

Pentecost 22C, Proper 27. Luke 20:27-38. November 10, 2019.

There really isn't any such thing as the Feast of the Annual Giving Campaign, and anyway lots of people would prefer that we call it a fast if we have to call it anything. And we all have a double compulsion not to talk about money in church. First, because a whole lot of us come from a class where public talk about money is gauche, is "not the done thing." And second, because many of us are deeply repulsed by the popular image of the pastor in the private jet, the Jesus Jet, with designer shoes and fake smiles and snake oil for sale. We'd rather not talk about money at church at all than be associated with the health and wealth heresy that has enriched so few at the expense of so many.

But it's a mistake never to do it. Jesus of course had a lot to say about wealth, belongings, and necessities that cost money, like food. We have strong cultural reasons to avoid church money talk, but it's a kind of moral cowardice to give in to them. Money matters, how we get it and what we do with it, both as individuals or families and as a church. And so every fall we ask you to pray over a broad range of your participation in our common life, including financial participation. And then right around this Sunday we ask you to tell us what you plan to do next year, so that the vestry can pray over what resources we think we'll have and decide how we can best use those resources to pursue God's work in the world, as best as we understand it. Today we'll gather our pledges and bless them, asking God to help us see how best to use the gifts we have been given. It is a Sunday of celebration (I hope) and of self-dedication.

But that's not to say that the assigned bible readings always cooperate. Although this reading from Haggai is kind of a hilarious option. The children of Israel, returning from exile, are decades into a capital campaign to rebuild the Temple, and it isn't going very well. So God is giving them a little shot of optimistic prophecy that includes the relevant lines, "I will shake all the nations, so that the treasure of all nations shall come, and I will fill this house with splendor. The silver is mine and the gold is mine, says the LORD of hosts." So that would be a great stewardship sermon. Except that I don't really think that the treasure of the nations is on its way here to St. C's. So we're turning instead to the gospel reading, and this hypothetical seven-times widow, who faces some awkward marital reunions in the resurrection.

It is the final week of Jesus' life. If our liturgical year went chronologically, we'd be in Holy Week. Jesus is in the Temple courtyard facing off challenges from the religious authorities. Once he has dispatched them, he'll turn to sayings about the end of the world, before the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. So this question is a trap, part of the effort to discredit Jesus and maneuver him into a position where he can safely be killed. The law of Moses that younger brothers had to marry their widowed sisters-in-law was a humanitarian protection for women who otherwise might be left without social and economic attachment in a patriarchal society. It was a crude social safety net. And, as we can see from the question of these Sadducees, it was an opportunity for the flourishing of religious speculative nonsense.

But what on earth can it have to do with our common life and how we steward it? We, who have all kind of problems, but different marriage customs and safety nets? We who believe

in the resurrection, but not because of this loose exegesis Jesus pulls out of the hat, but because of the ways we witness it week by week as God calls life out of death. I think the crux here may be the question of getting or missing the point. These Sadducees construct this ridiculous scenario, but once they've constructed it, they see all the wrong stuff in it.

If we were to take this hypothetical woman's situation seriously, our first response could not be to wonder to whom she belonged in the resurrection, but to have compassion for this seven times widow, whose worth is constantly being valued by her inability to produce children and whose well-being is dependent on an extremely fragile family of brothers. Maybe those of us who have trod the dark paths of infertility are more alert to this than is good for us, but parts of this story feel to me a long way away from an empty hypothetical that would make a good theological trap. And for those of us who recognize part of this woman's absurd fate, the response we long for is the compassion that is completely missing from the goals of these religious antagonists.

Jesus takes a different but related tack. Luke's first audience didn't have access to some of the values and terms we have and it isn't always fair to force our assumptions on the text. But this crude social safety net of serial fraternal marriage was necessary because the world that required it was captive to a brutal form of the patriarchy that continues to poison our relationships with each other. The woman has failed to produce children who might ground her in society, and so her identity comes from the men she marries. Without those marriages, the world is ready to chew her up and spit her out. It is a world, and a system of marriage, in which what matters about a woman is to whom she is married and to whom she gives birth.

Jesus' interpretation of the resurrection cracks right through all of this. In that age, the markers of identity that are imposed on us are stripped away and we live and are seen as we truly are: children of God. Marriage is done away with not because partnership is bad, but because what matters, overwhelmingly, is that we are children of God, destined for the life that conquers death. These Sadducees miss the point: that pain calls forth compassion, and that the truth of every person is their beloved relation to God.

Believe it or not, that is how we get back to our stewardship season. Because it is hard to see other people this way. It is hard to walk through the world seeing through the many false ways that we are encouraged to categorize and evaluate people. Part of the reason that we need to come together to break bread, hear the word, and pray is because it takes a community to see ourselves and others as children of God. It takes a community to see the resurrection at work. And so we give ourselves to each other and, together, to others—so that we do not miss the point. So that we are able to remember that God is at work in the world, bringing life out of death and loving each of us as children. And so that, together, we can join that work that is hope for us and hope for the world. Amen.