

“St. Ives” A Reflection on Luke 20:27-38 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young shared on November 9, 2025 at the First Congregational UCC of Onkama, Michigan,

*As I was going to St. Ives, I met a man with seven wives. Each wife had seven sacks, each sack had seven cats, each cat had seven kits: kits, cats, sacks, and wives. How many were going to St. Ives? (PAUSE)*

*“There were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then- the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection therefore, whose wife will the woman be?” Luke 20:29-33b*

Is it any coincidence that this traditional nursery rhyme and our scripture lesson this morning sound like twins? Is it a coincidence that the question asked at the end of each is meant to "trip someone up?" (pause)

I don't think so.

Why is this?

The reason, I think, is that they are both intended to test and confuse. The nursery rhyme, questions of sexism and polygamy aside, is intended to get us to frantically begin calculating what answer might result from multiples of seven: kits, cats, sacks, wives--it sounds so much like one of those pesky "word problems" which plagued us in our Math classes in school, doesn't it?

It is meant to confuse us--to misdirect our attention away from the fact, that there was only ONE person going to St. Ives, the author of the poem, and that the overburdened wives and their husband, were going in the opposite direction! It is a cleverly made-up riddle, and as such, entails no serious consequences for the person answering, if the wrong answer is forthcoming, save perhaps ending up being the brunt of a joke.

The question of the Sadducees is meant to do the same thing as the rhyme—

to test and confuse, to trick—but the wrong answer, far from being a frivolous matter, is a deadly serious one--one that was meant to trap Jesus. A blatantly wrong answer, an answer counter .to Deuteronomic Jewish Law would give Jesus' enemies what they wanted--a chance to arrest him and put an end to his ministry—and his life. As John J. Kilgallen states so clearly in his article “The Sadducees and Resurrection from the Dead,” in an international theological journal:

*"The Sadducees . . . thought their question would effect only confusion and embarrassment. Supposedly, he (that is Jesus) was to decide, if he were able, which of the seven men, legally and piously married, would be husband in the next age to an equally legally and piously married woman, so that a male heir might be raised up in the age to come for the benefit of the name of the woman's original husband." (p. 494)*

The question was meant to test, confuse, and embarrass Jesus. It was a test that the Sadducees intended for Jesus to fail. Indeed, the complicated way that it is worded, like the St, Ives nursery rhyme, is set-up to make for failure. It is meant to distract the hearer from the central truth, by thrusting forth irrelevant information, and thereby bringing about a false answer.

This was not to be the case, however. Jesus, far from being taken-in by this attempt, "cuts to the chase." He tells them that they have missed the point. Marriage, he says, is a human state, not something that has importance in whatever state of being is implied by the resurrection, and that, further, they are concentrating on the wrong thing. The Sadducees, priests of the temple in Jerusalem, are wrong, not because they follow the Law of Moses, but because they

have asked the wrong question. In the other versions of this same passage in Mark and Matthew which are almost identical in wording, Jesus' response to them is even more forthright on this point. In Mark and Matthew he simply says, "You are wrong--wrong because you know neither the scriptures, nor the power of God!" (MT. 22:29 and Mark 12:24). Further, the Sadducees' question cannot be taken seriously by Jesus, because it was well known that the Sadducees do not even believe in life after death, therefore, their question is not only wrong, but a mockery. They are concentrating on death--death of the human body and the death of an earthly family lineage, through the lack of a male heir--instead of on life. Life in their present everyday lives, as well as eternal life as children of God. In their clumsy attempt to trip-up Jesus, they have tipped their own hand. In their apparent concentration on avoiding death, through an inordinate emphasis on the preservation of a family name, they are simply not living. Jesus' final word on the subject is one stark statement "God is not God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive." Amen.

© 2025 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young