

First of all, I need to make a confession: the sermon you are about to hear was preached exactly six years ago today. I keep sermons I have preached on file. When I read this one, I thought I probably couldn't write a better one, not that this one's that great. While I have rewritten old sermons before, this is the only time I've used the same sermon again in the same congregation. I've tried to improve it: it's shorter. Even if you've heard it before, like most of my sermons, it probably will not be very memorable.

When couples meet with me to plan their wedding, someone usually will ask about giving away the bride. You know the custom. Typically, it happens right after a father and/or mother escorts their daughter up an aisle where the groom awaits them. Then the pastor asks, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?"

Almost always, people are surprised when I tell them that the giving away question is not part of the marriage service. Literally, it's just not there. Would you like to see for yourself? If so, open a hymnal to page 286. Page numbers are at the bottom of the page. Page 286, where the marriage service begins, is near the front of the hymnal.

The first set of instructions (in red print) say that the service begins with the entrance of the ministers and the wedding group. After the greeting, on top of the next page, the couple declares their intention to marry. But nowhere will you find mention of anyone giving someone to be married to somebody.

You might think that this is a recent change from traditional practice; after all, our current hymnal, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, only has been around for thirteen years. But here's another surprise: nothing about giving away the bride appeared in our previous hymnal either, *Lutheran Book of Worship*, which came out in 1978. Nor was there provision for the giving away of the bride in the hymnal before that one, the *Service Book and Hymnal* from 1958. Even the great-grandparent of our current hymnal is silent on this subject. The *Common Service Book with Hymnal* was first published in 1917, three years before women gained the right to vote in this country. Yet not even that hymnal mentions the giving away of the bride. That's the oldest hymnal I have in my office. Nor do the other hymnals and service books I have, the *United Methodist Hymnal* and *The Book of Common Prayer* which the Episcopal Church uses, mention the giving away of the bride.

It's kind of startling, isn't it? Nowadays, most people probably think of the giving

of the bride as a kind of blessing that the bride's parents bestow upon the marriage and upon the groom. After all, the question is, "Who gives this woman to be married to this man?" The usual answer is "Her mother and I." It's as if the bride's parents are saying, "We're okay with this. Well, maybe we don't know if any man's good enough for our daughter: and we're not sure this guy knows what he's getting himself into with her, either. But he's the one she chose, so if she's happy with him, we are too."

But what if things were reversed? Would you be surprised if the groom's mother or father walked up the aisle escorting their son and the pastor said, "Who gives this man to be married to this woman?" So you've never seen that before? I haven't either. Why don't the groom's parents do the same thing as the bride's parents?

Historically, this little ceremonial event of the giving of the bride to the groom has nothing to do with the parents' blessing the marriage. The custom comes to us from cultures when a daughter not only could be given away: she could be traded and sold.

Do you remember the story of Jacob leaving home to work for his uncle Laban? After Jacob had worked for Laban with no pay for a month, Laban asked him what his wages should be. Jacob said, "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." (Genesis 29:18) It was a transaction, a deal struck between Rachel's father Laban and Jacob.

Who gives this woman to be married to this man? "I do," said Laban: after Jacob had worked not just seven, but fourteen years to pay for Rachel. Laban tricked Jacob, first giving his older daughter Leah as his wife. Then Laban had Jacob work another seven years to get Rachel. Laban wasn't about to give either of his girls away: he managed to collect fourteen years of work from Jacob in exchange for his daughters. A father could even sell his daughter to another man to become a slave (Exodus 21:7).

In today's Gospel, Jesus speaks of people marrying and being given in marriage. This, too, is a reference to a culture in which daughters were regarded as the property of fathers who could transfer them into the possession of another man.

Some of you who, like me, are old enough to remember the music of the 1960s probably recall Herman's Hermits' "I'm Henry the VIII, I Am." In the song, Henry is pronounced En-e-ry, the manner of pronunciation for Henry that the Cockney English dialect uses. The lyrics go like this:

I'm 'Enery the 8<sup>th</sup> I am,  
'Enery the 8<sup>th</sup> I am, I am.  
I got married to the widow next door.  
She's been married seven times before,  
and every one was an 'Enery -  
she wouldn't have a Willy or a Sam.  
I'm her eighth old man, I'm 'Enery,  
'Enery the 8<sup>th</sup> I am.

In today's Gospel, a group of Sadducees visit Jesus with a similar story: only for them, the woman was married seven times instead of eight. If people had surnames then in Israel, this woman's husbands also would have had the same name: she married seven brothers, one right after the other following each husband's death. They married this widow to fulfill the law by providing a son for her and their brother. But none of them succeeded.

The first five books of the Bible are often referred to as the Torah. The Sadducees regarded Moses as the author of the Torah. To the Sadducees, these books were Judaism's foundational documents. They did not consider the other books of the Old Testament to be authoritative. This was one reason the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead: they didn't see any evidence of this teaching in the Torah. But the Sadducees did believe it was possible for men to achieve a kind of immortality in this life by having sons, with the sons fathering more sons into perpetuity. Girls and women were not valued as highly. In this extremely patriarchal culture, families sought to produce a son to whom they could pass on the inheritance.

Of course, if a man wanted to have sons, he needed a woman. This seems to have been the practical way the Sadducees assessed the situation. Marriage in the ancient Middle East was much different from marriage today. Marrying outsiders was discouraged. More often, marriages were arranged between families within clans. The idea was to secure and enhance a family's future status and economic viability. Women were a means to that end.

To the Sadducees, a resurrection of the dead didn't make sense. What if a woman had been married to seven brothers and no heir had been produced by any of those unions? After she died, whose wife would she be in the resurrection? The Sadducees believed they had set a trap that Jesus could not wriggle out of this time.

As they speculated about a resurrection they disputed, the Sadducees assumed the same norms that applied during earthly life would apply after death. Jesus told them it doesn't work like that. Just because people marry and are given in

marriage in earthly life does not mean the same customs apply after death. When you're resurrected, death has no power over you. This makes the idea of a man getting married so he can have sons irrelevant.

The resurrection makes all worldly ambitions obsolete. Marriage is not burdened with the requirement to produce heirs. In the resurrection, everyone is equal, and we are free to enjoy our inheritance as beloved children of God.

Still, Jesus had not addressed the problem that was most crucial to the Sadducees: they saw no foundation for the idea of the resurrection anywhere in the first five books of the Bible. So Jesus offered them another perspective. He reminded them how God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. In that story, God is described and identified with these words: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." (Exodus 3:6) The past tense is not used in this description of the encounter with God. God didn't say, for example, "I am the God who was the God of your father, who was the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" as if they were dead. God said I am their God. Since the verb used is in the present tense, it implies "that these patriarchs are not dead, but living..."<sup>1</sup> To God, Jesus said, "all of them are alive."

As children of the resurrection, we are totally done with death. Death is the transition to a resurrected life that is different from this life. In the resurrection, we look forward to being freed from grief and loss and having a joyful reunion with our loved ones. The way things work in this life is not a blueprint for how things work in the life to come. Then, we will be children of the resurrection in all its fullness and joy. Jesus suggests it will be beyond our wildest dreams, and more wonderful than we can imagine.

As a stanza of one of our hymns puts it:

In heaven above, in heaven above,  
God has a joy prepared,  
which mortal ear has never heard,  
nor mortal vision shared,  
which never entered mortal thought,  
in mortal dreams was never sought,  
O God, the Lord of hosts!<sup>2</sup>

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1 Lance Pape in *New Proclamation Year C: Easter through Christ the King* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 229.

2 *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (2006), "In Heaven Above," hymn 630.