What's Next?
Luke 20:27-38
Rev. Dan Schumacher

Will you pray with me?

Almighty God —
Help us to seek you earnestly in this story,
and through our seeking, lead us to hope.
In Jesus' name we pray, amen.

When I was in high school, I had a wonderfully kind and generous english teacher named Ann Chladek. I loved her class. And lots of misfits and chronic under-performers also loved her class, because the repeated refrain in Mrs. Chladek's class was: "There's no such thing as a stupid question."

And she *meant* it. It's how she got all of those kids to engage in our class conversations that were too intimidated to speak up in other classes. Every question was valid. Every question was received and answered without judgement, because "there's no such thing as a stupid question."

Well, the Sadducees are out to prove Mrs. Chladek wrong. In this story, they ask Jesus what can only be deemed a stupid question.

It's stupid, because, first of all, it's not asked honestly, but as a trap intended to make Jesus look like fool. And, secondly, because it's an utterly absurd question to begin with.

The Sadducees, who don't believe in resurrection (which is why they are "Sad, you see"), approach Jesus in the Temple and say to him, "Teacher, Moses said that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife and no children, that man should marry the widow and raise up offspring on his brother's behalf."

It was a law spelled out in the twenty-fifth chapter of Deuteronomy referred to as *Levirate marriage*. If a husband died, his brother was to marry his wife. It was a law intended to protect the widow from homelessness and destitution — to keep her safe. And I know what you're thinking — thank God that times have changed, and I no longer have to be concerned about marrying my sisters-in-law should anything happen to my brothers. I love all my sisters-in-law, but not like that.

But in Jesus' day, it was understood to be part of the Jewish law. So, the Sadducees essentially say, "Let's presuppose the scriptural validity of Levirate marriage…"

They've set the stage. Now they spring their trap: A woman's husband dies, so she marries the second brother. But then that brother dies, so she marries the third… then

the fourth… the fifth.. and on down the line until she's married every single one of them. It's like that musical "Seven brides for Seven Brothers," only this version is "One Bride for Seven Brothers." Or like that movie, "Four Weddings and a Funeral," only this one is "Seven Weddings and Seven Funerals."

They tell this ridiculous story. Then, the Sadducees, who — again — do not believe in resurrection, ask: "In this next life you talk about, Jesus, which of the seven will be her husband? To whom will she belong?"

Now, if this scenario really played out, aren't there about a hundred other questions that you would want to ask before you got to: "In the next life, who will be her husband?"

Questions like:

- *Were these brothers accident prone? Or just genetically doomed?*
- Or, *how can one woman go through seven husbands without attracting the attention of the authorities?*
- *What kind of life insurance plans is this woman buying?*
- *If you're number six, would* you *sleep in the same room as her? Would you eat anything she handed you?*
- *What's brother number 7 thinking when he says, "I do"? Was he secretly crossing his fingers behind his back?*

The point of the question, of course — *the point of this whole scene* — was not honest inquiry or theological dialogue, but to make Jesus look like a fool for believing in resurrection at all. "So you believe in resurrection, huh? Well, have we got a question for you!"

Have you ever heard of the mode of philosophical argumentation known as *reductio ad absurdum*?

Reductio ad absurdum literally means, "a reduction to the absurd." Philosopher, Daniel Dennett, describes it as a model of rational argumentation where you take your opponent's premise and deduce something absurd from it.

Whether we know it or not, we use it all the time. For instance, let's say your teenager gets in trouble for skipping school. When you confront him, he says, "But all my friends were doing it!"

And, in response, as a reasonable adult and parent, you say, "Well, if all your friends were jumping off of a cliff, would you do it, too?"

Reductio ad absurdum. You've taken your teen's logic and pushed it to an absurd limit, and thus, (you hope, but probably not likely) exposed to your teenager that their logic is flawed.

That's what the Sadducees are trying to do to Jesus. They are trying to force Jesus to admit how ludicrous the idea of resurrection is by pushing it to an absurd limit.

Some people say, "There's no such thing as a stupid question." Others say, "Ask stupid questions, get stupid answers."

Jesus refuses to play the game the way they want. Instead, of acknowledging their point and bowing to their superior logic, he seems to say:

"To whom will she belong?? Well, that's a stupid question."

"First of all," he says, "you seem to be working on the assumption that in the age to come, everything will be the same as it is now. But it won't. When God sets all things right, there won't be any need for *Levirate marriage* anymore, because women won't *belong* to men. In fact, nobody will *belong* to anyone."

The Sadducees meant to use their ideas about marriage to make life after death seem absurd. Jesus turns it around: "life after death makes your ideas about marriage seem absurd."

When we're the children of God, we don't *belong* to anyone *but* God.

"Secondly," says Jesus, "if you want to take a verse from Deuteronomy that has nothing to do with resurrection and misuse it to try to say something it was never intended to say, well, two can play that game. Remember when God spoke to Moses at the burning bush, and God said, 'I *am* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,' not 'I *was* the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob'? Well, clearly then, because God spoke in the present tense and not in the past tense, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are still alive! You want to misuse scripture to make a point?? I can do it, too. You're not as clever as you think you are."

It's brilliant, because Jesus both makes his point *and* seems to poke fun at how inappropriately they've used scripture all at the same time. And notice that it's the *scribes* — the experts in the scriptures — and not the Sadducees, that say, "Good answer, Jesus."

Ask stupid questions…

So, the Sadducees got very quiet. What else could they say? Luke says, "They no longer dared to ask him another question." That's because they'd been had, and they knew it. So they left the debate "sad, you see."

Now, let me ask you this: do you think that Jesus would still have responded to them like that if it hadn't been a trap, but an honest question? If it hadn't been a stupid question, but an earnest one?

Do you think Jesus would respond to your questions about eternity like that?

Years ago, shortly before Stan Bauguess died, his wife, Norma called me. She said that Stan wondered if I might come by for a visit, that he had some questions to ask me about life and death. I had no idea how to even prepare for such a conversation, let alone what to expect, but I said, "Yes, of course. You name the time, and I'll be there."

When I got there, Norma walked me into the living room. Stan was in his recliner. Cancer had eaten him up and he was near the end, so he spent most of his time in that spot, his beloved little lap dog curled up on his lap. He asked Norma to leave us, so that he could to speak to me in private. She looked at me, worried. I mouthed, "It'll be ok," and she quietly left the room.

I sat down across from Stan, and readied myself. I thought he might ask how to die or what would dying be like? Would it be painful? Peaceful? Would there be a long light at the end of the tunnel? Or maybe that he wanted to do was to confess some long ago sin and unburden himself before he died. Maybe he wanted assurance. Something like that — that's what I thought he'd ask of me.

Instead, Stan Bauguess — one time French Legion Medal of Honor award recipient for his acts of bravery in World War II and winner of Colorado's Centennial Beard-Growing Contest — looked down at the little dog on his lap and smiled gently. Then he looked up at me and said, "Pastor, I'll be dying soon. I'm not afraid of death. I'm ready for it, and I trust God's promises. But there's one thing that's been bothering me — one thing I want to ask you."

"Yes, Stan. What is it?"

"Do you think our dogs will be in heaven?"

Well, I hadn't anticipated that one! But it was as earnest a question as anyone has ever asked me. That little dog in his lap had been his constant comfort, and what he was asking was: "In the age to come, will I be reunited with my friend?"

How do you think Jesus would have answered Stan Bauguess? I think every word would have been filled with love and kindness and compassion.

Mac McCord died this week. It was a slow, painful process which, by the end, made his death a blessing. When I talked to his son on that phone that afternoon, he told me that he had just discovered his mother's ashes while cleaning out Mac's house that weekend. He thought Mac had long ago buried them or spread them in one of their favorite adventuring spots.

One of the last times he spoke to Mac, Mac asked him if he was in possession of his mother's ashes. "Yes," he said. "I found them while cleaning out your house, dad."

Mac said, "Good. After I'm cremated, I want to be buried with her."

Do you think Jesus would say to Mac, on his deathbed, "In the age to come, the dead are neither married nor given in marriage"? Of course, he wouldn't.

There are people in this room right now who have lost husbands and wives that they loved, and who have remarried. And they love their new husband, their new wife, too.

Do you think Jesus would be dismissive of their questions about what happens in the next life? Of course not.

When the Sadducees tried to trap Jesus with a question about marriage and resurrection, Jesus wasn't setting out to make a universal theological claim about marriage, forever and ever, amen. He was challenging the Sadducees' attempt to apply logic from this reality onto the next — which, Jesus says, is like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. The same rules won't apply, because the same reality won't exist.

Now, you and I might like some clues as to what eternity looks like, but if Jesus has any inside information, he's not telling. And if we read this story asking if we'll know the ones we love in heaven, we don't get an answer.

And if, like Stan Bauguess, you ask *me* those questions, I will tell you what I *hope* is true… I mean, how can you call it heaven if there aren't any dogs?

But I will also tell you this: I will tell you that we won't know what it's like and we can't know until we experience it for ourselves. But we can trust God, who is our true home. And so when the time comes, God will be there to receive you with open arms.

The minister gets a visit from Martha, one of his favorite church members. She lives with the hope he describes every Sunday. But he can tell something is wrong. Her doctor has discovered a tumor. She says, "I have about six months to live."

"I-I'm so sorry, Martha."

"I've lived a long, good life. I'm ready to go. And I want to talk to you about my funeral." And they talk for a long time, discussing Martha's favorite hymns and passages of scripture. And when it seems like they've covered just about everything, Martha pauses and then, with a twinkle in her eye, says, "One more thing. When they bury me I want a fork in my hand."

"And why do you want to be buried with a fork?"

"I've been thinking about the church dinners I went to growing up, and one thing sticks in my mind. At the good ones, when the meal was almost finished, the person coming around collecting our plates would say, 'Hold onto your fork.' Now that meant that dessert was coming. And it didn't mean a cookie or ice cream — you don't need a fork for that. It meant the *good stuff*. Chocolate cake, pie — when they told me to hold on to

my fork, I knew the best was yet to come. And that is what I want people to talk about at my funeral.

They can talk about the good times we had together. That would be nice. but when they walk by my casket and look at my pretty blue dress, I want them to ask, 'Why does she have a fork?' And that's when I want you to tell them that I kept my fork, because the best is yet to come."

I don't know what's on the other side of this life any more than you. But I trust in the promise that the best is yet to come.

And until that time, our job is to practice with each other here what we hope it will be like there.

Amen.