FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

"WHEN LOVE OUTLIVES DEATH"

Scripture Lesson: Luke 20: 27-38

This sermon was preached by The Rev. Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, November 9, 2025 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Luke 20: 27-38

The Question about the Resurrection

27 *Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him* 28 *and asked him a question:*
"Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. 29 *Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman and died childless;* 30 *then the second* 31 *and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless.* 32 *Finally the woman also died.* 33 *In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."*
34 *Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage,* 35 *but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.* 36 *Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.* 37 *And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.* 38 *Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive."*

When Love Outlives Death

Leader: The word of the Lord.
People: Thanks be to God.

In our Lectionary reading this morning from the Gospel of Luke, a group of religious leaders known as the Sadducees take center stage. They were the more priestly and aristocratic faction of leaders within Israel, whereas the Pharisees were more of the middle class and tended to relate more with ordinary citizens. Another distinction between the two groups is that the Pharisees stood in greater opposition to Roman rule, whereas the Sadducees were more aligned with it, chiefly because the Sadducees were largely responsible for the management of the temple and its operations—Rome allowed them to make money.

But there's something else that is important to know about the Sadducees, which was different from the Pharisees: they didn't believe in the resurrection. If you ever need a way to remember that, just recall this old joke about their name. I warn you, it's cheesy, but it is memorable. It goes like this: because the Sadducees had no hope of eternity, they were "sad, you see."

Well, with Jesus now standing before them, this was their opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: to make a mockery of the idea of resurrection on the one hand, and make a mockery of Jesus on the other. But make no mistake about it, Jesus was their real target, and based upon what we know about the last week

of Jesus' life, we have good reason to believe that this encounter likely happened on the same day when Jesus had overturned their tables in the temple—the temple they managed, which gave them religious and economic privilege.

To get rid of Jesus, and perhaps gain a theological advantage over their religious brethren, they posed a question that traces its roots back to the ancient marriage law that was operative in the story of Ruth. As the musical *Hamilton* might say, they were not throwing away their shot. Think about that: this scenario, this hypothetical situation, was the very best they could come up with. This was their best shot, and they thought they had him.

If you want to follow along, our reading from Luke 20:27-38 can be found on page 855 of your pew Bible:

"Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, 'Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.'

Jesus said to them, 'Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'" (Luke 20:27-38). The Word of the Lord. Let us pray.

If we were to give the woman in this morning's Gospel story a name, we might call her "the most dangerous bride in Jerusalem." Imagine being the fifth brother in that family and knowing there was still one more brother after you. I don't think I would have had a problem being skipped. People have jokingly described Elizabeth Taylor saying to her seventh husband, "Don't worry, I won't keep you long." I don't know if Elizabeth Taylor actually said that, yet such is the nature of this wildly provocative scenario the Sadducees bring to Jesus.

Granted, they didn't believe in the resurrection, so this riddle about a woman who married seven brothers, each dying in turn according to the law of Moses, isn't really a question at all. What it is, is a trap. They may have called him "Teacher," but this was no teaching moment. In part, they wanted to show how absurd the idea of resurrection sounded, because if the dead really are raised, then this wife and these husbands may find themselves in a predicament. Their question isn't really about love, marriage, or even faith—it's about proving a point.

But Jesus doesn't take the bait. He refuses to play by their rules or their logic. He refuses to let heaven be defined by earth's categories. He reminds them, and us, that a resurrected life is not simply a continuation of this life. To be received into the everlasting arms of God is not just more of the same—it is far better.

To more fully understand what's happening between Jesus and the religious leaders, it helps to look back for a moment to our Old Testament lesson from Ruth. When Ruth lay down at Boaz's feet on the threshing floor, she wasn't acting out of scandal or seduction. She was acting out of faithfulness. Her husband, Mahlon, had died, and with him went her security and her future. Under Naomi's wise counsel, Ruth approached Boaz,

a close relative of her deceased husband's family, to see if he would serve as her husband's next of kin and fulfill the law of God.

The law to which she was referring was an ancient Levirate marriage law, established in Israel to protect a family's line and lineage. If a man died childless, his brother or nearest relative was to marry the widow, and the firstborn son of that union would carry on the deceased man's name. In a society where lineage meant survival, this law was both practical and gracious—a reflection of God's care for the vulnerable and His faithfulness to preserve his covenant people.

Most of us are quite grateful that we no longer live under the full system of ancient Israel's civil, ceremonial, and dietary laws—laws which spoke of shellfish, tattoos, and ritual cleanliness. While their moral principles may remain, their specific applications either exclusively applied to Israel's national life or were fulfilled in Jesus' life. The exception, of course, is God's moral law, summarized in the Ten Commandments. God's moral law remains in effect because it expresses God's unchanging character. The way God deals with sin changes throughout redemptive history, but God's holiness, justice, and attitude toward sin do not change.

Which brings us back to this scene with Jesus. The Sadducees, who denied the resurrection altogether, had twisted the same Levirate law into a trap. They concocted this absurd scenario: seven brothers, one after another, marrying the same woman. "So, Teacher," they asked mockingly, "in the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be?"

This scenario also reflects the Sadducees' overt criticism of the Pharisees, many of whom believed that eternal life was simply a longer version of this life—essentially the same relationships, same limitations, just stretched out forever. And if the truth be told, we sometimes fall into that same way of thinking as well. We picture heaven as an extension of this world, only improved—no tears, no sickness, no death—but still very much the same sort of existence.

To their question, Jesus responds by saying: "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection."

In other words, the life to come is not a continuation of earthly patterns; it is a transformation of them. Marriage, as precious and holy as it is, belongs to this age, but it points to the time that is to come. It points to a deeper and eternal reality—the covenantal love between Christ and His Church. We will no longer need the sign of Christ's love to a sinful and broken world, because we will be living in the substance of Christ's love for a sinful and broken world.

When we say in our marriage vows, "until death do us part," we acknowledge that death marks the boundary and fulfillment of those holy bonds of marriage. That's what Jesus is saying here: death marks the fulfillment of God's promises. In the age to come, every bond of love will be perfected in communion with God and with one another. In the age that is to come, our earthly relationships will not be diminished; they will be transformed. No longer will they be bound by time, exclusivity, or any other temporal entanglement, for they will be made complete in the love of Christ.

I suppose this is one of those places where we need to pause because if we've known the blessing of a good and healthy marriage—the friendship, the shared years, those small and sacred routines—it might sound jarring. I don't know what my life would be like without Martha Ann. So, when Jesus says that people

don't get married in heaven, the unavoidable implication is that our marriage here may mean something else there.

Will Martha Ann and I be strangers? The answer is a resounding "No." Jesus is not suggesting that love disappears; he is saying that it will be transformed. In the resurrection, love isn't divided among households or bound by vows. It is perfected in the presence of the One who is Love Himself. Every relationship will be healed and made whole. We will not love less—we will love more. My love for Martha Ann will not be diminished; it will be magnified.

Paul once said to the church in Corinth: "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we shall see face to face." Our love in this world is partial; it is refracted through the lens of our limitations. In the life to come, that love will shine fully and in every good way as God intends. We rightly think of heaven as a reunion, and the Scriptures give us every reason to hold fast to that conviction.

In one of our midweek Bible studies, we're studying 1 and 2 Samuel, and I'm looking forward to that moving passage in chapter 12 where, after the death of his infant son, King David said, "He will not return to me, but I will go to him." That simple, sorrowful sentence has brought comfort to generations of believers, because it touches on questions I've been asked more than once: "What about children who die before they can express faith in God? What happens to babies?"

While Scripture does not speak directly about that, the Biblical witness to God's covenantal love leaves us with deep and abiding assurance. We are told that God knits us together in our mother's womb. We remember how the prophet Jeremiah referred to the children who were burned on pagan altars as innocents, and how the Lord grieved that such a thing could even enter the minds of His people. The Bible is clear: the God who creates, knows, and loves His little ones does not abandon them.

The Scriptures are not silent in this regard; they point us to a God whose mercy extends beyond our comprehension and whose covenantal promises encompass even the smallest and most vulnerable among us. When King David spoke of going to his child, some have suggested that he was referring to one day joining his infant son in the grave. But most interpreters recognize that there was something more going on here: a measure of faith that looked beyond death. David trusted that love does not end at the grave. He believed that one day, by the mercy of God, he would see his son again.

Parents who grieve the loss of a child need to hear that. For those whose children died in utero, were stillborn, or lived only a short time, the questions that remain can be haunting. If a parent bears the painful thought that their actions or inaction may have contributed to their child's death, that grief can feel almost unbearable. But even in such cases, David's story reminds us that grace is real and forgiveness is full. David found peace not because he was without fault, but because he knew that God's love and covenant promises were not undone by his sin. He knew that God's mercy prevailed.

I've mentioned Martha Ann a few times this morning, and if she were one of our children, to whom I've promised five dollars every time I mention them in a sermon, I'd probably owe her at least ten bucks by now. During the years when we were trying to grow our family, Martha Ann endured the heartbreak of three miscarriages. When people ask about our children, we speak of the three who were born to us. But we also know we have three more children we will one day meet. That same promise holds for every spouse who mourns the loss of a beloved partner, and every child who weeps for a parent gone too soon.

Friends, in Christ, every story cut short on this side of heaven is completed on the other; every broken piece is made whole; and every separation ends in reunion—not because of our merit, but because of God's mercy in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Here's another interesting question that often comes up: What will we look like in heaven? What will that blessed state of glory look like? To begin, we will know and be known—not as ghosts or memories, but as healed, whole, living beings: recognizable and glorified. I can admit it: I've sometimes wondered what I'll look like in heaven. I'd gladly take the muscle I had at eighteen, or even my knees from a few years ago. But Scripture doesn't promise youth; it promises something far greater: a body free from decay and a spirit unburdened by sin.

While it remains undoubtedly mysterious, it is not metaphorical; it is reality. When Jesus says that God is "not the God of the dead, but of the living," He's talking about Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—not as memories, but as living souls in the presence of God. We also tend to wonder about the meantime, the time between our death and Christ's return, the blessed occasion about which we testify in the Apostle's Creed nearly every Sunday: "I believe in the resurrection of the Body." We also remember what Paul said: "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

This means that our loved ones who die in Christ are already with Him in paradise. They are at peace and in joy, awaiting that glorious day when Christ will return and our soul and body will be reunited in glory. Those who have gone before us are not lost; they are not asleep in the dark. They are alive with Christ Jesus, our Lord. And one day, we will join them—not as ethereal spirits, but as resurrected people in the radiant presence of God.

Even if the Sadducees had believed in the resurrection, they still would have missed the point. Seven husbands, one woman—who's she married to up there? I like to imagine Jesus thinking to Himself: "You've missed the point entirely. We're not talking about eternal in-laws; we're talking about eternal life." The kingdom of heaven is not the continuation of old entanglements; it is their redemption. Every love that we know in part will be known fully. Every joy that slipped from our grasp will be grappled to our soul.

That's why Paul could say with such faith: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul knew that in dying, we lose nothing that is real—we gain everything that is eternal. When Ruth told Boaz, "Spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin," she didn't know it, but she was foreshadowing the gospel itself. In Christ, God spreads His canopy of grace over us and claims us as His own. Jesus redeems our losses, restores our hope, and renews our life.

It's interesting: Ruth's story ends in Bethlehem with the birth of a child who would become the ancestor of King David, and through David, the ancestor of Jesus. In the fullness of time, the Redeemer of Ruth became the Redeemer of the world. The One who turned Ruth's widowhood into blessing is the same One who turns the mystery of death into the light of eternity. In the resurrection, we will not cling to the shadows of love. We will not long for what we have lost. We will live in the fullness of a love that will not die.

In this way, our faith is not built on wishful thinking; it is built on historical facts. The tomb was empty. The stone was rolled away. The risen Christ actually stood among His disciples, and He changed their lives forever. He also bore scars that were not erased—ah, but they were redeemed. Those scars remind us that resurrection doesn't undo our past; it transfigures it. Every tear, every sorrow, every broken piece of our story will one day be gathered into the wholeness of God's grace.

Yes, death still stings, and absence still hurts, but one day, every name whispered in grief will be spoken again in joy. Every embrace cut short by time will be renewed beyond time. That is the promise that allows us to live and to die, not unto ourselves, but unto the Lord.

When the Sadducees tried to corner Jesus with their clever logic, He didn't respond with philosophy. He responded with power: "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for to Him all are alive." That means Abraham lives, Isaac lives, Jacob lives, Ruth lives, Mary lives—and because Jesus lives, so shall we. The love we have known will not die. It will not be lost. It will be complete. The people we miss will be gathered again. Even these bodies, frail as they are, will be perfected in holiness and raised anew.

The Sadducees saw death as the final word, but we know better. We know what comes next: a joyful reunion with all those who have loved God and now rest in His presence. Until that day, we live as people of resurrection hope—a people who know and believe that love outlives death. When everything else fades, when the questions fall silent, and when the veil is finally lifted, we will see God face to face. We will discover that God's love is perfected, and it is perfected in us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.