

First Presbyterian Church
“Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind: Sadducees”
Rev. Bethany Peerbolte
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Exodus 3:1-15; Luke 20:27-40

There are times in life we have an experience that completely shifts our perspective. You start off sure that you fully understand, but then it is presented in a new light and you have to rethink everything. For example, I grew up in Michigan on a small little inland lake. I took trips to the Great Lakes with my family every summer. I thought I understood bodies of water. Then I went to an ocean and witnessed tides for the first time. It was incredible to see the beach grow a couple hundred feet and then watch as that same area was transformed just hours later.

After a few trips to the ocean, and a couple science lessons, I thought I understood how tides work. But I had only ever experienced tides on American beaches. When I traveled to Kenya, my understanding was shaken again. The tide would go out just over a half mile. Whole boats would rest on the sand and camels would be used to bring in the catch. I had absolutely no concept of where all that water was going.

This week I again had my perspective challenged by my favorite astrophysicist, Neil Degrasse Tyson. I had the moon and the sun's gravitational impact figured out. That much made sense to me. Neil pointed out that the earth rotating inside the two water bulges the moon and sun creates is actually the tide. The water is always being pulled away from the earth's surface, but the beach one is standing on is either rotating into or out of the bulge.

To hear this explained this way is mind boggling. I guess I understand what Neil is saying, but do I really? And does it change anything? I'm still going to say the tide is going out and coming in. From this perspective I will interact with tides in a way that makes sense to me. It would be cumbersome to say the section of the earth I am currently standing on is rotating into the bulge of water caused by the gravitational pull of the moon. And that wasn't what Neil was suggesting we do, thank goodness. But knowing that my perspective is limited helps me stay open to new perspectives. And realizing I value concise language reminds me someone else might use different words to talk about the same thing.

Perspective is central to Jesus' teaching in this week's lesson. The religious elite who encounter Jesus think they are going to trap Jesus into answering an unanswerable question. From their perspective there is no way for Jesus to answer the riddle that doesn't make him sound absurd or backtrack a previous teaching. They are confident that once the crowd hears Jesus' response the people will see Jesus as a fraud.

Jesus is three steps ahead of them as always. Being asked impossible questions happens a lot to Jesus. Jesus' answer can be boiled down to the things we do in this life are not comparable to what is in the next life. In this life, some marry and some are given in marriage, but just like the dead no longer worry about death, they also do not marry nor are they given in marriage.

There is a lot more in Jesus' answer than just the answer to the Sadducees' question. Jesus hears a secondary problem in the religious leaders' question. There is the problem they say

they want to know about, “What is marriage like in the next life?” but Jesus sees that there is a problem in the assumptions of their question too. Jesus wants them to consider this problem, “Why do they assume their perspective is absolute?”

Jesus tries to help them see a different perspective three different ways. He gives them an option they have not yet considered to solve their marriage and resurrection problem. He also matches their energy of an absurd question with an absurd answer. Then he meets them where they are and uses their own values to show they can faithfully choose to believe.

The first way Jesus tries to help stretch the listeners’ perspective is in the way he describes marriage. Jesus says there are those who “marry and those who are given in marriage” which sets us up to see marriage as a practice that has two different perspectives. We can talk about marriage from the perspective of those who marry or we can talk about marriage from the perspective of those who are given in marriage.

It is a subtle but deliberate choice to frame marriage this way. In the riddle the Sadducees show that they think the two experiences of marriage have to do with gender, also known as, every man who is married has the same experience. Jesus’ view of marriage is that the two experiences have nothing to do with gender but depends on if the person is marrying, or being given in marriage.

Not all men experience marriage from the perspective of “marrying.” Sometimes a family has to have a son be given in marriage and make a match that is not his own autonomous choice. Not all women experience marriage from the perspective of “being given in marriage,” even in Jesus’ day there were women who chose the matches they wanted. Taking gender out of the riddle, Jesus’ framing now asks who is being given and who is marrying. The listener can then ponder if the rule the Sadducees are talking about is fair to each person regardless of gender.

When this rule about marriage was made, it was meant to correct the injustice caused by human standards and constructs. Widows were outcast if their husbands died without an heir and no one felt responsible for the widow anymore. Allowing a brother to marry their brother’s widow took away the stigma of marrying a widow and was supposed to ensure all widows were protected.

Except in practice the rule didn’t actually fix anything. Even though marrying a brother’s widow was now allowed and even seen as honorable to do so, families were still casting out widows. The rules still said that a childless woman didn’t have any right to the family wealth. And siblings quickly worked out that if no one married the widow, everyone got a bonus in their inheritance.

The rule looked good on paper but in practice it did not correct the injustice against widows. The rule was supposed to correct a system that produced unjust results.

With their question freshly answered, Jesus calls them out for asking an absurd question. He knows the Sadducees do not believe in resurrection so they do not really need an answer. They hope he says something they can use against him and draw people to their side. So Jesus answers with an equally absurd answer, at least to their ears. Jesus says everyone will be like

angels, another concept the Sadducees do not believe in. If they were hoping to use his words against him. Jesus gave them nothing to work with.

Then Jesus meets the Sadducees where they are. They value the Torah above all other scripture and so Moses is central to their worldview. They bring up Moses in their question so Jesus uses that same story to show resurrection could be an option even in their religious construct. Jesus points out that God remains tied to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By all laws when someone is dead, all contracts are void. Yet God is still keeping the covenants with these fathers of faith, which could be seen as God confirming resurrection in the afterlife because God still treats these contracts as active, as if the men were still alive.

Three ways Jesus tries to shift the Sadducees to a new perspective so they can spend less time on questions of marriage and more energy on things that matter to God.

It is good to note that Jesus is careful not to condemn the practice of marriage completely. He knows in this life there is a lot of value in marrying so people shouldn't stop marrying and being given in marriage. However, we shouldn't assume heaven will operate with the same standards we adhere to now. Largely because what we come up with often results in double standards and injustices. Jesus spends his whole ministry teaching how to notice injustice and empowering followers to correct it. To make life on earth closer to how it will work in heaven, to make heaven on earth.

This issue with marriage and resurrection may be too far removed from our experience for us to feel the shift in perspective the Sadducees would have felt. There is a similar question I hear asked today that I think is similar to the Sadducees' question.

What gender will we be in heaven? We live in a world that has a very firm construct around gender. Just like the structure around marriage that the Sadducees were stuck in, it is hard for us to imagine an answer outside of our own perspectives.

As a cis-gender woman, assigned female at birth and identify as female currently, I don't think I will be me if female is not a part of my existence. My perspective limits the way I can understand gender. I can listen to other perspectives...when Neil Degrasse Tyson explained the water-bulge-tide-thing I see what he is saying, but tides in and out are still the best way for me to experience tides. So I can listen to the perspective of someone who is transgender and kinda get what they are saying, but I will always experience gender as being in sync with my body because that's how I experience it.

So when we hear the religious elite of our day claim that they have it all figured out, and they say they know what gender will be like in heaven because they know how it works here on earth, we want to remember Jesus' response. The things that make sense to us here won't necessarily transfer exactly the same way in the next life. And it might do us some good to examine the fruit our current standards and constructs produce. Because if we find that our rules aren't protecting everyone in our community, it would serve us best to amend our understanding now, making this life as close to heaven as we can so our minds won't be bogged when we get to the real golden gates.