

Love Heals
Sermon preached at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church
November 8 & 9, 2025
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In today's Gospel, Jesus has finally arrived in Jerusalem. He is teaching in the Temple and is confronted by Temple authorities. The Sadducees don't believe in any form of resurrection, and they challenge what Jesus is teaching, with this question grounded in the Torah-based idea of Levirate marriage.

Before we go any further it may help to unpack Levirate marriage. Here's how it worked. If a married man died childless, his brother would marry the widow and have children with her. Those children would carry on the dead man's name, and take care of the widow in her old age. At first glance, levirate marriage appears to protect widows, but it only did so by effectively treating women as property, a burden passed on from one brother to another.¹

In our Gospel text, the Sadducees take this example of Levirate marriage, to an extreme: "Now there were **seven** brothers....". They hope to illustrate that resurrection is absurd and unworkable. 'Having married all seven, whose wife would she be?'

But rather than be trapped by the question, Jesus turns it on its head. He explains that they're starting at the wrong end of the equation. In the resurrection people are defined first and foremost as belonging to GOD, as children of the resurrection. Which means the question is irrelevant.

The widow belongs to God; she is a beloved child of God. She is not solely defined as someone's wife. When you see the world through the lens of God's resurrection you understand that people are valuable in themselves. And not **only** in the time of resurrection, but here and now. Because God is a God of the living, of our present and our future.

Jesus affirms what we already know - people are NOT commodities, or property to be manipulated. People are not meant to be used as pawns for family legacy, or pawns of war, or need I say it - pawns of politics. People shouldn't suffer because of unjust, insufficient social systems. Whether that's 1st century levirate marriage as a form of social service for widows, or our 21st century inadequate social safety net for vulnerable populations. We are all children of the resurrection, children of the God who overcomes death. We are all beloved by the living God. God who IS, God who ACTS, God who CARES in the here and now.

Beloved Ones, if we're not careful, we can play into our culture's tendency to turn people into commodities, into seeing others as less than full human.

¹ What's Resurrection For? SALT's Commentary for Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Nov. 3, 2025, saltproject.org

Think about the way we talk about "the poor" and "the needy. Shouldn't that be, "people who are poor," "people who are in need"? They are people **first** - their current situation shouldn't define their identity.

Given our text this morning, it seems appropriate to focus on women. The retreat I attended last month was led by The Rev. Dr. Becca Stevens, founder of Thistle Farms. For the last 28 years, she has worked with women at risk, women who have survived prison and trafficking and abuse. The mission of Thistle Farms is two-fold, and illustrates precisely what Jesus is talking in our text. The program provides women survivors with free housing, healthcare, counseling, and job readiness for two years. **AND** they don't stop there. They challenge systems that commoditize, criminalize, and exploit women.

Self-described as a social enterprise, Thistle Farms provides exploited and wounded women a chance to heal and thrive by providing a safe place to live, a meaningful job, and life-long connections.²

The program has established safe and self-sustaining communities for women to succeed and grow as entrepreneurs, both here and abroad. Becca Stevens has created a national network of support for vulnerable women, advocated for systemic change, and empowered women around the world through international programs of shared trade which provide women the means of economic independence.

All the work she does is grounded in the core value - that love heals. And healing women heals entire communities. The retreat was led by Becca Stevens and two fiercely faithful, profoundly wise women who are graduates of Thistle Farms. Wherever she goes, Stevens always brings graduates with her to speak to the importance of the work, to witness to what can be. They share their stories so we can fully grasp the realities facing so many women, and understand the power of programs which provide both safety and the capacity to build an independent life. Yes, they work to heal individuals, but they also work to heal systems so that women can thrive. Heal women - heal communities.

Which brings us back to Jesus as he replies to the Sadducees. Jesus is saying don't miss the point - don't get caught in old laws (even those that look compassionate on the surface). Dig deeper, look at the systemic issues beneath - and address those.

Because everyone is a child of God. So yes, shelter, protect, and heal women; educate, and empower them to support themselves. **And** work to change the culture and systems which **still** treat women as less than fully human.

Or, if we apply that formula to the food insecurity ravaging our communities: Yes, provide food for those who are hungry, **AND** work for food justice, and economic justice. Creating the kingdom of God means we meet immediate needs **AND** we work to address systems of oppression and injustice.

² Thistle Farms website: <https://thistlefarms.org/pages/our-mission>

There's a beautiful quote, from the Pulitzer Prize winning book, “The Nickel Boys”, in which author Colson Whitehead writes:³

We must believe in our souls that we are somebody,
that we are significant, that we are worthy,
and we must walk the streets of life every day
with this sense of dignity and this sense of somebody-ness.

Friends, may we go out into the world, knowing in our souls that we are somebody, we are significant, and so is **everyone else**. May we lift up the "somebody-ness" of those around us, and work to change systems so those who are vulnerable may thrive, here and now. All of us beloved children of God, **together**. Amen.

³ Colson Whitehead, "The Nickel Boys, (2019) as shared in Verse and Voice, Sojourners, November 6, 2025