

In our gospel reading the Sadducees put before Jesus a question about marriage and eternal life. I think a couple quotes from our country's presidents are in order. Abraham Lincoln said, "Marriage is neither heaven nor hell; it is simply purgatory." Lyndon Johnson said, "Only two things are necessary to keep one's wife happy. One is to let her think she is having her own way, and the other, to let her have it." But of course not all quotes are against women. Recently deceased Thomas Szasz, said, "How men hate waiting while their wives shop for clothes and trinkets; how women hate waiting, often for much of their lives, while their husbands shop for fame and glory."

I'm making half a mistake to make us think about marriage these days to introduce marriage in Jesus' day. In Jesus' day many marriages were arranged, especially among the higher classes. Marriages were business deals. Women were the property of their husbands or fathers and their only purpose was to give birth to boys.

We see that assumption behind the little scenario the Sadducees want Jesus to respond to. A woman is married to the eldest of seven brothers. He dies childless. According to the Sadducees version of Jewish law she was to marry the next eldest son. He dies childless and so she goes down the whole line of brothers outliving them all. They ask Jesus, "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?"

To Jesus' credit he answers wisely. I'd have said something inappropriate like, "Who'd want her? Outlived seven husbands?!? Didn't anyone ever check their wine glasses for poison?"

But Jesus answers their question with a challenge. In your bulletins I've printed a little chart showing the shape of Jesus' response, for its form carries just as much meaning as the words themselves. You see the form:

<u>People</u>	<u>Ages</u>	<u>Forms of Practice</u>
1. The sons	of this age	marry and consent to marriage
2. those considered worthy in that age and	of a place	neither marry nor consent to marriage; nor can they die anymore, for they are like the angels;

in the resurrection and they are sons of God,
from the dead being sons of the resurrection.

Jesus is taking this to a much deeper level. He is contrasting two sorts of people, two eons, and two forms of practice. This *is not* a teaching about what relationship will or won't be like in eternal life. This is also not about the nature of what we will be like. Some people have used this text to say that we will become angels. No, that is not the case. That's not what Jesus intended.

Of the two sorts of people one sort, the sons of this age are oriented towards concerns of status, honor, relationships of debt and reciprocity. The other sort, those considered worthy of a place in that age, are apathetic towards self-promotion and self-justification. Their worth is not determined by comparing themselves to the honor and prestige of others. Underlying Jesus words to the Sadducees is that so much of what drives our lives - whether it be honor and status, or reproduction so humans don't become extinct, is irrelevant in the age to come. And because it is ultimately irrelevant, it should also be irrelevant now too.

This can be freeing news. I meet a lot of people who aren't living their lives according to their true selves. Perhaps they are caught in an abusive relationship or family system. Perhaps they are afraid of losing face or being embarrassed about something in their private lives. Perhaps there are unfair community or family expectations placed on them.

That's always a tough one. You're probably familiar with the idea that birth order plays a significant role in your development. Usually first born children are responsible, reliable, and serious. The baby of the family is often carefree and unhindered by anything. Often punishments aren't handed down evenly from parents. The first born is raked over the coals for the tiniest mishap while the baby of the family is allowed to get away with murder.

Perhaps the babies of the family are the lucky ones here. I frequently encounter first-borns who are saddled with being the responsible ones for their whole lives. Even after mom and dad have died the first born is expected to maintain family traditions, keep track of heirlooms, and always be the

dependable. First-borns can bear a crippling life-long sense of duty and obligation. Jesus' teaching would free a first-born from these burdens if they choose not to accept them. In the grand scheme of God's plans for salvation family traditions don't mean a thing.

But of course this teaching is also cutting. It cuts down our pretensions. The Thanksgiving holiday is coming up. Families all over the nation will gather together to have a meal. In many houses there will be two, three, and maybe even four generations gathered around the table eating turkey and mashed potatoes. To be sure, many of those people gathered around those tables don't see each other very often. They may manage to give the appearance of getting along with each other just for the sake of this one day. But I can easily imagine an aged mother and father looking over all their collected offspring and feeling a bit of pride at what they've done. Sure there were good times and bad. There were ups and downs. Someone at the table was always the good girl. And someone at the table was the troublesome black sheep. But they'd get the sense that they had done it right. They had succeeded.

But what gives them that feeling? Jesus would say that this sort of feeling is based on the things of this age. How many people this Thanksgiving are not going to be having a meal with several generations gathered around and they are going to feel somehow less than whole, and wish it could be otherwise?

While we may almost mock the Sadducees for their ridiculous example of a woman who goes through seven brothers as husbands, we have to admit that their assumptions about life aren't all that different than ours.

Jesus says a very troubling thing in his response to the Sadducees. Maybe you caught it and it bothered you, or maybe you let it slide. It's the phrase, "those considered worthy of a place in that age," meaning those worthy of eternal life.

I think that if we're honest with ourselves, much as we want to wish and hope that we could be among those who are "worthy of a place in that age", we'd better consider ourselves not in that group. Prone to be caught in the ways of this world, we easily lose sight of the wholeness of God's promises.

I don't say this to condemn us. I just don't want us to leave with the question of, "Am I worthy enough or not?" That

is not what Jesus intended. To be worthy of eternal life is an impossible task. To somehow earn it or deserve it, even at a discount rate for being a believer in Jesus, is still missing the point.

Not considering ourselves among the worthy is a way to remind us of our constant need to turn to God and our constant need for reliance upon God's grace. Ultimately it is God's grace that brings about the resurrection of the dead. It is not a mechanical operation or business deal at all. When we can stay in awe of God's overwhelming love for us we have truly put ourselves in a position to be freed of the rules of this age, and indeed live the reality of the age to come in the here and now. Amen