

Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Haggai 1:15b-2:9, Psalm 98, Luke 20:27-28
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A nineteenth century gravestone from a British cemetery reads, "Seven wives I have buried with as many a fervent prayer; if we meet in heaven, what trouble will be there?"

The Sadducees were a particular group or what we might call a "denomination" within Judaism. They were wealthy, influential, of the priestly class and associated with the Temple in Jerusalem. They believed only what was written in the first five books of the Bible or what is called the Torah, the Law or the Pentateuch. It was believed that Moses had written these books. They didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead because no mention of it was found in these books.

Another group we hear about more frequently in the New Testament is the Pharisees. They believed and practiced the Torah as well as later interpretations and applications of the Torah in what was called the Oral Law. It wasn't considered part of the official Hebrew scriptures. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees did believe in a general resurrection at the end of time.

Today's hypothetical supposition to Jesus about seven brothers marrying the same woman is merely a ploy on the part of some Sadducees to question Jesus' belief in the resurrection without asking him directly. His answer is far more than they bargained for and one of the very few places in the gospels where Jesus does give us a clue to the nature of life after death.

If the man in England who had seven wives knew this particular Bible story, he wouldn't have had to wonder about a possible unpleasant gathering of numerous former Mrs. Pendletons. What did Jesus mean then by saying that there was no need for marriage in heaven?

In the first place, he was stating unequivocally that the age to come would be notably different than this age. If marriage was intended for propagation and sustaining human existence on earth, that would be unnecessary because there would be no more death. The population in heaven never needs replenishing.

Jewish Law in the book of Deuteronomy required a brother to marry his brother's widow so that a son might be born to carry on the name of the deceased original husband. This was to prevent his "name from being blotted out of Israel" as stated in Deuteronomy 25: 6. We still like our surnames to survive from generation to generation when possible.

In the second place, marriage and family were a means of accumulating and passing on wealth and property. This provided greater security in a world that could be precarious and at times dangerous. In the resurrection, there will be no need for external means of safety because God will have eliminated every threat of disease, harm or impoverishment.

Another clue Jesus gave more than once to the nature of heaven was the analogy of a wedding banquet where food and drink and merriment were inexhaustible.

I would be very happy and grateful to spend an eternity with Juanita, but I have to think that even the very best of marriages cannot compare with what awaits "those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead..." Are the relationships there more platonic and certainly not exclusive as marriages are?

C.S. Lewis tells the story of a woman artist who was thrown into prison. Her only light came from a window so high that she couldn't see outside. The woman gave birth to a son during her incarceration and had to raise him in her cell. Each day as he became old enough to understand, she tried to explain the outside world to him. She tried to describe wheat fields, mountains, ocean waves crashing on the shore, clouds, birds and trees.

Of course the boy couldn't understand so she drew pencil sketches. The boy thought the outside world was all black and white and gray. He was unimpressed. Lewis asks if our world as we know it could be mere pencil drawings compared to heaven?

We have some lovely needlepoint in our church. Every Sunday we kneel on cushions painstakingly hand-worked many years ago by various women of Christ and Grace. I'm told that if we could see the underside of these and all needlepoint work, we might be surprised by what a tangled, imperfect mess we'd find.

Keeping that in mind, once a young girl was strolling with her father on a beautiful clear night. The sky was full of stars, the Milky Way seemingly close enough to touch. After walking in silence for a long time, awestruck by the magnificence overhead, the daughter turned to her father and said, "I have been wondering. If the wrong side of heaven is so glorious, what will the right side be like?"

We call our funeral services these days *A Celebration of Life*. This is appropriate in more ways than one. We are celebrating the life that just ended and the greater Life that is just beginning.

More and more these days we hear about people living longer and the prospects of living longer still. A headline read recently, "Would you like to live to be 120?" That's horrifying to me since I do believe we are presently living on the underside of heaven. Why stay here any longer than necessary?

I hope you can join me in this lively hope of heaven. Such faith can surely help us better face the difficult challenges that this life can dole out. In the meantime, our work for God is to bolster and encourage one another with these words and patch together, as best we can, an approximation of heaven here on earth knowing it isn't and will never be ideal. As someone said, "The work we do now will result in the world of which we dream." The

dream is not ours ultimately, but God's both as gift and mission. Then let us
be about this godly work. AMEN.