

“Majoring in the Minors”

Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21; Luke 20:27-40 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – November 9, 2025

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might learn to loosen
our grip and trust in your grace. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

First of all, I need to say: this is a horrific story. Some might aim to dismiss the details, explaining that it's just a made-up example, but I would argue that makes it worse. You're just looking for an example to make your point, and this is what you come up with? A story of repeated loss and grief? A family presumably seen as cursed? A woman trapped in a cycle of pressure and death and blame until she dies? It's helpful to know that seven is a number that symbolizes completeness in this culture, because the idea that a woman would live through seven husbands dying prematurely stretches credibility. It's a horrifying tale.

The idea – the “excuse” – that the story is just a fiction these Sadducees invented to make their point doesn't make it better; it makes them seem even more cold and heartless. They were trying to use the “logic” of their rules to prove Jesus wrong about the resurrection. That introduction Luke offers, that the Sadducees were “those who say there is no resurrection,” is important background here. It's also important to know that Sadducees rigorously studied and honored the Torah, the Jewish law, which is why they tried to lean into the “rules” in this situation. The rule in question was the

tradition that a man must marry his brother's wife if the brother had died without any heirs, in hopes of producing heirs for him posthumously. One could argue that this also helped provide care for widows, but the emphasis and concern is clearly more centered on the need for the men to "live on" through their offspring. That they would lean on this "logic" to make a point with seemingly no awareness of the trauma their example involves lays bare an approach to faith so focused on rule-following that it ended up devoid of compassion.

What's more, it doesn't work. They say to Jesus, essentially, "the resurrection can't be real because it would make our rules impossible." And his response is pretty much, "Exactly!" The resurrection does make those rules nonsensical, but it's not the resurrection that is the problem. It's the rules that have to go. You can almost see the Sadducees' jaws gaping as they realize that their terrible argument has been effectively turned against them and they're left standing there looking silly and cold-hearted.

And then Jesus goes into this explanation about how eternal life isn't how we perhaps imagine it; we simply aren't the same kind of beings at that point. Marriage is no longer a thing; the structures of our earthly societies simply don't apply anymore. We can even note that he refers to marrying (what men did) and being given in marriage (what woman did), offering a much more egalitarian understanding of the human traditions he's suggesting will be left behind, rather than relegating the woman in the story to a mere vessel for heirs.

It's just a glimpse, a hint that what God is offering us is so much more than what we've been able to imagine on our own. The capital L Life that Jesus is inviting us into isn't just different than life on earth; it's more. Life Abundant doesn't replicate the hierarchies and strictures we have here; it's beyond that. The only way that the Sadducees – and not just the Sadducees, but many cultures around the world – the only way they could imagine immortality was by producing offspring who would produce offspring who would produce offspring, thus carrying on the name and the bloodline. It's a vision shaped by a desire to hear the cry of “me, me, me” echoing into the future.

But the vision of immortality that Jesus is describing isn't about “me, me, me;” it's about God. It isn't about rules; it's about Love. Just as life in Christ is different than earthly life; the faith of Christ is different than human traditions and religious law. Humanity has often been confused about this: we know that God is powerful, but we don't really understand what that means. We have this idea that being powerful means having the capacity to create and enforce laws; to impose one's will on others. And so our religion gets shaped by rules we have to follow, and those who are best at following the rules are the ones judged faithful. The rules determine who is in and who is out, who is right and who is wrong, who is blessed and who is cursed. If the rules mean that we have to condemn a woman who's lost multiple husbands to an endless cycle of trauma and grief, oh well. If the rules go against our natural tendencies to extend

sympathy to those who are suffering, we'll just need to toughen up and learn to deal with it. And if there's something God wants to do – like say, the resurrection of the dead – that doesn't fit within the reality the rules have constructed, it will be deemed impossible.

And here is where I'm imagining a bystander who happened to be listening to the Sadducees debating Jesus. Wait a minute, did they just suggest that their rules can tell God what God can and can't do? That doesn't seem right, right? What a relief to hear Jesus tell them that they're "majoring in the minors." You've lost the plot, focused on the wrong thing, took your eye off the ball.

And because we don't believe in a rule that a woman has to marry her brother-in-law if her husband dies without heirs, we may be tempted to feel smug about those Sadducees and their foolishness. But they aren't the only ones who can get caught up in trivialities, are they? We like rules sometimes too. We like structures that tell us who is in and who is out. We like a faith that tells us clearly that if we do these things and don't do those things, we're good people. Too often, we still have a picture of God as an angry old man in the sky, watching and waiting for us to mess up, only restraining himself from hurling lightning bolts because Jesus is encouraging him not to.

There are still so many people who fundamentally misunderstand God's power, thinking it's about power over others, rather than power to bring forth the flourishing of creation. And when we convince ourselves that God's power is about authority, it's

just a short step to building up a system of rules that we then claim authority to enforce on God's behalf. And before you know it, it's power that's being worshiped rather than God. This is the fundamental heresy at the roots of Christian Nationalism, the basic failure to understand that God's power is first and foremost the power of love. It is generative, creative, transformative power, not the authority to punish and condemn. It is just and kind, as the psalmist says. And that divine empathy, rather than being something to mock or denigrate, is the essence of God whose name we are called to bless forever and ever.

The psalmist's repetition of "forever and ever" and reference to "one generation" lauding God's name to another could be seen as expressing a similar desire to the need for progeny to carry on the family name. But given that the emphasis in these verses isn't on us – or "me, me, me" – but on God, perhaps it is instead an affirmation of Jesus' declaration that God is the God of the living, and the dead are also the living in God's eyes. The power of love doesn't allow time or troubles or even death to be impediments to compassion and justice. Our petty rules and anxious urges to follow them will all fall away, and we will be left with a love that transforms us beyond our comprehension. We will be children held in the arms of Love. We will see and be seen clearly, know and be known fully, made One with all creation, alive in ways we've never imagined. Hallelujah and Amen.