

You'd Better (Re)think

November 6, 2022

The Wrong Questions

Have you ever heard the question, “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?” Today, that phrase is used to talk about wasting time debating topics of no practical value, but some suggest that it has its origin in the fall of Constantinople where scholars continued to debate as Turks besieged the city.

Whatever its origin, the intention is to lift up how absurd the topic is. In fact, the Latin term for this type of logic is called a *reductio ad absurdum*, literally, to reduce to absurdity. This trait of focusing on things that don't matter is all too human. I think of the church I worked at during college that was forced to replace our crystal Communion glasses with metal because the denomination decreed that metal was more dignified. Really? As if the makeup of the vessel in any way shaped people's experience of Jesus.

Scripture

In today's Gospel reading, some Saducees are trying to set Jesus up. Jesus has been teaching in and around the temple in Jerusalem, not with a title or credentials, but with a deep wisdom and integrity that resonates with the people.

The interaction we read today between Jesus and the Saducees is just one more example of people in power being threatened by Jesus. The Saducees were kind of the fundamentalists of their day, claiming to live strictly according to the scriptures and not relying on interpretation or tradition.

Now, many of you know that I can go on for hours about the fact that there's no such thing as engaging with something without interpretation, but that's not my point today. Our text tells us that the Saducees didn't believe in resurrection and were trying to discredit Jesus by posing an absurd argument to him. The practice they describe is called Levirate marriage, which was part of the law of Moses. The idea is that, if a woman's husband dies, she was to marry his surviving brother.

In our passage today, the Saducees set it up in spectacularly ridiculous fashion. Not only does the widow end up having to marry her husband's brother, this goes on seven times. Seven brothers marry her, and seven die.

This, of course, is where folks inevitably start making jokes. Who in their right mind would marry her after 3 or 4 or 5 of your brothers married her and died? Don't eat her cooking!

Once we have the silliness out of the way, we can start to unpack Jesus' response. Like asking “How many angels can dance on the head of a pin,” asking “Who will she be married to in heaven” appeals to a *reductio ad absurdum*.

All of the preaching I've ever heard on this critiques the Saducees for assuming that the resurrection will be simply an extension of life as we know it. While it may be comforting to

imagine Grandma and Grandpa reunited in heaven, a deeper understanding of the resurrection reveals different priorities and concerns.

To quote Kyle Brooks, who is an Assistant Professor of Homiletics, Worship, Black Church and African Diaspora Studies at Methodist Theological School, “life in the resurrection is about a spiritual communion that surpasses earthly bonds.”

So what?

So, while this discussion of the nature of the resurrection is where preachers normally take this text, this year, I’m hung up on the Levirate marriage, the law that a man had to marry his brother’s widow. The concept was that Moses laid out this law because women could not inherit property. The concept is that this is a law of compassion, that women would no longer be destitute when their husbands die because they would still be tied to his family.

Do you see where I’m taking this? Moses’ fix for the conundrum that women were becoming destitute when their husbands died because the women weren’t allowed to inherit their husbands’ property was to maintain their marriage to the family. The idea that creating a law in which she could inherit property, a law in which women were understood to have full personhood and agency, was just too much of a stretch. Creating this contorted system by which men married their brothers’ widows, maintained a certain set of foundational principles, namely that women weren’t _____ enough (Smart enough? Responsible enough? Reasonable enough? Cunning enough?) to be trusted with the means of looking after their own wellbeing. And even more foundational than that, by creating this work around, Moses may have been making sure the widows weren’t destitute, but he was also making sure that the power and resources continued to remain centralized in the hands of men. Jesus’ response to the Saducees’ question today not only tells the Saducees that they’re asking the wrong question, he’s also saying that Moses asked the wrong question.

Just this week, a friend lent me Adam Grant’s “Think Again.” Named the best nonfiction book of 2021 by the Washington Post, “Think Again” “pushes us to reconsider, rethink, reevaluate and reimagine our beliefs, thoughts, and identities and get to the core of why we believe what we do. . . It teaches us to stop digging in our heels and doubling down and consider other people’s points of view so that we may grow our own.” (Forbes) Grant understands that challenging long held beliefs, sometimes cherished beliefs, can be disorienting, even scary, so one of the paradigm shifts he suggests is that “who you are should be a question of what you value, not what you believe.” (Grant)

Let that sink in. In the example from our scriptures today, the Saducees are trying to trip Jesus up around beliefs, and the way that he responds is about his values. As Grant points out, “Research shows that when people are resistant to change, it helps to reinforce what will stay the same. Visions for change are more compelling when they include visions of continuity. Although our strategy might evolve, our identity will endure.”

Conclusion

The same friend who lent me “Think Again” also told this story about the recently deceased great Angela Lansbury dinner on our retreat. The story goes that Ms. Lansbury regularly advocated for elderly Hollywood actors to play guest roles on her show “Murder She Wrote,” so that these folks would earn the Union points to allow them to receive insurance, pension, and such. It’s a sweet story and speaks to Lansbury’s character.

But, because I was in the depths of preparing today’s sermon, all I could think of was that getting them work so that they could get points so that they could get insurance was so contrived. Wouldn’t it be more direct and more value aligned to find a way to get everyone access to healthcare rather than making elderly people work just to jump through the hoops we’ve laid out?

Friends, our current social and political climate is full of people who are absolutely certain of so much, and yet whose surety doesn’t align with reality nor their values. As we head to the ballot box this week, and in the months and years to come, if we are to have any chance of improving ourselves and our world, we need to follow Jesus’ lead by rethinking and reassessing. In doing so, we will break down the well-meaning but misguided beliefs and structures we have developed and we will continue to bring our world ever closer to God’s vision of peace, joy, justice, and love.

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