

When Systems Treat People Like Fuel

Luke 20:27-38

Well, here we go again. Jesus can't get away from the haters. The religious big shots are relentless. They want so badly to trip him up.

But before we get to the riddle they throw at him, we have to remember where we are.

Jesus is in Jerusalem, teaching in the shadow of the Temple (you know, the place he was just flipping tables over?). He's surrounded by people who've spent their lives learning how to protect what they have.

The air's thick with fear and ambition. Everybody's calculating what this strange rabbi might cost them. So when the Sadducees step to Jesus, this isn't a genuine search for wisdom. It's the kind of question you ask when you're sure you already know the answer.

It's the kind of question you toss out when the goal isn't truth but control. The Sadducees aren't trying to learn. They're trying to keep things the way they are, to freeze the world in a shape that benefits **them**. So, the woman in their story never stood a chance. She was never meant to.

Some Sadducees approach Jesus with a question. It sounded theological, but it wasn't. It was a trap, dressed up in the language of Torah and concern for proper interpretation.

"Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote that if a man dies childless, his brother must marry the widow and produce an heir. Now suppose there were seven brothers, and the first married a woman, then died. The second married her, then died. Then the third, and so on, all seven of them. Finally, the woman died too. So in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?"

Whose wife will she be? That's the question they asked.

But notice what they **didn't** ask. They didn't ask her name. They didn't ask what she thought. They didn't ask what she endured, passing through the hands of seven men, one after another, like property transferred from owner to owner. They didn't ask whether anyone cared about her grief, her losses, her humanity. **She** ... was not the point.

She was a hypothetical. A prop. A game piece moved around their theological chessboard. The Sadducees weren't concerned about her. They were concerned about winning an argument with Jesus, about protecting their power, about maintaining the systems that kept them wealthy and comfortable.

But here's what we need to understand: this woman, even though she's hypothetical in their story, represents something devastatingly real. She's a stand-in for every

person who's been treated not as a human being made in the image of God, but as fuel for a system that runs on human expendability.

The levirate marriage law that the Sadducees referenced wasn't about compassion. Let's be clear about that. In an economy where women couldn't own land or inherit property, where survival depended on attachment to a male kinship network, this law offered a bare minimum of protection.

But make no mistake: This law was about property management. It ensured that land stayed in the family line and that the dead man's name continued. The woman's survival was secondary, almost accidental. She mattered only insofar as she could produce an heir and keep the machinery of patriarchal inheritance humming at full capacity.

This's what systems of commodification always do. They treat people and other things like commodities to be bought and sold in the marketplace. They take human beings and reduce them to their usefulness.

They ask not "Who **are** you?" but "What can you **do** for us?"
Not "What do you **need**?" but "How can we **use** you?"

And when you no longer serve the system's purposes, or can't produce, perform, or contribute in the ways the system demands, you become disposable.

The Sadducees knew this. They built their entire existence on it. They were the religious and Jewish political elite, the aristocracy who controlled the Temple in Jerusalem.

They collaborated with Rome, collected taxes, and ran the temple economy like it was IBM.

They got rich by turning worship into a transaction, by rejecting people's sacrifices as "unsuitable" and then selling them back at inflated prices through the **temple** marketplace. You know the Sadducees' own special gift emporium and butcher shop.

They needed people to believe that God's blessing only came through proper sacrifice, through correct ritual, through their gatekeeping.

And resurrection?

Well, resurrection was dangerous to them. Because if God raises the dead, if God vindicates those whom the system has crushed and discarded, then the whole machinery of religious transaction loses its power.

If God's justice doesn't depend on Temple sacrifice, if it reaches beyond death itself, then what do the Sadducees

have to **offer**? What use is their carefully maintained system of control?

You can see the problem.

So they come to Jesus with their question, and they use this unnamed woman as their weapon. They think they're being clever. But Jesus sees them coming a mile away.

"Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage," he says.

Notice that language: marry and are given in marriage. It's not neutral. Men **marry**. Women are **given**. The grammar itself encodes the power differential, the reality that in this system, in this world of death and scarcity and competition, people are sorted into owners and owned.

"But those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection."

Let's be clear: Jesus isn't just talking about the afterlife. He's talking about the new world God's creating—the reign of God breaking into this present reality and shattering the old arrangements.

In God's reign, the conditions that make commodification necessary simply don't exist.

There's no death to manage.

No scarcity to hoard against.

No hierarchy of human value where some people matter and others are expendable.

In **God's** reign, people aren't property. No one is a prop. Nobody exists merely to fuel somebody else's agenda.

Everybody is a child of God. Equal to angels. Beloved. Alive to God. The living, not the dead.

And this is a word we need to hear right **now**. Because we're living in a time when the machinery of commodification is running at full **throttle**, when fascism is no longer a distant historical horror but a gathering storm on our **horizon**, and when the vulnerable among us are being systematically reduced to fuel for systems that devour people without mercy.

But, I mean, let's just say what we're looking at. We're watching the intentional construction of a society that treats **certain** people as disposable.

Immigration policies that separate families and cage children, that treat human beings as **invaders** rather than **neighbors** looking to keep their families safe.

Criminal justice systems that warehouse poor people and, disproportionately, people of color. They hide them in prisons that generate profit for private corporations.

Healthcare systems that ration life-saving care based on how much money you have, that tell you don't deserve to survive if you can't afford it.

Economic arrangements that demand poverty wages, that work people to exhaustion, that throw them away the moment they can't produce enough profit.

And always, always, it's the vulnerable who get consumed first. Women, whose bodies are legislated and controlled, whose reproductive autonomy is stripped away, who're told their value lies in their capacity to bear children and submit to male authority.

Transgender people, who're demonized and excluded, whose very existence is treated as a **threat**, who're denied healthcare and dignity.

Disabled people, who're told they're burdens, whose needs are seen as too expensive, who're discarded when they can't contribute to capitalist productivity.

Immigrants and refugees, who're vilified as criminals and parasites, who're detained and deported, whose deaths at borders are treated as acceptable losses.

Impoverished people, who're blamed for their poverty, who're denied basic necessities, whose suffering is monetized, and whose labor is exploited.

That's the logic of this present age. This is the world of death that manages scarcity through sacrifice and maintains itself by declaring **some** people worthy and other people worthless.

And into this world, Jesus speaks resurrection.

God's not the God of the dead, but of the living. God calls people "the living" even when death-dealing systems have marked them for extinction.

God refuses to let empire, patriarchy, White supremacy, capitalism, or any **other** power structure have the final word over who gets to live and flourish.

The reign of God is about **dismantling** these systems. Not **reforming** them.

Not making them slightly less brutal. **Dismantling** them.

Because you can't redeem a system built on people treated like trading cards and not as children of God.

You can't baptize fascism and make it faithful.

You can't sprinkle some holy water on racism and call it good.

You can't slap a Jesus bumper sticker on exploitation and call it Christian.

The reign of God requires an entirely different foundation. It requires that we see every human being as a bearer of God's

image, as one of the living, and infinitely precious and irreducible to usefulness.

It requires that we organize our common life around flourishing rather than profit, around mutual care rather than competition, around abundance rather than artificial scarcity.

So, what does that mean for us, for people who claim to follow the one who announced resurrection in the face of empire's death machinery?

We can't stay silent.

We can't pretend that our faith is just personal, just spiritual, just about getting to heaven someday.

We can't retreat into comfortable apolitical piety while the systems all around us grind people into dust.

When we proclaim a God of the living, when we announce resurrection, we're making a **political** claim. We're saying that the powers that organize this world around death are illegitimate.

That systems that treat people as expendable are under judgment.

That God's future is breaking in right now, and it looks nothing like the fascist fantasies of those who want to build a society on purity and dominance and exclusion.

Resurrection people offer sanctuary to those targeted by the state.

We cancel medical debt. We advocate **for** peace and **against** the endless wars that demand sacrificial bodies. We

fight for living wages, universal healthcare, and housing as a human right.

Resurrection people stand with transgender youth and their families when the government tries to erase them. We march for Black lives when police and vigilantes kill with impunity. We open borders and share resources and refuse the logic of scarcity.

I mean, these aren't optional **add**-ons to faith. These are what it looks like to believe in a God who raises the **dead**, who calls people "the living" when the world calls them disposable.

And we have to examine ourselves, too. We have to ask how **we** might be complicit in the very systems we claim to oppose.

Do we use vulnerable people as sermon illustrations without listening to their actual voices?

Do we talk about "helping the poor" without knowing their names or what they actually need or including them in leadership?

Do we hoard resources while people outside our doors go hungry?

Do we prioritize institutional preservation over prophetic witness?

The Sadducees used a hypothetical woman as a prop for their argument, never considering her humanity. We do the same thing when we discuss "the houseless," "the immigrant," "the addict" without listening to their voices, without sharing power, without genuine solidarity. Jesus

refused to let the woman in their story be just a prop. We have to refuse it too.

And we have to prepare ourselves for what resistance costs. The Sadducees came after Jesus because he threatened their power. They eventually **killed** him for it.

The empire crucified him. But God raised him and vindicated him, proving that death doesn't get the last word, that the systems that crucify prophets and vulnerable people and troublemakers for justice won't stand forever.

Remember: the cross is what happens when you tell the truth about power. But resurrection is God's answer to the cross. And we live **between** the two, in this time when the old age is dying and the new age is being born, and we have to decide which age we **belong** to.

We have to decide whether we're going to use people as props for our comfort or see them as children of God.

Whether we're going to accept a world where people are fuel for machines or build communities of resurrection.

Whether we're going to stay silent while fascism rises, or speak truth, practice resistance, and embody the reign of God right here, right now.

The Sadducees asked, "Whose wife will she be?" They thought they were asking about resurrection. But they revealed their own commitment to a world of ownership and transaction. Jesus answered with a vision of something else **entirely**. A world where **no** one is owned and **everyone** is alive to God.

That world is breaking in. God's reign is here, growing like a seed, spreading like yeast, disrupting everything. And we

get to choose whether we're going to participate in its coming or cling to the dying arrangements of this present age.

The choice is ours.

But we have to know this: God is the God of the living. And God will not abandon those whom the systems mark for death.

God refuses to forsake those whom Caesar treats as expendable. God calls them the living, right here, right now.

And so must we.

—Amen.