

The God of the Living

Luke 20:27-40

Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church in Camden UCC, November 10, 2019

We celebrate *Remembrance Sunday* today and will honor loved ones who died in the past year and, of course, in our hearts also others who have passed on before. It is a sacred honor to do so. Death and grief are among the most profound challenges we all face in life. They often leave us speechless altogether as the actual loss turns our world upside-down. We might find ourselves asking, “Why do people die? What happens to us? Will we see each other again?” and be left without what might feel like adequate answers. Dealing with loss is also often a transformative experience, however difficult.

Today’s Gospel begins with a challenging look at how some people of Jesus’ own time approached death and resurrection. The Sadducees were conservative urban aristocrats who did not believe in the resurrection.¹ Quite frankly, they have no actual interest in what Jesus has to say other than to trick him and make him look foolish. So they propose an absurd scenario based on the Law of Levirate marriage out of the Law of Moses.

In earlier times Jewish belief held that people only lived on in their children and grandchildren – as long as there was someone to continue the family line, they and their legacy continued. If a man died without an heir, so did his memory. Part of the history of the people at large was lost. The law of levirate marriage was designed to ensure the continuation of a man’s line in the event of his death without an heir. His brother was obliged to take the dead man’s wife as an additional wife. Any child born of that relationship was considered to be a child of the one who had died. I hesitate to call it a relationship since the women usually did not have any say in the matter and were mostly there to bear an heir for a man. The Sadducees offer the scenario in which a man dies and brother after brother marries the widow but also dies. By the end there are seven prospective husbands in heaven. The Sadducees now ask Jesus whose wife she will be in heaven. They want to see Jesus squirm.

¹ They traced their name and line back to a priest named Zadok in David’s time centuries before Jesus.

Before I go on with the text, I recognize that it probably pushes tender buttons for those of you who have lost spouses or life partners. Some of you have had the great fortune of living in a loving and mutually supportive marriage/union. Losing your spouse/partner may have left you feeling utterly heart broken. Perhaps the hope of being reunited with them after death is the hope that keeps you going. There are also marriages where the prospect of being reunited as a couple after death sounds like a nightmare. As one woman said in tears, after people at her husband's funeral kept consoling her with the prospect of reunion in heaven: "I'll never get away from him, will I?"² If life after death is seen as a pre-determined continuation of what has been, it could spell bliss or disaster depending on our individual circumstance.

Real relationships mean real joys, real pains, real losses. However, the Sadducees aren't interested at all in the human relational aspects of their own scenario. They are into rational and transactional mind games merely intended to prove that the very notion of a resurrected life is absurd. In response to this particular audience, Jesus initially makes a distinction between what they are presenting as a more transactional human laws that binds us during our lifetime and what is to come. People in "this age" join in marriage (Luke 20:34), he says. Beyond "this age," we enter a different dimension of existing and relating altogether. Jesus is not focused here on offering a rational counter argument to the Sadducees but invites an expansion of our relational imagination and embrace of God's love.

But let's stick with our own experience in our lifetime, or "this age," a little longer. Our human life is an embodied life created by a God who embraces creation in its fullness. That is good news in itself. God does embrace our bodily, earthly existence. We experience our love in very particular ways. We dedicate ourselves in marriage/union, if love is actually present, to growing deeper in our love by embracing the particular person we are with. We mirror love for each other. We give ourselves to the daily giving and receiving of love, the shared journey through ups and downs, through failing and renewing, in sickness and in health (from how we squeeze out the tooth paste to recovering after betrayals). Those of us who are not married now or in

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, Cowley: Cambridge, MA, 1999) 204.

another intimate relationship give ourselves in other ways in mutual service and covenant. My emphasis here is on the beauty of the real particularity of our existence in relationship.

Jesus seems to suggest that the particularity of our human relationship during our lifetime will be expanded exponentially to a love so broad and deep that it can no longer be defined by the customs and laws and commitments we have become accustomed to. My sense of this is that the depth of the particularity is not left behind but included, transformed, and expanded. Nothing will be lost but so much more will be gained beyond our imagining. I trust that this, too, is good news. The good news of today's Gospel is that when we come to this point of expansion of living as children of the resurrection, as Jesus puts it (Luke 20:36), our grief will have been transformed and the prospect of this transformation will not frighten. However, depending on our circumstance, that thought may be too much to bear or seem absurd at this time. We cannot rush through our grief precisely because we dwell in the particular. So, while I do firmly believe that your love for your particular loved one will not be lost or abandoned, I also urge you to true to where you are at right now.

When we say that we believe in the resurrection, we are really saying that we believe in the power of the faithfulness of God toward all that God has created. There can be resurrections within the course of our lives when we emerge from something that has felt like an ending. Our faith also invites dimensions beyond our conscious time on earth. I don't believe that we earn God's love beyond this life in a morality contest of worthiness. The word *worthy* can also be translated as "suitable." I think when Jesus speaks of being *worthy* (Luke 20:35) in our passage, his emphasis is on being suitably and gradually transformed in our trust in the faithfulness of God beyond our knowing. This gradual process can begin in our lifetime. Our very grief can actually be a catalyst for it as we grow in faith and love. I would like to tell you a Buddhist story about a woman's journey of transformation triggered by a grief that came close to destroying her. I think it is also relevant for our Gospel, our good news of Christ for today.

During the time of the Buddha, a young woman named Kisa lost someone whom she loved with all her heart.³ Now she was heart-broken. Kisa went all around her village begging people to find her a potion that would bring her loved one back to life. There was no cure. Some neighbors listened and tried to console her. Finally, someone urged Kisa to seek the counsel of the Buddha. Kisa went on a pilgrimage to find the Buddha and walked many miles until she found the Buddha teaching under a tree in clearing.

Kisa went straight up to him and fell on her knees. The Buddha stopped teaching and gently invited her to speak. "Please, Great One, people told me that you could bring my beloved back to life." The Buddha was moved with compassion and his eyes filled with tears. Then he closed them for some time. Out of the silence he said: "Try this: Return to your village. Ask for a mustard seed from every household that has not been touched by death. With the seeds you gather, I will create for you a remedy that will bring your loved one back to life." Kisa bowed to the Buddha, got up and raced straight back to her village to fulfill her mission.

Kisa knocked on every door and asked for a mustard seed. Her neighbors were again moved by compassion but had to decline. The people she spoke to could not meet the one criteria that the Buddha had determined. None of them could say that they had not been touched by death. When Kisa saw that eyes of the people in the last house she came to were filling with tears, her heart cracked open even more. This time, it did not feel like it was "only" breaking in grief but something was also widening and deepening in her. She did fall to the ground and wept and screamed until no more tears or sounds could come out of her. She was exhausted but also felt a new peace welling up inside.

Kisa recognized that we all want to keep what we love and hold on to it forever though we cannot. We all share this longing and the hurt that comes with it. If she did not love so deeply, the pain would not be so deep. Knowing this, she also knew she would always want to be

³ Given the presence of children in our service, I am adapting the story which focuses on the loss of a child. It is an ancient story which appears in a variety of version. This one is drawn from Mirabai Starr's book *Wild Mercy: Living the Fierce and Tender Wisdom of the Women Mystics (Sounds True: Boulder, Colorado, 2019)* 46-47.

present, awake and risk love despite the pain. She resolved not to run from her pain and to let her pain open her heart also to the suffering of others. Even without answers for why loss was a part of her and our life, she resolved to risk caring and carrying the burdens as well as the joys of love. Kisa became a guiding light for her people and a devoted student of the wisdom of the Buddha.

Jesus as the Christ is inviting us into this same expansion of our heart as we grow in faith that we may love and uphold each other here and now with all our hearts. He is the embodied presence of God carrying this pain with us. Christ is also inviting us to have faith that just as our ancestors of the faith are alive in God (Luke 20:38), so will we be and all who pass on. God is the God of the living and fully capable of bearing our grief in its fulness until it is transformed into a love broader and deeper than our imagining. More fully than we have been able to feel before, we will all once again be part of the great mystery of love that is God. It is God's own faithfulness that makes it so. Thanks be to God!

For reflection:

Pushing Through

~ Rainer Maria Rilke

*It's possible I am pushing through solid rock
in flintlike layers, as the ore lies, alone;
I am such a long way in I see no way through,
and no space: everything is close to my face,
and everything close to my face is stone.
I don't have much knowledge yet in grief
so this massive darkness makes me small.
You be the master: make yourself fierce, break in:
then your great transforming will happen to me,
and my great grief cry will happen to you.[1]*

[1] Rainer Maria Rilke, "Pushing Through" in *Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. and ed. Robert Bly (New York: Harper and Row, 1981) 55.