

## BLACK WIDOW

Luke 20:27-38

After 29 years of marriage my parents were legally divorced in 1976. Four days later, my father remarried. Each of his six children received a certified letter which announced his remarriage. As you can well imagine the fallout from this reverberated internationally, but none was quite so devastating then my Grandmother Maria's reaction. I was working in Vermont at the time and one day soon after Papa's wedding announcement, Mutter, as we all called her, summoned me into her apartment. Convinced I was being called on the carpet because I had missed attending Mass that Sunday, I had my well-prepared excuse in hand. I never needed to use it. When I entered her apartment, I found Mutter pacing back in forth with her great stride. While she remained standing, she 'ordered' me to sit. Not one to ever mince her words Mutter asked me, "How can Rupert have two wives? Which one will be his wife in Heaven?" I stuttered and stammered totally flustered with her question. Finally, I managed to suggest she talk to her local priest about this.

Little did I know that Mutter was wrestling with the very question the Sadducees asked of Jesus in our text this morning. Jesus is approached by the Sadducees with a theological riddle. In an attempt to see where he stood on the idea of a literal resurrection from the dead – which they did not believe – the Sadducees presented Jesus with a truly complicated scenario: seven dead brothers and one wife inherited between them. Since all would be raised to life in the kingdom to come to whom would this extremely unlucky Black widow be married? The Sadducees were hoping that the puzzle they posed would demonstrate that the idea of a resurrection was sort of ludicrous.

Jesus responds by saying, "The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage." (Luke 20:34-35) In other words Jesus says, "Look, don't use marriage in this world to disprove God's promises about the next one. Marriage is a gift for today, meeting needs that will be filled in different ways tomorrow."

But what is this??? Seven brothers consecutively marry the same woman as she is widowed – and she ultimately buries all seven of the brothers. And you and I are left scratching our heads. In my sermon title, I call this woman a "Black Widow." Black Widow is slang for a typology of female serial killers who, "moves from husband to husband, kills them and collects the inheritance." I would venture to guess that the Sadducees were not referring to a real-life case, they felt they were posing an impossible question to Jesus. The brothers, in this scenario were merely following the levirate law. The Sadducees are basing their argument on the legal tradition of levirate marriage, known from Genesis 38, Ruth, and Deuteronomy 25:5-10. This law was designed to provide a way back into the fabric of family structure for young women left widowed prior to having children. Rather than thrusting them back into the marriage market, through which they might never successfully remarry and thus become more likely to fall into poverty, levirate marriage sought to insure them a place in their new in-laws' family by making them secondary wives to another man in the family, usually their dead husbands' brother. It was a way of providing security for them.

In the minds of the Sadducees, however, it would be impossible for a doctrine of bodily resurrection to exist alongside this law. Marriage unites two people into one kin, one flesh, and although a man might marry more than one woman, a woman can only enter into this special bond with one man. So, how can a resurrected woman be “one flesh” after death with seven men, all of whom she was “one flesh” with on earth? This law only makes sense to the Sadducees if the dead cease to exist after death. If the first husband still exists, all the other marriages are adulterous, and why would God ordain a law that produces multiple adulterous marriages in the afterlife?

Seeing as there is no clear statement about afterlife in the Torah, but there is a clear statement about levirate marriage, the Sadducees reason that there must not be an afterlife. Jesus focuses his answer, however, on the nature of the resurrection, pointing out that the hypothetical widow would have no need for the security promised by levirate marriage once she became a child of the resurrection. Neither would any of her former husbands need to concern themselves with the demands of family responsibility with regard to her. Resurrection existence is not like earthly existence.

This passage is a very important one for both Old and New Testament theology because it highlights the fact that the debate concerning the fate of the human soul after death was still very much alive in Jesus’ day. (Homiletics Online, 11/11/2001).

The Levirate law is one of those Biblical mandates which no longer have a place in our society. So we can all breathe a sigh of relief!! This text does give us a chance to look at the institution of marriage, however, and the purpose it serves for us today.

First of all, marriage can be messy. Well, life is messy, so no surprise there. But – let’s be clear – marriage is also beautiful and fun and a deeply fulfilling gift from God. But wouldn’t you agree that a great marriage takes work, compromise, patience and forgiveness – and a whole lot more. It’s a playground for mistakes to be made that create lasting wounds, betrayals that bruise the soul and for levels of intimacy that bring great blessings but also great burdens. (Homiletics Online, 11/10/2013).

And is this any surprise? Think about it. Marriage is an institution handcrafted by God for *broken people*. It connects two individuals and fuses them together as one within an equally crazy world. The goal, of course, is to create a union that, despite its baggage, is better together than apart. And a vast majority of the time it is; these two people meet deep needs, share great joy and create much beauty. But along the way, our individualistic natures unavoidably collide, and often, while trying to sanctify one another, we end up sinning against each other, and so it gets, well, messy. Or at least interesting.

At its most basic level, marriage, with all of its complications, exists to carry us through, to help us survive and thrive as a people in a world of even *greater* chaos and complications. Marriage exists to meet certain needs today through spouse and family – needs that will be unknown in God’s future and coming reign. But until that day, it remains essential. This is precisely the point that Jesus makes in today’s text: He’s asked a question about marriage in the resurrection,

and his reply pretty much says, “Hey, no marriage in heaven; better to work on your marriage in this life than to worry about a marriage in the next one.”

That said, let’s remember that not all are called to marriage. Some people may not be in a marriage for a number of different reasons. Even the apostle Paul suggested that it might be better, if possible, to remain in a state of singleness. But since Jesus is asked to comment about marriage, today we’re talking about marriage.

In his response, Jesus affirms and gives us a glimpse of a future life, but he upholds the importance that marriage helps us navigate our current struggles and appreciate the coming glory.

Let’s take a look at just a few examples. First, *marriage was made for life and death*. In this world life is fragile. It begins with babies that are breakable, beautiful and absolutely dependent. They need mom to feed them, dad to burp them, and two committed, complementary adults creating a playground of growth and safety and joy for them. Likewise, as we get older, moms and dads become like their children once were. They become breakable, dependent and desperately in need of the nurture and the comfort that a spouse can provide. It comes in the form of trips to the doctor’s office with hands held, sitting by each other’s side when one enters an assisted-living facility and making sure their best friend maintains their dignity even as their body begins to bend toward the grave. Marriage provides a cradle for the beautiful fragility of human life.

However, in the age to come, the burden of death and the fragility of life will be gone. Jesus promises in our future life, we “cannot die anymore” (v. 36). You’ll no longer need to be reminded to take your meds, helped up the stairs or encouraged through cancer treatments. The cradle that marriage provides for our fragile human lives will be retired by bodies that are raised imperishable to enjoy an eternal existence.

Second, *in this life, marriage is made for oneness and companionship*. Sure, we can experience this in our relationships with friends and extended family. But when a husband and wife play together, work together, argue together, parent together, study Scripture together, share a bed together and forgive together – well, over the course of decades, that’s what you call intimacy. Our need to be deeply known, to have our weaknesses balanced and shored up by another’s complementary strengths – it’s all there. It’s difficult for us to grasp what that sense of wholeness in God’s presence will be like. But again, marriage gives us the best glimpse. You know that moment when you’re cuddling on the couch, with the one you love, and all seems right in the world? A sense of satisfaction fills your heart, a smile creeps across your face and you think to yourself, “If I could just press *record* on this feeling, this moment, then I would replay it over and over. I’d live in it forever.” Have you been there? Perhaps *that* is a faint fragrance of the fulfillment we’ll know in Christ.

When we were courting, I naively said to Vern, “I hope our love for one another never changes.” To which Mr. “Burst my Bubble” said, “Oh, it will.” But he wisely added, “It will only get better and become stronger!”

Here's one more. *In this life, marriage exists for promise-making and promise-keeping.* In this broken world, instability and uncertainty rule the day. Sin drives us all to love ourselves more than our neighbor, and the world is a cauldron of boiling unpredictability. Marriage offers something radically different. It offers the possibility of two selfish people making promises of selflessness, stability, fidelity and endurance. It begins at the altar with grand promises to “love and cherish” until death but gets lived out in a million little promises to “take out the trash,” to “call me when you get there” and to “pick up milk.” Sure, marriage partners don't always succeed, but their constant pursuit of the ideal and their willingness to be accountable creates a safe haven of relative security in a world where there's no such thing as a sure thing. (Homiletics Online, 11/10/2013).

Yes, marriage can be complicated. Yes, marriage can be messy. Yes, marriage is not perfect. Given the people who enter it and the world that requires it, how could it not be? And sure, sometimes we make a mockery of it. Take Glynn “Scotty” Wolfe for example. He holds the record as the world's most married man. In his 89 years, he was married to 29 different women.

But for all those who abuse it, there are billions more who are blessed by it and desperately need it. Because until marriage is, as Jesus predicted, made wonderfully obsolete, it is a wonderful opportunity for blessing and happiness, offering to us today the greatest glimpse of the satisfaction, the wholeness and the stability we will experience in full, through Christ, in the future. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen!