

Ex Nihilo

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Luke 20:27-38

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Most of the time, Presbyterian ordination exams are pretty tame and hospitable, but several generations ago, they could be quite intimidating, even resulting in some young ministers standing on the floor of presbytery and being grilled by the larger body until a motion was made that deemed the examination satisfactory. Especially in the days of the civil rights movement and the hard divide between the conservative and liberal wings of the church, ministerial candidates who were not careful could twist themselves into the field that the two teams were fighting their theological and political disagreements upon. In some rare cases, these examinations might last 4-6 hours. And many times, the interlocutors would be asking questions of the candidates not unlike those in our scripture lesson today. If a person marries legally seven times, who will their spouse be in heaven? Questions that might be worthy of some reflection but are hardly issues that hang in the balance of life or death. At one of those presbytery examinations long ago, a nervous candidate was being grilled on the spot for hours and a crusty old minister rose and began with one of those traditional Calvinist trick questions: 'Are you willing to be damned for the glory of God?' It is actually a good question that explains our tradition well. Being a Presbyterian and a Calvinist has always insisted that faith is about more than just our individual fate, about more than our personal eternal security. That ultimately, our lives about the glory of God, not our personal divine benefits. So, this old Calvinist minister rose to ask, if that is the case, 'are you willing to be damned for the glory of God.' In other words, if your own condemnation brought glory to God, would you be willing to accept that reality? Well, the sweaty and brow beaten candidate on the floor of that presbytery meeting thought about the question for a moment, wringing his hands after hours of being grilled in front of everyone and answered thus: 'Mr. Moderator, not only am I willing to be damned for the glory of God, but I am willing to damn this whole presbytery for the glory of God.'

I think Jesus finds himself in a similar situation...surrounded by a band of hostile and also curious interlocutors lobbing him questions to see if they can catch him in some kind of theological trap or create some kind of blasphemous scenario where he admits that someone could be married multiple times in heaven. 'Wait until you hear what the revolutionary Rabbi is teaching now' one of the Sadducees leaks to the sensational reporter covering the religious beat. But rather than admitting to being cornered in a theological bind, Jesus receives the theological gotcha question without firing back a smart-alecky retort and reminds his interlocutors that in the coming age when we will be our fully resurrected selves gathered into the presence of God as children of the resurrection, we will no longer be seen by the same categories like married or unmarried,

male or female, Jew or Gentile, high or low caste, but we will shine brightly as children of the resurrection in the presence of God. We don't need to worry about the hypothetical scenario of which spouse or where we will sit in the kingdom of heaven, for before God, all will be alive and all will be received fully into the presence of God simultaneously. Much the like presbytery meeting, Jesus' response leads to some surprised and mystified silence, not to mention anything that could be a theological gotcha, instead, they receive an insight into God, like the tax collectors, sinners, and disciples all receive at various points of the gospels, and all they can do as admit, perhaps half graciously and half begrudgingly, 'teacher, you have spoken well.'

But what has Jesus actually said or what insight has Jesus gifted us with that moves us beyond the tit-for-tat questioning or even the polarized gotcha internet trolling is the new normal world we all we care about is owning the libs or trashing the Trumper binary world that we often inhabit. Which reminds me that one would think that perhaps you could avoid the unprovoked violence and social media trolling of our times by escaping into the world of sports, but just last week, several college football players were ganged up on and assaulted by a group of their opponents after a game was over, a NBA player was suspended after endorsing a movie that is blatantly anti-Jewish and denies the holocaust, and college football coaches were trolling each other and demeaning their colleagues as way to score points and get some good shares on Twitter and TikTok. As Jesus shows us, even if the norms of the world around us everywhere we turn seem to celebrate internet trolling and demeaning our peers and humiliating people with whom we have a beef, we do not have to respond it kind, and in the case of this episode, Jesus' response transforms the conversation, offers deeper insight into God, and lifts everyone there to a higher plane. Perhaps that is the church's responsibility in the realm of politics, in the realm of social media, in the realm of public conversation, in the realm of being a sports fan, in the realm of trying to keep us all from living in a brittle civil society.

Ron Byars: In worship, I see further out than I can see anywhere else. I see a glimpse of the kingdom of heaven, to which Jesus points us. That realm where the loose ends are at last tied up; where those things that haven't come out even in scores of lifetimes finally do come out even. A place where the unfinished becomes finished. Where it no longer matters whether we lived a short time or a long time on this earth. Where that One whose presence we sense among us will meet us face to face. Jesus cures our near sightedness. He tells us that the very bottom line is that our presence does not go unnoticed in the universe. There is One who knows our names, and for whom our names matter. The arena in which God has placed us is much grander than we imagine, but also more intimate than we imagine.'