

**A Sermon for
The Twenty-Second Sunday
after Pentecost:
Proper 27 (C)
November 10, 2019
A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish
One love**

The Gospel: Luke 20:27-38

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.”

Savior, like a shepherd, lead us. Amen.

I volunteered for eighteen years at a federal immigration center near the Newark Airport that has about three hundred detainees locked up there. I had applied to

the Presiding Bishop's Fund early on and was given a sizeable grant then to begin the program. I did a Bible study from the Alpha Course there on Thursday nights for thirty or forty detainees who came to a windowless indoor recreation room for about two hours. We did praying, singing, preaching, and Bible study. On one Thursday a young man from Mexico came up to me after the service and told me about how he and his father had not spoken to each other in almost a decade or so, and he was so excited as he had just learned that his father had gone to the immigration authorities and had arranged to pay for a lawyer for him and for his young

family who had no means to hire a lawyer before. He felt that his father's renewed attention to him was a direct answer from God. For years he and his father had not communicated at all, and he had apparently prayed long and hard while he was in detention that he could be reconciled with his father. It was amazing and so uplifting to me to see his beaming and smiling face as he animatedly told me about this incredible miracle he was experiencing in his life. We celebrated that miracle together in that big noisy windowless room as the detainees were being taken back to their high security dorms. It is not often that I heard good news

there. But when a father and son are reunited, it was a miracle of immense proportions.

I have a priest friend who has not spoken to his two grown daughters in years. One was a brilliant student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the other was a teacher, as I recall. It was so sad to hear how his family had gotten so broken.

So when I read this story about brothers marrying another brother's wife, it does make me feel rather uncomfortable, to say the least. It is not something we are at all accustomed to in our society.

However, I do know our society has taken the issue of divorce rather casually in the past several decades; but when I heard that one of the first couples I had performed a marriage for had split up and were already on their third spouses, it did take me back a bit. Before that I had sort of imagined that the weddings I had counselled were somehow able to counter the divorce trend the rest of society was experiencing. But when my eyes were opened, I found that the statistics of the marriages I performed that “endured” were about the same as for all marriages in general. I did not have my imagined ‘special touch’ to keep couples

together. I won't say that I became cynical, but I certainly did become more realistic in my expectations as I approached marriages.

I recall one young couple who spent months on end working at multiple jobs to save money for a fantastic wedding and honeymoon—upwards of thirty-five thousand dollars or more. But when the wife's expectations of what sort and size of house they would live in were not realized, they divorced less than three months later. I just shook my head. It was his first marriage and her second. That thirty-five thousand dollars should have been put on the down payment of her dream house, I suppose.

Hindsight is oftentimes 20/20! But I guess a Kardashian type of wedding has its benefits! At least they were not unhappy for long! But those weddings do make one wonder if seeking the “perfect wedding” is at all what it is supposedly cut out to be. Some folks focus so much of their energy on the wedding that they seem to forget they are supposed to be married to that person for a very long time, and it would have been better to focus more on the marriage than on the wedding itself.

One of my greatest successes in marriage counselling was when a couple decided not to get married. I thanked God that they were

able to see the insurmountable difficulties that spring from unrealistic expectations. Marriages are made, not born, as someone has said. Indeed having a baby does bring some focus on the issue, especially if that baby is born a bit “early.” I am of the opinion that the care of children is far, far more important than having a totally happy marriage, especially since the totally happy marriage is probably only a mirage, a myth, in our culture. I have done more than one marriage for couples who had been together for years and had children several years old, and it is actually a joy to do those weddings, because I think the couple has finally come

to terms with the non-existence of an idealized marriage. One of my bishop friends in England told me that “in the olden days” in England, there were almost no marriages unless the bride was already pregnant. The Bishop of New Jersey readily admits he and his wife were married only when she was seven months pregnant. But they were never sorry because their marriage has been a successful one, and they have been partners in ministry. But I also do know that is not always the case, since the second couple I married did so because the bride was about to have a baby, but the marriage didn’t last a year, which I think is

and was indeed sad for the baby. So a pregnancy is not the only reason a couple should marry, for sure; hopefully they will determine if they can love and tolerate each other first before having children! But The Episcopal Church is supposed to be rigorous about requiring a legal will for the parents to be written and executed before we baptize a baby, although I am not sure all priests follow that rubric carefully. But we usually do strongly insist that godparents must be Christians since the godparents are still supposed to be able to care for the child financially and physically in case anything happens to the parents. A godparent or

sponsor is far more than a figurehead job, at least in the Anglican Communion, or they are supposed to be more than figureheads at an Episcopal baptismal celebration. So remember that if someone asks you to be their child's godparent you are taking on significant responsibility by agreeing to be a godparent, or at least you are supposed to be seriously considering your responsibility to that child. Maybe this is a way we Anglicans may be able to save children somewhat from the problems of divorce if we choose our child's godparents carefully. We godparents should be ready to raise the child for whom we have agreed to be the

godparents. That puts being a godparent in a much more special and important light, doesn't it?

I was in a conversation with some members of an Anglican internet church called i-church, i-hyphen-church dot org, which I have helped pastor off and on for several years. One of the members said her niece was going to move in with her boyfriend soon, but that that was considered OK since the girl's father liked the boyfriend. Wow, I thought. In the "olden days" one asked the bride-to-be's father for the hand of his daughter; now the daughter's father is just relegated to "liking" his

daughter's boyfriend before they officially move in together. Times have changed, haven't they? However, if one is to do a credible job counselling a couple about to get married, we priests often need to consider all previous 'live in' relationships just the same as marriages, and we need to consider the breakups of these live in relationships just the same as divorces since we humans are biologically primed to be the partner of one person; and any break up of a physically intimate partnership always has concomitant consequences for all future partnerships, whether we were married or not. We humans cannot "break away" from

each other without leaving a part of us “back there” with that previous relationship, whether it is called “marriage” or not.

That’s just how we humans are made. And indeed Jesus recognized non-marital partnerships existed, as his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in the Gospel of John, Chapter Four, indicates.

Note that Jesus himself did not make a “big deal” over the Samaritan woman’s living with someone she was not married to.

But amongst us Anglicans as well as for all other Christians, there is still a sense that family is very important, and that children’s lives are very important. We, however, of

course are not bound by the Jewish law that the Sadducees were trying to catch Jesus out on. We are not at all required to marry our brother's wife if our brother dies. And in fact should we ever do that, it would probably raise more than a few eyebrows, not that it never happens; but in general it is just not the "done thing" in our society. So this rather peculiar story about brothers marrying the wife of the first born, who had become the wife of the second born, and so on, and so on, just sounds odd to us. And indeed it sounds equally if not more odd to Jesus as well, because he knows the Sadducees are just trying to make eternal

life look ridiculous; but we know for sure eternal life is absolutely not ridiculous; eternal life is very real for us Christians, since indeed Jesus rose from the dead to assure each of us of eternal life. But to frame eternal life in the manner of who will be married to whom in heaven is absurd, as Jesus points out, since none of us will have a physical body in heaven. Marriage is not the end all and be all of human existence; marriage is a way we humans have of not burning in hell because we are adulterers, to put it perhaps way too bluntly; but of course Jesus noted that adultery can occur simply by thought, not necessarily by a physical act.

Partner swapping is not at all healthy because we humans cannot separate from the opposite or same sex without some sort of trauma, a trauma which can be very major. But what Jesus is trying to focus us on is the need to see that our human relationships themselves are not the “stuff” of eternal life. There in fact is little in the Bible that indicates we will even know each other in the afterlife; that is not a basic Christian concept actually, but we do tend to perpetuate it. In one Biblical story, however, after death Abraham recognizes poor Lazarus and also Lazarus’ rich acquaintance. But it is love that is eternal,

God's love for us through God's only Son Jesus Christ. It is that divine love that endures forever. It is that divine love that we are to tell and show others about, to assure them that God loves them too, regardless. God's Son died for each us even though God knew and God knows we all are sinners. God did not just die for good people. God died for us, good or bad. And when we realize how much God loves us, then life becomes not just bearable whatever relationship we are in or we are not in, when we recognize how much God loves us, then life takes on new meaning. Life is our chance to help at least one other person to

see how much God loves them. May we show them we are Christians by our love; by our love, may we show the world we are Christians by our love.

Ultimately it is not to whom we are married, but to whom we owe our very being. If that is Jesus Christ, whom we take as our Lord and Master, if we are wedded to Christ and sealed as Christ's own forever, we have no more worries, no more ultimate concerns, no more issues about the life after this life; when the hereafter is taken care of, then this life will be ours to enjoy and celebrate. For we have a Great Protector for

all time in heaven. In Him we live and
move and have our being. Alleluia.

Amen.

Description: Weddings are formed for this life only, but in many ways they reflect how we evaluate life in general, and what we value, and what we take as ultimate concerns. If Christ is on the throne of our lives, then we can remove our sometimes petty issues about our spouses and focus on how we are witnesses to others about the love Christ has for our world.

Tags: Marriage, children, wife, husband, Pharisees, Jesus, Christ, Master, Lord, love, relationships, detention, Mexico, father, son, divorce, church