

Mark 12:18-31
“What It All Comes Down To”

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If ever there was a biblical metaphor for the times we are in, it very well may be this one from the gospel according to Mark, in which a group of Sadducees come to Jesus with a problem to solve. “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no child, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother.” It’s a scenario that Jesus, the Sadducees, and any Jewish listener within earshot would have been familiar with. There was a man, he married, he died, he had no children—you can see Jesus listening to the plotline intently, nodding his head in agreement, as if to say, I’ve heard this one before and I know where you’re going with it. There was a man, he married, he died, he had no children. “Now we all know what Moses said, the man’s brother ought to step in and care for the widow. It’s what families do.”

“Well, I won’t argue with that,” says Jesus to the Sadducees.

“Yes, but in this particular case, there were seven brothers, and would you believe it, that after the first and second died, the third, fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh all died as well? And none of them gave her a single child. In the end, all that is left of this poor widow woman is this poor widow woman. And now she’s dead, too.”

“Well, you know what to do,” Jesus tells them, still nodding his head with a look of understanding that assumes they do know what to do. “You care for her. You see to her affairs. Bury her like she’s one of your own. It’s what the family of God does.” Except that’s when they hit him with the punchline. “Oh, no, sorry Jesus. We just wanted to know whose wife you think she will be in the resurrection? I mean, she was married seven times in this life. Who’s going to get her in the next life?”

Now among the many things we can say about the Sadducees, Mark tells us just one thing, that they don’t even believe in the resurrection. And this is when Jesus knows their whole story about the woman with seven husbands and no children who becomes a widow with no husband or children isn’t a story at all. It’s a gimmick, a ploy intended only to make Jesus look stupid for being someone who does believe in resurrections. What is more, if ever there was a widow out there—poor, hungry, without any family—these Sadducees could care less about her. For they are not interested in the woman or her condition. To them, she is just a pawn in a made-up story that is really about them.

For what else can we say about the Sadducees? Besides them not believing in the resurrection of the dead, they represented the Jewish aristocracy of the 1st and 2nd century. They were the high-end bankers, the Wall Street executives, the senators and politicians who had both the influence and power to make the rules that governed society and determined who got what. In all fairness, they could create a world that inspires generosity and dignity and equality among all people. They themselves could be that inspiration. Or, they can create a world that plays only to their rules, a world in which a poor widow woman is only ever thought of in terms of, to which man does she belong?

It is no wonder these Sadducees do not believe in resurrection. For they hope to never have to see another world. They like this one. With all the power and privilege reserved just for them. In fact, so self-absorbed are they, that they can't conceive of a world where they don't get to call the shots. "Jesus, we don't actually believe in resurrection, but just for the sake of conversation, let's pretend there is such a thing, and this woman—this woman who's become a widow 7 times and has no kids of her own—let's just say she shows up there, on the side of resurrection, well, whose wife will she be?" Even in their make-believe world, the poor widow woman is nothing but a cheap trinket to them, someone to be traded about.

And Jesus, who has no time for their antics, lays into them. "You just don't get it. The woman was married and widowed 7 times and you want to talk about whose wife she'll be? Let's talk about how much she loved! Let's talk about how much she lost! Let's talk about how much she endured in love and loss! Let's talk about the ways you are objectifying her, using her to create a world that suits your pleasures and purposes! And how God wants to tear that world down by staging a resurrection today! Not tomorrow, not when we die, but here and now, and starting with you, God wants to raise up a new world. Let's talk about that. But if all you want to do is raise up a world that protects the powerful and serves the privileged, then get out of my way! I have a cross to carry."

If ever there was a metaphor for the times we are in, it very well may be this one. Of a world in which our power has gone so much to our heads that we've become blind to our own arrogance, and to the damage we can do to ourselves and to one another when we say, "Because I am who I am,"—as a member of this majority party, or race, or position, or country— "and you are not who I am," therefore I will tell you how this world is going to

work. So, we speak of migrants who haven't even reached our borders yet as people we might have to shoot. And we start to think of racist language and sexual misconduct as things we'll give our leaders a pass on, because somehow we still benefit from their leadership. And shootings in our society become normal, everyday things.

What times we're living in! Of course, Bertrand Russell once said that if you want to change the world, change the metaphor. And I think that's how we need to proceed at times like this. So if you think it's guns and mass shootings, think again. Or if you think it's migrants and illegal immigrants, you're quite mistaken. It's about a world that has ceased to care, about a people who are living with a forgotten joy.

It reminds me of another story Mark tells in his gospel, this one also about a woman. In this story, a woman is bleeding in an unnatural way. She's tried every doctor and medicine to make it stop, but nothing has worked. She hasn't been able to leave her house for years because the law says no one wants to be around someone who has open wounds, and this woman has tons of open wounds—both the physical and emotional kind. She is bleeding out blood, but she is also bleeding out hope. But the law is the law, and it says that until you're presentable again; unless you can step out your front door and not offend the men (because let's face it, Mark tells us this woman is bleeding in a way that all the women would understand, if only the bleeding would stop); that basically, unless you look like the majority, we don't want to see you. So, this woman has sat inside, hidden away for years, until one day she decides, she's had enough. She gets up, walks outside into the busy streets, blood trailing behind her, and in a stroke of defiant civil disobedience, she goes to find Jesus. When she gets to him, she touches him, she finds that she is healed, that her bleeding has stopped, and she walks away.

Now we want to read this story the same way we read most stories in the Bible. As being a story about Jesus, and how he does for this needy woman what no one else is willing to do, because he is Jesus, and we should be like Jesus. Sermon over. Except that's not at all how the story goes. Mark says that when the woman gets to Jesus, he doesn't notice her at all. And that when the woman reaches out to touch Jesus, she doesn't have his permission to do so. She puts a hand upon Jesus and something like healing power goes out of Jesus and enters into the woman, and this is when Jesus takes notice. "Who touched me? Who took away a piece of my power without asking first?" The woman, Mark says, is

terrified. Probably thinks Jesus will scold her for stepping out of her place; call her a dirty name. Instead, Jesus calls her, daughter. “Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of all your disease.” I mean, wow! Talk about a resurrection here and now!

In the end, Jesus rewards the woman for her faith. Not her faith in him, but her faith in herself. Her faith in stepping out, in believing that this world still ought to hold a place in it for her. She sets out that day, a bleeding, out-casted woman. She returns home, a daughter, a member of the family.

In the end, all I want to reward us with today—all I want to send us home with—is a bit more joy in belonging. And maybe that sounds hard to come by, given the times we’re living in. But I don’t think it’s as hard as we make it to be sometimes. Author Anne Lamott writes, “Try walking around with a child who’s going, “Wow! Wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that burned-down house! Look at that red sky!” And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, “Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny tiny baby! Look at that scary dark cloud!” Lamott concludes, “I think this is how we’re supposed to be in the world—present and in awe.”

So, let’s try it together for just a moment. Let’s try to be present and in awe for a moment. I’ll start. Wow! Look at what we have here. A table that looks like it’s been set just for us. And there’s bread, and juice to drink. Let us come as daughters, brothers, friends. Let us be family together!

Amen.