

Luke 20:27-38

Stump the Preacher

We preachers are supposed to know the answers to some pretty hard questions. But there are some questions that stump the preacher. Pastor Charles Williamson tells the story of a hard question he was asked one Sunday after church. A young mother and her five-year-old little girl stayed around after worship wanting to talk. “Dr. Williamson,” the mother said. “My daughter has a question she wanted to ask you.” The girl looked him in the eye and said, “Is Buster in heaven?” Buster was her dog and he had been hit by a car and killed. They had a funeral in the back yard with prayers and a song and a little farewell message. But she wanted to know if Buster was in heaven. The mother said she had tried to talk to her about it but that was the kind of thing preachers were supposed to know so they decided to ask the preacher. “Is Buster in heaven?” It was a genuine question from a pure heart because this little girl loved Buster and hoped that

Buster mattered enough to God that God would let Buster into heaven. We preachers get asked question like that sometimes. Preachers are supposed to know that kind of thing, you know.

It's not just little girls who ask hard questions like that. Grown ups ask hard questions too; most of the time with a genuine and pure heart. When we stand beside the grave of a grandparent or a parent or a spouse or even a child we ask hard questions about the afterlife. I have asked those questions myself, even though as the preacher I am supposed to know everything about that kind of thing. "What is heaven like?" "Will we know each other in heaven?" "What are we going to do in heaven?" "How is God going to raise people from the dead?" Those are the kinds of questions we preachers are supposed to know. To be honest, those are "stump the preacher" questions. Oh, I know what the Bible says, but even the Bible has a hard time putting words to something that cannot be described in human language. So, when those questions are

asked I hem-haw around and eventually have to admit that even though I believe in resurrection I am somewhat ignorant of the details.

The Sadducees didn't believe in resurrection of the dead. They didn't believe in heaven or hell or any of those kinds of things. They only believed in the first five books of the Bible and there is no mention of resurrection there. So when they came to Jesus and asked him a hard question about the resurrection it was somewhat disingenuous of them; they were not coming with a genuine question from a pure heart. They were playing "stump the preacher" with a question that they thought would prove their point; belief in resurrection from the dead is ridiculous, they argued. So they came up with a ridiculous hypothetical situation to prove belief in life after death was silly. The hypothetical situation the Sadducees make up has to do with the Law of Levirate Marriage, which said that if a woman's husband died before they had any children she had to marry her

brother-in-law so she could have children who would be credited to her first husband. It sounds like a strange and horrible law to us, but in those days it made sense. It protected the woman from being destitute and it made sure that the name of her first husband would not be forgotten in later generations. So the Sadducees made up this scenario to demonstrate how silly belief in resurrection was. There was a woman whose first husband died before they had any children so she married his brother who also died; then the third and fourth and fifth and sixth and even the seventh brother. All of them died before she had any children. I am thinking she must have been a very difficult person to be married to! Finally, she dies. The question: When they are raised from the dead, whose wife will she be in heaven? They thought they had stumped the preacher. After all, how heavenly could it be if you had one wife for seven brothers? This resurrection business is completely illogical, they were arguing. Of course, they didn't believe in the resurrection to begin with.

Their question is like a pamphlet some atheists wrote a while back. In the pamphlet a missionary meets a cannibal and it does not go well for the missionary. He is eaten. In the nature of things the missionary becomes part of the cannibal's flesh. Eventually the cannibal becomes a Christian. Then he dies. So, in the resurrection how will both of these fellows be raised from the dead? Of course atheists trying to ridicule the notion of resurrection invented this scenario. They were not really trying to find an answer. They were just trying to stump the preacher. It's the same thing with these Sadducees who were asking about this poor woman who couldn't keep her husbands breathing. They were just trying to stump the preacher.

But Jesus does not hem-haw around. He is not stumped. Jesus really does know a thing or two about resurrection life in heaven. Admittedly, he doesn't give us all the details we would like to have, but he does give us a tidbit or two. For one

thing the Sadducees start off with the wrong assumptions. They assume that resurrection life in heaven is going to be an extension of the same old thing as life in this world. They assume life in heaven is just like life on earth, just better. No, Jesus is saying. Resurrection life is going to be really different. In the culture of Jesus and the Sadducees marriage was different than in our culture. Most marriages were arranged marriages for the purpose of having children. The Sadducees believed that the only way you lived forever was in your children and grandchildren. So, the way to have eternal life for a Sadducee was to get married and have children: lots of children. But Jesus says, “Heaven is not like that. In heaven you don’t die. So there is no need to have children to replace you or remember you. Therefore, you don’t need to be married in heaven.” Now I know that for some of you that sounds really terrible. What kind of heaven is it if I can’t be married, we may ask. But Jesus is not saying we won’t have relationships in heaven. He is just saying it will be

really different there. After all since there are no material goods in heaven what good are vows that say “for richer or poorer?” Since there is no disease why would we pledge “in sickness and in health.” Since we can’t die there why take an oath that says, “as long as we both shall live,” or “’til death do we part?” It is not that we won’t have relationships in heaven; it’s just that marriage will be unnecessary. It is going to be really different. The Sadducees begin with the wrong assumptions.

Now, I know that for some of you this is no comfort at all. But this story in Luke is not really about whether we will be married in heaven. This story is about whether we can trust God to take care of us in the end. I guess the only way we can imagine heaven is to have the same assumptions the Sadducees had; that heaven is some kind of extension of all that has been important to us in this life. Our imagination is earth-bound because this life is all we know. We can only imagine what we know to imagine. But what if heaven is more than we can

imagine? A baby in her mother's womb can only imagine life in a dark, warm, compact place. She cannot imagine that on the other end of the birth canal there is a world that is so different, so bright, so big. Maybe that is why it is so hard to get babies born in this world. Maybe they just want to stay where they are in the warmth of the womb. But then they are born into a world beyond their imagination. I think that is what it is like when we are born into God's world. Here we are in a world where we are comfortable with our customs and traditions and relationships. We can't imagine anything else. We fight and struggle to stay here as long as possible, but one of these days it is inevitable that we will leave this world to be born into God's world. From our earthbound perspective we may be tempted to think we are giving up all of the things we love and we are leaving all of the things we worked for. I think that is the wrong assumption and an earthbound imagination. I think Jesus is saying that resurrection life is going to be more than we can imagine. So this story is not

really about whether we will be married in heaven. This is about trusting God to take us to a different kind of place; it is about trusting God to take care of us in the end even though we cannot imagine it now.

But Jesus doesn't stop his answer by challenging the false assumptions of the Sadducees. He goes to Scripture, the Scripture the Sadducees take seriously. He reminded them of the story of Moses at the burning bush where God said to Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Well, from our earth-bound perspective Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been dead for over 400 years. But they were not dead to God! God was still their God, even after they quit breathing! God does not quit being our God just because our heart quits beating! I am reminded of what the Apostle Paul says in the eighth chapter of Romans: "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present no the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able

to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Well, if death cannot separate us from God then God is still our God even when our heart stops and our lungs give out. Remember, death may be a big deal to us, but it is not that big a deal to God. It is God who raised Jesus from the dead! To God we are alive whether we are breathing or not! Or as Jesus tells these Sadducees, “He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.” It says so right in Scripture.

As I said at the beginning, we preachers are supposed to know the answers to some pretty hard questions. A big part of what I do is talk to people about death. Sometimes I talk to folks who are about to die; sometimes I talk to folks whose loved ones are dying. It is a conversation I have more than you would think. People have a lot of questions about resurrection life; questions that are genuine and from the heart. Well, I have to admit there are some questions about resurrection life in heaven that have me stumped. I have

questions too. But when I am at a hospital bed and the dying person says, “What is going to happen? What is heaven like?” I may not know everything about heaven but I can assure them that God is going to take care of them in the end and that they are going to be born into a place we cannot imagine. When I am standing over a grave of a spouse or a parent and the questions come I can assure all of us that God has not abandoned them just because they quit breathing. They may be dead to us but they are alive to God; more alive than ever before. Because I know that even though I don’t know the answers to every question, God is not stumped. He is the God of the living.