Sermon for the Twenty-Second Sunday After Pentecost: Luke 20:27-38
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There's a pair of ideas rattling around in my head that just won't stop hollering to be said, and I think they come from the same problem. That problem is that there's too many people using scripture to justify cruelty, or as the Bible might call it, "hardness of heart." And one of those claims getting traction lately is the idea that since the Bible doesn't explicitly condemn slavery, it's okay. This is real. It's 2025. Now, at the very least, the Bible misses the opportunity to condemn slavery outright, but that's far from an endorsement. Remember that the Bible tries to do a few things at the same time. One describes the ideal world and another presents ways to make a broken world better. Is telling a master to be kind to their slaves a picture of an ideal world? No. Is it a better world? Yes. Is telling a master to be kind to their slaves an endorsement of slavery? No, and frankly I see that as a disingenuous line of reasoning intentionally oversimplifying the Bible while ignoring the overall context. It also tries to force the 66 books of the Bible into a coherent set of rules, which it categorically is not.

The Hebrew people's escape from slavery under the Egyptians is a defining event and an ongoing theme throughout the Bible. There's a whole book about it. The journey to the Promised Land makes space for what they get to do with their new found freedom. And then they recall that story again with prophets, judges, and kings. It's one of the most important moments in their history. Moses was the human architect of that escape, and as such he was one of the defining leaders of Judaism, and all great prophets and leaders were compared to him. Even Jesus got compared to him. His life mirrored many of the high points of Moses' life, culminating with freeing all people from the slavery of sin and death, phrases the authors of scripture use. Revelation makes allusions to Exodus, and the Apostle Paul uses the story of the Exodus as a means to spread Jesus' teachings. Even the Garden of Eden hinges on the exercise of freedom. One of the primary themes of scripture, beginning to end, shows that a lack of individual and societal freedom is a major problem and prevents people from living the life God expressly wants them to have the options to live.

If you need a way to say the Bible is opposed to slavery, consider the many times slavery is mentioned as a thing to get out of. It doesn't go as far as I would like explicitly stating that slavery is wrong, but it does point us in a particular direction. The fact that this old argument has bubbled back up points back to that fundamental problem, hardness of heart. Truth be told, many who read scripture understand that, though it still inspires and guides our faith, scripture remains a product of its time. There's lots that we simply don't adhere to because we know it represents snapshots of ancient history. So, it's unfathomably strange to me how many fall to the temptation of using scripture to justify their hardness of heart when the overall arc of the entirety of scripture is one of kindness, love, and the freedom to choose the life ahead. God is love, so how can we justify so much hatred in God's name?

Another claim is that the Bible says gay marriage is wrong. There are all sorts of arguments on this one on either side, some more scriptural than others (also on either side), but something popped out to me in this passage from Luke. See, one of the arguments against gay marriage is that it goes against the "Biblical definition of marriage." Funny thing, there is no Biblical definition of marriage, at least no consistent one. There's at least eight. Hold on tight, a list's coming, and it's got some difficult things in it. The Biblical definitions of marriage are:

- One man and one woman
- One man and his many wives
- One man, his wife, and her slaves that the man's also sorta married to
- One man, his wife or wives, and his concubines

- One male soldier and a female prisoner of war
- One male rapist and his victim
- One male slave and one female slave

Picking up on a theme? Sure are a lot of ways to say marriage was one man + whatever he wanted to do with women. That's all we've got to go on. There is one more, Number Eight, and that's what we deal with in Luke, an old form of marriage deployed to try to trip up Jesus called Levirate marriage. To understand Levirate marriage, first we gotta understand that women were the property of their fathers who were either given or taken by the men whose households they would come to reside in. Sometimes that was consensual, sometimes it wasn't. But, women in a man's household were taken care of, at least their basic needs were supposed to be met by that man. In many ways, they were nothing more than useful property. And their main use was procreation.

Now, when the man of a house died, his wife, wives, slaves, and concubines faced a great deal of uncertainty. With his death came a real danger of being forgotten, abandoned, and left to suffer until their own deaths. Levirate marriage came about as a way to protect widows and their ilk from that hopeless fate. When the man died, his wife and retinue were brought into his surviving brother's household. That meant the surviving brother got more wives, but it also meant those women would be cared for, even the ones well past childbearing age. That made sense in the context and was a compassionate response to a real problem the broken system created for itself. We don't practice it today, but I figure most of us, whether we like it or not, can understand the function it served or, at the very least, can recognize it as an example of something that happened. So what does Levirate marriage have to do with gay marriage? Nothing really, which is kinda the point. I'd argue that none of the models of marriage in the Bible are one-to-one correlations to modern marriage. Even one man, one woman marriage doesn't look the same.

It's interesting that people who're opposed to gay marriage point to some Biblical passages while ignoring others (and, of course, the same can be said for those in favor of gay marriage). But in Luke, Jesus' response to the pop quiz on Levirate marriage explicitly says that those who are worthy in the coming kingdom of God "neither marry nor are given in marriage." You could take that to mean marriage isn't a thing on the other side of all this (in which case, why do we care so much if people do it right, now?), but you could just as easily take it to mean that only those who do not marry will get into heaven. Believe it or not, this was not an uncommon idea. Paul expected Jesus to return, like, Tuesday, and many of his more extreme statements make sense with that urgency in mind. One says it's better to remain celibate until Jesus comes back. The best plan is to be celibate, but if and only if you can't control yourself until Tuesday, then go on and get married. It would be better for Jesus to come back and find you celibate; marriage is second best.

I have yet to meet a single soul who talks about marriage like that now. Even the monastics I've known who take vows of celibacy talk about their vows in ways that are life-giving and spiritually helpful as a different (but not better) path. You'd think they, if anyone, would embrace that passage, but we don't hear that argument. And if that argument's out there, I gotta wonder why it isn't louder. I suspect it has less to do with what's actually spiritually efficacious and more about how people justify doing what they want while condemning people who want other things. Which brings us back to the hardness of heart.

Remember that thing about slavery? In case you didn't pick up on it, women were treated like property. Even in the 10 Commandments, they're paired with possessions not to be stolen or coveted. It's less about respecting the sanctity of the relationship and more about not taking men's stuff. Women were the possessions of their fathers until there was a transfer of ownership. Maybe not all of them were slaves by name but that was barely a distinction much of the time. When Jesus says there will be no marriage in the Kingdom of God, he's upsetting that order, effectively freeing women from the institution that enslaved them. Frees them for what? To

be in full relationship with God, the rest of humanity, and whoever they choose without limitation, without barrier, without hardness of heart, and with transcendent love.

This may not be a perfect condemnation of slavery or a perfect endorsement of gay marriage, but to me those are unreasonable things to expect from scripture. There's many reasons we rely on our three-legged stool of scripture alongside tradition and reason. Scripture's immensely useful but it doesn't always contain the answers to the specific questions we have entirely on its own. Those who would use the Bible to justify cruelty continue to insist that it's better to force these kinds of practices onto others than to view them with compassion. I fear we have an epidemic of hard hearts. Whether we're talking about marriage, slavery, starvation, imprisonment, genocide, disappearances, or murder those hard hearts are trying to warp Christian love into a means of control and a justification for causing great physical and psychological harm.

I realize I'm a preacher that relies pretty heavily on scripture to make my points, but I want to make the radical claim that there's a difference between turning to scripture to see how to exert control and turning to scripture to see who to love. You won't be surprised to hear me say we oughta be on the side of love.