

## HEAVENLY RELATIONSHIP

By Rev. Dr. Donald Algeo

Genesis 12: 1-9

Psalm 17: 1-7

2 Thessalonians 2: 13-17

Luke 20: 27-40

Have you ever noticed how quickly and easily little kids form friendships? Put a handful of them together in a room and they're almost immediately completely comfortable with each other and satisfied with each other's company. Compare that with the way adults tend to circle around one another and check each other out and do initial background investigation when you throw them together.

Why the difference? There are probably several factors, but I think one important factor is that kids are so comfortable in their own skins that they're not in the least concerned about how they might use somebody else to add to their own satisfaction or at least not subtract from it. To put it another way and at the risk of sounding a little 'psychological', little kids don't regard other kids as potential means to some further end of theirs, or potential threats to their own ends. And that leaves them free simply to focus on and enjoy whatever they're doing, with the added dimension of doing it with someone.

I think that observation is a useful jumping off point for thinking about our Gospel passage from Luke this morning.

The gospels don't have much to say directly about the specifics of heaven, about what heaven might be like or what happens there. You don't hear anything about the weather in heaven or the kind of entertainment available in heaven or where people live in heaven or what they wear or what they eat, whether the children go to school there, whether there are snakes and mosquitoes, whether everybody speaks the same language and if so which one, and so on and so on. And of course that lack of specific information has

allowed the human imagination free rein to come up with all sorts of possibilities. Here's one example.

*A preacher found himself wondering whether there were any golf courses in Heaven. He even began to ask the question in his prayers. One day, in answer to his prayers, he heard a voice from on high.*

*"Yes," said the Heavenly voice, "There are many excellent golf courses in Heaven. The greens are always in first class condition, the weather is always perfect and you always get to play with the very nicest people."*

*"Oh, thank you," said the preacher, "That really is wonderful news."*

*"Yes, isn't it?" replied the voice, "And we've got you down for a foursome next Saturday."*

But anyway, in our passage from Luke, Jesus does seem to give out a piece of specific information about what you might call the 'facts' of heaven. It's important to note that the incident recounted in this passage is one of a series of confrontations Jesus has during the final few days of His earthly life, the period often called Passion week, and that I think gives them a special poignancy and a special importance. Knowing that the end was near, the lessons contained in these exchanges would be the lessons He wanted to impress the most firmly on the minds of His followers.

Different groups serve as His foils in these exchanges. In various passages, the text mentions the Pharisees, the chief priests, the teachers of the law and the leaders of the people, and in our passage for this morning the critics He's confronting are identified as the Sadducees.

Who were the Sadducees? There's not a lot known for certain about them, but one thing we do know is that they did not believe in an afterlife. Like many today, they found the notion of an afterlife to be intellectually incoherent and morally unnecessary.

It is to demonstrate that intellectual incoherence that they pose the dilemma to Our Lord recounted in our passage. One of the laws you find in the law code portions of the first five books of the Bible - called the Torah or, as in our passage, the books of Moses because Moses, in Jewish thinking, was their author - one of the laws found there requires that, if a husband dies without a son, his brother must marry the widow, in order to continue the husband's line. If that brother dies also without begetting a son, then a third brother must be

enlisted, and so on, until this poor woman has married seven brothers. But now we are to suppose that the woman herself dies, and that supposedly creates a problem in the afterlife, viz. who is the woman's husband?

And this hypothetical case, in the minds of the Sadducees interrogating Jesus, is supposed to demonstrate the absurdity of the whole notion of an afterlife. We're invited, I think, by Luke to picture the Sadducees looking sideways at each other and winking, or maybe giving a high-five to the one who asked the question.

But now let's think about this particular hypothetical case for a moment. Several different possibilities might easily occur to you as ways out of this supposed dilemma. You might suggest that it should be the original husband, or perhaps the final husband, or perhaps that the woman would be allowed to start over, and I'm sure there are other possibilities as well. All of these are certainly possible answers, and each could be made plausible by further reasoning or Scriptural citation. Or in other words, you could meet the Sadducees on their own intellectual turf, and engage them in argument.

But that's not what Jesus does. What He does instead is break completely from His usual method of talking about heaven in parables and gives us this one specific fact about heaven. Let's read the relevant portion again:

Jesus answered them. *"The men and women of this age marry, but the men and women of this age who are worthy to rise from death and live in the age to come will not marry."*

What an extraordinary thing to say! It catches the reader unprepared, because we're used to heaven being spoken of in vague, allusive, symbolic language. This is so straightforward, so factual. People in heaven don't marry. You don't often hear this passage referenced in wedding ceremonies.

It's so extraordinary, in fact, that it suggests that something else is going on here, something much more significant than simply engaging in a debate with a few cynical Sadducees. And this becomes even clearer when we notice that Jesus does in fact immediately go on to directly refute the Sadducees on their own terms by citing a different passage from the books of Moses, the passage about our God being a god of the living. If Christ's aim was simply to score a debate victory over the Sadducees, just quoting that passage would have been enough. But instead he offers us first this remarkable piece of information about heaven. Why? What's really going on here?

I think the clue to the answer is found in our passage. We already reread this part: "The men and women of this age marry, but the men and women of this age who are worthy to rise from death and live in the age to come will not marry." But notice the verse that immediately follows: "They will be like angels and cannot die."

Why would the fact that people are immortal in heaven affect whether or not they are or remain married? Couldn't a marriage be forever? What does immortality have to do with the issue of marriage? Why does Our Lord point to **that** as the reason there is no marriage in heaven?

The answer to that question gives us the key we're looking for to understand what Jesus is really teaching us here. Immortality would make marriage unnecessary, **as the Sadducees understood marriage**. Marriage, to the Sadducees, and to the Jewish way of thinking in general, was first and foremost a contract between a man and a woman, in which the man agrees to provide material support in exchange for the woman providing male children, **so that** the man's line would continue after his death. The point of marriage, in this way of thinking, was to achieve a kind of immortality for the man. The man was using the woman for his own purposes. That's why there was this law about the brother taking over and marrying the widow when the man dies without male issue.

When Jesus points to the immortality of those in heaven in responding to the Sadducees' supposed dilemma, he's saying that true immortality would eliminate the need for the sort of substitute immortality which, for the Sadducees, constituted the fundamental reason for marriage. Or if I may put it this way, Christ was not saying that there would be no marriage in heaven; he was saying that the marriage relationship in heaven, and by implication, all relationships in heaven - are based on something far different from the contractual model that characterized the Sadducees' thinking. Relationships in heaven, however long or short, are not arrangements for using the other as means to some further end of one's own.

But now here's the most important thing to remember. When Jesus teaches about heaven - whether by parable or just giving facts - he's never doing so as some world-traveler might describe the customs of some far-away and exotic Timbuktu. Using marriage as one example, he's showing us what deep and intimate **heavenly** relationships are like, in order that we may use that as a model for our own lives in the here and now.

"The kingdom of heaven is among you," he said once. Don't look for it over here or over there, and that includes not just looking for it as something in the future. Christ's lesson is ever and always that our day-to-day concern and responsibility is to bring the Kingdom into our own world, the one we're living in right now, right here.

So to return to the illustration with which we began this message, I think that's one of the things Jesus meant when he said that unless we become as little children, we will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven. As we observed, little children do not assess each other, they don't size each other up before deciding whether to pursue a friendship. And I suspect that is a large part of the reason why friendships emerge and flourish so readily at that age, why they can make for very unlikely matches, and why those friendships, formed at a young age, so often last a lifetime.

I think Christ's deep message in giving us this factual information about heaven, is that we might very aptly call the friendships that little children form by a different name: we might call them heavenly relationships.

And so, gracious God, let this be our prayer for this morning and for this message, that You soften our hearts when it comes to establishing relationship with others, that you diminish our interest in their shortcomings and increase our interest in their strengths, that you help us to purge both envy and condescension from our own characters, and that by all these measures you enable us to develop heavenly relationships even here below. We ask that you help us to be as loving and accepting of everyone we meet on our daily walk through life as was your child and our Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.