

"A TRICK QUESTION"

Luke 20:27-38

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York Center Church of the Brethren

Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

A train departs Chicago at 10 am going east at 60 miles an hour. Another train departs from New York at 10:30 am going west at 70 miles per hour. How far will each train travel before they meet? And where did the engineers go to high school?

Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? I always thought word problems in math class made about as much sense. Unless I was on one of those trains and they were on the same track, why did I care how far they traveled before they met? I know math word problems had a purpose, but they always seemed like trick questions to me. And they gave me a stomachache!

Trick questions are the norm these days. You hear them in political debates and discussions. Someone will ask an innocent-sounding question intended to make the candidate look foolish, incompetent, or dishonest. You can also hear these kinds of questions in religious settings.

The questioner isn't looking for answers or insight. They already know what they think the correct answer is and they think they know how the person will respond. They just want to make that person sweat or look ridiculous. Trick questions are not about finding the truth, they are weapons of deceit. There is no right answer to a wrong question.

Luke's Gospel tells a story about a trick question that tricks the wrong people. The Sadducees have launched a game of theological dodge ball and their target is Jesus. These religious leaders were part of the Jewish priestly class. They were mostly wealthy, theologically conservative aristocrats. They believed the holy scriptures included **only** the five books of Moses, known as the Pentateuch, what we know as the first five books of the Old Testament- Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. If it wasn't found in the books of Moses, the written Torah, they believed it wasn't of theological value and it certainly wasn't the "word" of God.

This put them at odds with another group of religious leaders, the Pharisees, who believed that scripture included not just the written Torah but also the oral Torah which included current interpretations of the texts along with the writings of the Prophets and the Psalms. The battle over the authority of scripture goes back a long, long way.

The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, and this was the basis of their attack on Jesus. Although I doubt that it really had much to do with resurrection and a lot to do with making Jesus look foolish in front of his followers.

Let me set the stage: Jesus is now in Jerusalem, He entered with the Palm Sunday fanfare, wept over the city, and cleansed the temple by throwing out the merchants who were cheating the worshippers. The religious leaders are getting more worried about him and his popularity with the people, so they are turning up the heat. They sent spies who pretended to be honest seekers so they could trap him with trick questions, make him look foolish, and turn the people away from him. You can guess how that worked out for them.

Each time Jesus was confronted with their intellectual quicksand, he lightly stepped over it while they became mired in their own deceit. Their trick questions included:

- "By whose authority are you doing these things?"
- "Did the baptism of John come from heaven or was it of human origin?"
- "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

Then they dropped the big one- a question about one

bride for seven brothers. I honestly don't think they cared what Jesus thought about this convoluted scenario- they just wanted to show how ridiculous the whole idea of resurrection was. Their question may have been a trick, but Jesus's answer was not. It is important to note that this text is the only place in the Gospel stories where Jesus talks about resurrection.

"Teacher," they said. "In the law of Moses, it is quite clear that if a man dies and leaves behind a wife with no sons, she is to marry his brother and their sons would be considered those of the dead husband. So, what happens if she marries the first brother and then he dies without producing any sons and she marries the second and the same thing happens? What if her first husband had six brothers and so she marries each one in turn and they all die without leaving any sons?"

Here comes the twist. *"So, what happens when she dies? Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?"*

To our 21st century ears, there are so many things wrong with this question. First of all, doesn't anyone care about this poor woman? They show no sympathy for the fact that she has been widowed seven times, has no children, and is basically being treated like property.

To their first century ears, however, the question made perfect sense, it was based on Jewish law which was concerned less about the woman and more about the male offspring who would inherit the father's name and earthly goods. It was a law that ensured the continuation of the tribe. If a man died without any sons, his wife married his brother and if they had a son he would be raised as the son of the first husband. In that way the dead man's name and inheritance would continue. In some ways it was a compassionate law ensuring that the widow would be cared for.

Tom Long describes what happened next. *"Jesus surprises the Sadducees. He will not be trapped by their limited choices. Instead, he challenges their basic assumptions. The way the Sadducees set up their little puzzle implied two things: one, that they knew the scriptures backward and forward; and two, that the ways of God are predictable. In other words, their trap depended upon a closed theological system of which they were the masters.*

Once they set up the dominoes about this woman who married seven brothers, they were confident that they could predict how they would fall; thus, there was no way out for Jesus."

Tom Long continues, *"Jesus informs them, however, that they do not know as much about either the scriptures or the ways of God as they think. (1)*

Their biggest mistake was assuming that the afterlife would be just like life on earth in the present. It never occurred to them that perhaps the resurrection power of God doesn't preserve, but transforms, life as we know it.

Then Jesus turns to their own scriptures to prove them wrong. *"Remember when God spoke to Moses out of the burning bush,"* he asks. Well of course they do, they know those scriptures by heart.

Jesus asks another question. *"How does God identify Godself to Moses?"* And then he quotes from scripture, Exodus, chapter three. *"I am the God of your father. I am the God of Abraham. I am the God of Isaac. I am the God of Jacob."*

Jesus continues, *"God didn't say, "I **was** the God of Abraham. I **was** the God of Isaac and Jacob. God didn't say, I **was** their God when they were alive but now, they are dead. and I am no longer their God. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive."*

Although the Jewish patriarchs may have died by human understanding, they are still alive in the presence of God. *"So, you see," says Jesus, "your own scripture teaches the resurrection. Any more questions?"*

And of course, there weren't any more questions. In fact, Luke records some of the scribes as saying, *"Well done, Teacher."* And no one dared to ask him a question.

We, in the church, argue about a lot of things we think we know the answers to, and many things we have no clue about. It is human nature to want to know, to understand, to have the final answer to something as important as life and death. But we don't. We can't. I can't prove the truth of the resurrection of Jesus to you- it's above my pay grade. But if you are here on Easter Sunday, I will sure give it a try!

In her sermon, "God of the Living," Barbara Brown Taylor writes, *"The Bible refuses to approach resurrection as a rational kind of thing. Instead, it talks about resurrection as a mystical kind of thing, which is based not on our belief in God but on God's belief in us— and on God's investment in the creation, the incarnation, the essential goodness of matter, bodies, flesh. It is based on our origin in God and our ongoing union with God, which means that anyone who was ever part of God's life never stops being part of it."* (2)

She continues, *"I do not think resurrection is really about us at all. I think it is about God, and to focus on our own faith or lack of faith in it may be to miss the point altogether. Resurrection is not about our faithfulness. It is a radical claim about the faithfulness of God, who will not abandon God's beloved. This is what Jesus is getting at in his answer to the Sadducees. Never mind marriage, he says, first of all. Marriage is how we preserve our own lives in this world, but in the world to come that will not be necessary anymore. For God is God not of the dead but of the living, for to God all of them are alive."* (3)

Through Jesus Christ, we have come to know that our God is indeed God of the living. Through Jesus Christ we have come to know a God of abundance and love. Our God is so much bigger than we can imagine and transcends our experience of life and our understanding of death.

The question for us isn't, "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?"

The question for us is, **"How will we live our lives now, knowing that our God is God of the living?"**

Don't worry. It isn't a trick question. But it may be the most important question we ever answer.

Amen.

END NOTES:

- MATTHEW, Thomas G. Long, Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. P. 3
- "God of the Living," from HOME BY ANOTHER WAY, Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley. 1999. P. 205.
- Barbara Brown Taylor, pp. 206- 207.