

What a bizarre question. Don't you find that a bit bizarre? This is not *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, this is *one bride for seven brothers*. That's creepy.

You and I hear a story like this and I imagine there are more than a handful of things that jump out at us. We have our issues with this question, I'm sure, but the disciples, hearing Jesus answer, would have had a different issue with it.

You and I hear it, and we probably think it's just the teensiest bit odd. Well, we might find it just a little bit sick actually. I have three brothers. I love all my sisters in law, but no. Just no. On so many levels, no. My sister has three brothers in law. Again, no. On so many levels, no.

And of course, the question is sexist to the core – whose property is she? To whom will she belong? These are questions of matrimony of a bygone era. We hear them and we know that something just isn't quite right.

Moreover, it is very easy when we hear a text like this where the question appears to be about the resurrection of the dead to jump immediately to wanting some of our most pressing and urgent questions answered.

It is normal that we have curiosity about death – indeed there are times when we deeply need to know that there is more, that God has plans for us and that our loved ones are resting in God's care. I think sometimes we'll even excuse the oddness of this question if we think that the answer will give us a sense of comfort. Periodically, I have done Q&A for various groups – our youth group, a class at a school, rotary – I'm going to do one here at Morningside in a couple of weeks, it'll be your chance to talk back to the

preacher, and one of the things that folks are often most interested to learn about is *what exactly* the Bible teaches about when we die.

It always comes up because we know that death is a part of life. We encounter it in the lives of others, and someday we encounter it in our own life. But here's the rub: that's not what this question put to Jesus is about. Not really. The Bible is far less loquacious on the topic of death that I expect we sometimes want it to be – the Bible is the story of God's interaction in our lives and so much of it is about life and living it now with an eye for God's grace.

I promise you the Gospel has something to say about death, but not here, not primarily in this question. There is more going on.

And that is why the disciples would have heard that question very differently. To them, the question was a doctrinal litmus test between two rival factions. When the Sadducees and Pharisees approached Jesus with their question, it was the theological equivalent of the sharks and the jets rumbling through the synagogue. It was a doctrinal question, smugly attempting to paint Jesus into a theological corner, alienating one faction or another.

I'm sure Peter and James and the others were thinking to themselves, "Well, this is another fine mess you've gotten us into."

You see, it's a trap. These co-conspirators have devised the perfect question because it is a doctrinal question and it appears there is a right or wrong answer to it.

And to understand the doctrinal question, we need to learn a little about marriage in the first century.

It is important to start with a Biblical understanding of marriage, and by that I mean:
fasten your seatbelts, this is nothing like you've seen.

In the Bible, particularly in the earliest texts we have, love marriage is a completely alien concept. Marriage between only two parties is a completely alien concept. Marriages were arranged; remember Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah/Rachel? Think of David and all of his wives. Husbands and wives may have loved each other, but love was not the end in mind regarding marriage. Preservation of property and preservation of lineage were of primary concern. Moreover, there was a marriage debate going on then as now. Was marriage only between a man and a woman, or was marriage between a man and women? With preservation of property as the chief concern, the practice of *Levirite Marriage* developed in the ancient Hebrew culture.

The basic idea goes like this: if a man died without an heir, his property line and lineage must be preserved at all costs. So, his brother would be obliged to marry his widow and provide offspring. It didn't really matter if his brother was already married, or for that matter whether or not the widow could even stand her husband's brother. It had to be done. The first male offspring of that union would become the deceased brother's heir, and would provide for his widowed mother in her dotage.

We cannot judge this practice by our standards, but I will tell you, it will completely reshape your understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures, because if you go looking for the practice of *levirite marriage*, you'll find it is all over the Old Testament. Think of the story of Ruth, for example, when her sons died, Naomi released Ruth and Orpah, her daughters-in-law, from their obligation to her family. Her words were, "Do I still have sons in my womb for you?" It is all over the Bible. Odd as it seems, it was a part of the

covenant understanding of the community. To do otherwise would be to radically redefine marriage.

It's doctrine.

So these sects, the Sadducees and the Pharisees, dreamed up this scenario and questioned Jesus about what happens to a woman so unlucky in marriage. After her brothers-in-law turned husbands died, she too, ultimately died. It absolutely looks like a question about what happens to us when we die. The Sadducees, holding only the Pentateuch as Scripture, that's Genesis through Deuteronomy, say, "There is no resurrection of the dead." It doesn't appear in scripture, therefore it isn't so. And that's true. Resurrection doesn't appear in those books. The Pharisees, though, adding the words of the Prophets and the writings say there is. And so to Jesus they turn their question. No matter how he answers, someone is going to get mad.

Twice before in this chapter, Jesus was faced with gotcha game questions. Twice he was deemed to answer wisely.

Jesus begins by pointing out the question is absurd. Here is a paraphrase of what he said: *You're thinking of how things happen in this world. Here in this age, we're obsessed with continuation of life, because death is a reality of life. But in the age to come, there is no more death. She isn't anyone's property or problem in the age to come because death is no more, because the way you're looking at it isn't the way that God sees it.*

This isn't about doctrine, it's not even about life and death. It's about playing "gotcha-games," and testing God and you are missing the point. "Get your eye on the ball," Jesus seems to be saying.

You see this isn't the first question that has tripped up folks. They've asked about taxes, they've asked about baptism. What they are really doing is questioning the authority of Jesus. They want to know by what right he may say what he says.

I don't mean to be too hard on the Sadducees and Pharisees – it's easy to turn them into the villains of the New Testament because they so often seem to be at odds with Jesus, but history would tend to dictate otherwise.

History and the faithful practice would seem to indicate otherwise – indeed, the reason they are so often in conversation with Jesus is because they are probably the closest to what he is trying to do and say.

They *got* that *faith* calls for *commitment*.

They *got* that the *practices* in which we engage shape our character as well the way the world sees us.

They *got* that God *calls* God's people in every age – now and then – to be the witness to God's grace in the world.

They just got hung up. Or so it seems.

And to be fair they got hung up on things that were important to them.

I really don't know whether there was any ill will or if they just got hung up on categories. "I'm a Sadducee and we believe this..."

Or, "I'm a Pharisee, and this is the right way."

"Well, we can't both be right, let's make *him* decide!"

When we get too hung up on whether we're right or someone else is wrong, odds are very good we're headed down a road away from the gospel.

It reminds me of an old Scottish story. You'd think I'd be able to do a Scottish accent by now, but it never comes out right, so with apologies, here goes.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the World Council of Churches, seeing a need for the church to contribute to the reconstruction of the world, sent to Greece three ministers from the Church of Scotland. Why Scotland? Why Greece? I don't know.

But as it were, the three ministers arrived and were taken to the home of a priest in the orthodox tradition. Seeing that these ministers had come from far away to bring hope and to celebrate the end of the awfulness of war, the priest racked his brain to think of what he could offer to his guests by way of hospitality.

Remembering an old bottle of wine down in his cellar, he rushed down and brought it up and in his language said, "I have been saving this for a very long time. It's not much, but will you share it with me?"

Two of the Scots' ministers looked somewhat dour and replied, "Oh. No. We don't drink." But the third took the outstretched glass of wine and drained it to the bottom, handing it back with a smile.

The priest, not wanting the celebration to end, produced from a dusty shelf an old cigar box, and blowing off the debris, pulled out cigars and offered them to the Scots. Again, two of the ministers declined, "Oh. No. We don't smoke." But the third again took the offered cigar and he and the priest lit them and lingered into the evening, savoring the stale cigars and blowing smoke up the stars.

As they were driving away, the two ministers turned to the third and said, "What were you thinking? We don't drink. We don't smoke!" The third turning to them replied,

“No. We don’t drink. And we don’t smoke. And I don’t drink. I don’t smoke. But one of us needed to be a Christian!”

You know, we Presbyterians like doctrine. I like doctrine. I used to enjoy studying it at great length, the history of how we came to believe what we believe, the implications of doctrine for our lives. I like to tell people that when we study doctrine, we’re learning the common language of faith so that we can talk together about important things like what we believe. And that’s true. That is what we study doctrine for, just like those Sadducees and Pharisees.

But it’s awfully tempting sometimes to get caught up in it, isn’t it?

Or maybe it’s ideology that is awfully tempting? I know that I’m awfully fond of my politics and I’m very good at watching cable news that reinforces them. Maybe you feel the same way?

But across that divide, across all of the things that threaten to separate us from each other, Jesus issues a call to a different way of life.

Around the time of year like commitment season, it’s easy to assume that the church is teaching that we’re called to a way of life that involves the giving of money and time and commitment. And of course we are saying that, to a point.

But what Jesus is really saying with these words about life and death, is that God is calling us to a sacramental way of life, to a way that is set aside, from a common to a sacred purpose, that is looking for the grace of God in the world and seeking ways to multiply it. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber saw that sacredness in the interchange between I and thou... you and me, seeking to live faithfully together. The sacramental life is always lived between the I and thou, the you and me...

Oh, I get the Sadducees' and the Pharisees' question – they wanted to get it right. We all want to get it right. *When it comes to life and death, we want to get it right.*

But God isn't looking for doctrinal purists. I'm not even sure that God is obsessed with whether we get it right all the time. That's a great way to get into a fine mess.

God is looking for sacramental partners, who will seek to take the sacredness of this community, of this act of worship, of this body of faith and *live*.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.