

For the people of St. Philip's
November 11, 2007
Luke 20: 27-38
"Be Doers of the Word"
Maria Hoecker, preacher

"Whose wife will the woman be?" What an interesting question we have before us today. Just speaking for myself in reading this, my first question about heaven would be, "please isn't there a place where this woman can get away from all these brothers?!" "Once again we're going to need to take a little step back in time and try to get some historical perspective on the reason for this odd story presented to Jesus by the Sadducees.

The Sadducees were the oldest and most conservative of the major religious groups of Jesus' day. One of their big disagreements with the Pharisees was over the fairly new notion that there would be a personal resurrection after death. The Sadducees felt that it was not proven by scripture. They argued that the resurrection was not attested in Torah, the first five books of our Old Testament, which were the only books the Sadducees accepted. \

This is the set up. The Pharisees and the Sadducees couldn't agree, so if they all could get Jesus to give an answer to the idea of the resurrection, one way or the other, then he'd be guaranteed to give the *wrong* answer and, well, be *wrong*.

The Sadducees said that the resurrection didn't make sense. This is what's behind the story of with the woman and the seven brothers. After all, if the idea of resurrection doesn't let you figure out as simple a point as who is married to whom, then there must be something wrong with the whole concept. Our questions about heaven are still very much like those of the Sadducees. We haven't learned much between now and then.

We talked about this in Bible study on Wednesday. Any discussion of heaven brings up similar questions. All of us wonder whether, in heaven, after the resurrection, babies who died as babies will still be babies, and whether those who die at great age will be of great age, and if not, what age will they be, and for that matter, what age will we or anyone else be. In the fourth century St. Augustine worked on this question and came up with an answer that satisfied him. He decided that everyone would be 33 -- which was generally thought to be Jesus' age at his resurrection. (secondary source: Rev. James Liggett sermon.)

How will we recognize one another in heaven? Will *want* to recognize one another? Admit it, won't there be some folks in heaven you'd just as soon not run into? It's all a variation on the theme of question that we hear today from the Sadducees. We all have them. Wouldn't it be great to have knowledge, real information, on the specifics of eternal life. Let me tell you, we're severely limited by our lack of imagination. All any of us can picture is what we think we know.

This search for answers, for knowledge that feels so much like power, is both ancient and contemporary. Just go looking for it and you will find someone with all the answers. They all say basically the same thing, "We know the Bible better than you do and we've figured it out. If you follow our rules, you'll be safe and you won't be left behind." It's tempting to follow such authority. The Sadducees and the Pharisees had that kind of seductive authority.. But Jesus didn't bite their bait.

It is important to pay careful attention to what Jesus has to say to the Sadducees when they ask him about the woman with seven husbands. The Sadducees came to Jesus with a clever question, and Jesus simply said that it was a pointless question to ask. They and we want to know specifics about what it's like after we die and Jesus just isn't telling. And based on that, it would seem that he doesn't particularly want us to spend a lot of time asking, either. God is handling it. That's about as much as we are going to get out of Jesus.

This simple story is crucial to our entire understanding of the resurrection and of hope. It is very important that we understand that our hope does not come from *knowing* whose wife of which brother the woman will finally be. Or whether Grandma will be 65 or 25 in heaven. Our hope does not come from knowing answers to the best or the most mundane of all the questions of our existence.

Our hope comes through Jesus, and *only* through Jesus. Jesus comes to us through Word and sacrament, in our gathering together, through feeding the hungry, in the breaking of the bread, and in the brokenness of our own lives. Do we know Jesus? Do I know Jesus? Do you know Jesus? We can't know everything there is to know, our only *hope* is in being open to accepting Jesus as the Resurrected Christ.

So, we are called to cultivate a living hope, based solely on our trust in a loving God. We are given no specifics, no answers to tricky questions, no picture postcards of where we are headed. Instead we are called simply to surrender our questions and our clever

arguments and trust that God's got it covered; and that God's love and care for us will surpass all that we can ask or imagine.

We are to remember --when we die, and when those we love die--God does not die. God's love for us all never, never dies. This love will continue and will grow, and we can rest in it through all eternity. Jesus is telling us as plainly today as Jesus always did that the best way to prepare spiritually for our death and for the life that is to come is not by taking harp lessons or by trying to figure out the details of the afterlife. The best way to prepare ourselves spiritually for our own death and the life to come is to work on trusting God more, and to practice letting go of all that we think we know.

Jesus doesn't answer the direct questions of the Sadducees or our own questions. We still don't know whose wife that poor woman will be, or how old we will be when we see our loved ones, or how we'll recognize anyone and what will they be wearing, or anything like that. Jesus makes it clear that it is best that we don't know these details. It doesn't matter. The devil is in the details.

There is much to be done on this side of heaven. As you know, the 86th convention of the diocese of WNC concluded yesterday. The theme of the convention was "Be Doers of the Word." We accomplished all that one would hope to accomplish at a convention.

I'll close with a few words from the address our bishop, Porter Taylor, shared with us on Thursday night.

As Christians we are called to incarnate Christ's message of love and grace in the ordinary moments of our everyday lives. Otherwise we are just noisy gongs and clanging cymbals. Otherwise nothing changes.

We live in a culture of talking heads and the Church has been infected by it. We talk and talk and talk, but meanwhile the world cries out in its need for peace and justice and mercy. Because the truth is: the hungry don't get fed. And the homeless don't get shelter, and the world doesn't change by all our talking.

It's all in the doing;...it's all in proclaiming the Gospel by example. I wonder if all our talking in the Church is a self-serving diversion--as long as we talk, we don't have to address the needs of the world about us.

It's time for us to be doers of the Word and stop talking so much, because the truth is--Today is the only day we have to give thanks to God for all God has given us. Today is the only day we have to incarnate the Good News of Jesus Christ. Today is the only day we have to be transformed into disciples. And if the world is to be changed, it must begin with ordinary people like us, in ordinary places like this, doing extraordinary acts in the name of Jesus. But it begins with us, Right now.

As Ghandi says: "Be the change you seek in your world." Right now, right here. If we want a peaceful world, let us be doers of peace right now. If we want a more just world, let us be doers of justice right now. Let us stop endlessly talking about THOSE people who will not behave the way we want them to and be the change we seek, here, now.

Our time together as a diocese is to remember the many ways in which God has made us to be God's instruments so that through us, God might change the world.

After all, being doers of the word is what God made us for.

Amen.