there is. Jesus solves the dilemma by proclaiming that in the realm to come, there is no marriage, since in this new realm there won't be need of procreation. No marriage, then perhaps no heavenly family gatherings either.

This entire argument of the Sadducees is predicated on a single premise: life in the kingdom of God will be just like it is now. Consequently, the present institution of marriage is assumed by the Sadducees to continue on in the kingdom. Thus, a woman who was married to seven brothers would be in a terrible predicament in heaven, for she would have to choose one of them to live with. But in the new realm of God, security is to be found in God, not one's mate or one's progeny. Remember that for Jesus brothers and sisters, and even mother, is to be found in the community or faith.

There are many within the church who find themselves in a position close to that of the Sadducees, and likely see this as the "liberal" position. But Jesus disagrees. He responds by confronting them with a passage from the Torah itself – from the book of Exodus. He points them to the story of the Burning Bush. When God speaks to Moses, God reveals Gods self as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jesus notes that in this revelation, God is assuming that the three Patriarchs are living. As Jesus puts it,

“He isn’t the God of the dead but of the living. To God they are all alive”. If his questioners will take seriously the word of Torah, they must conclude that there is resurrection; otherwise God his misrepresented God’s self.

But, of course, we must look at the question that we all ask at some time: “What will resurrection life be like?” I think this is an incredibly understandable question given that we are naturally curious about what comes next, both for our loved ones and ourselves. Unfortunately, our passage from Luke gives little specific or concrete details. It revolves on a hypothetical question the Sadducees ask Jesus in order to discredit him while simultaneously trying to embarrass their resurrection-believing rivals, the Pharisees.

But if the passage doesn’t paint a vivid picture, it does insist that resurrection life is qualitatively different from life as we know it. This is, in fact, the mistake Jesus points out that the Sadducees are making. Their question is premised on the assumption that eternal life is an endless state of “more of the same”. But resurrection life, Jesus insists, is qualitatively different. The ordinary events and relationships by which we track our journey through this mortal life – marriage, childbirth, graduations, retirements – do not characterize our eternal lives because resurrection life is not merely an extension of this life, but something wholly different.

The Sadducees believed that their question about the one bride for seven brothers was the kind of thing that made belief in the resurrection of the body ridiculous. Jesus gave them an answer which has a permanently valid truth in it. He said that we must not think of heaven in the terms of this earth. Life there will be quite different, because we will be quite different. My favorite theologian and commentator William Barklay, noted: “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.”

Here are some words from an article by Andrew Prior: “So, more than anything else, resurrection is a trust in the love of God. Often it will only be “hope against hope”.

If we only hope for a better life for the world and live for that, we believe in the resurrection. We can doubt and even have days of disbelief.

But there is something else. You cannot prove to me there is a resurrection which is some kind of life after death. There is no proof. It cannot be coherently argued. But I can be convinced that God is trustworthy, and that God loves me, and therefore, on that basis, I can meaningfully hypothesize that there may be this thing called resurrection.

In actual fact it's a bit more subtle than that. In testing, in searching out and finding the love of God, my need and desire for life after death has faded. It does not seem so unlikely, strangely enough. But neither does it seem so important. For God is the God not of the dead but of the living, as Jesus said. There is something about God which comes back into life now, we might even call it 'resurrection now'.

There's a whole lot about the love of God that is testable, that's actual, and that's observable. When I give up on all the speculative stuff, all the stuff I simply couldn't believe in because it was mere hypothesis with no prospect of being proved, all the metaphysical stuff if you like, it left me with only one thing I could do, which was to try and live as Jesus lived. I literally began to experiment with compassion, with love, with service, with generosity, with forgiveness, and these things changed me and changed the way I saw life. I began to see that although the way of the cross is painful, and sometimes deadly, it is also real, powerful and transformative. I discovered that the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels, this person who went doing good in a strikingly different way, is not speculative, it is thoroughly grounded and able to be experienced. It is real.

Prior ends his article by saying, "Perhaps resurrection, first of all, is that I have begun to be content with this life. I find it good. I suspect, all things considered, that there might be something more; I wouldn't be surprised. But if there is not, despite Paul saying we of all people are to be most pitied if we don't believe in the resurrection. I have begun to feel that there is resurrection now, for God truly has been a God of the living.

God has touched me. I have been given resurrection now. For this I thank God. And if there is more – fantastic!”

Well, I guess there is more hope in the resurrection for the seven-times widowed woman in the Sadducees’ question than they might have realized. And I guess there is hope that the seven brides in the musical will live long and happy lives unworried about with whom they will spend eternity. Perhaps we should be less worried ourselves. Amen.