

Though I have learned in my pastorates that not all coincidences are without the active work of God, life does present fascinating little coincidences. At any rate, last week I mentioned that while I had been ordained eighteen years ago, I had already been serving as pastor of a church. The coincidence is that several years ago, a couple showed up at Florence who *had been married* in that same church, though not while I was its pastor. The couple was Pat and Ron Vucson, and the church was Lake Station Presbyterian in Lake Station, Indiana, just east of Gary.

But God does work in some interesting ways. Knowing that she was near death, I scheduled a substitute for August 8, 1999, and Carol died around 4:20 that morning. When I returned to the church and my pastorate there, I did not feel I was the same, and when a larger church happened to be looking for an interim, my presbytery exec suggested they contact me, so around February 1 of 2000, I began serving at the First Presbyterian Church in Merrillville, Indiana, just south of Gary and west of my home in Valparaiso. though I moved into Chicago a few months later. That new assignment — an interim is not a call — and having met Patricia provided an emotional lift from the grief I felt as a new widower. It is almost symbolic of what I want to say as my message today.

And one of my first Sunday's in Merrillville, two people considerably older than was I at the time, came to me and asked me to do their wedding! Between them, they had ninety-seven years of prior marriages before both had been widowed. Doing their wedding was a blast, and I used the Scripture about how the one-hundred year-old Abraham and the ninety year-old Sarah became parents, and how this couple should just be careful.

It was interesting serving at Merrillville, because some of my parishioners were people with whom I had worked in the steel mill in Gary; another was Terry, whom I had known in politics before I became a pastor. Terry was dating Fran, his "girl friend" of a number of years. Fran was not only a parishioner in Merrillville, but one with whom I did hour upon hour of hospital and home visits. The series of visits began when something, it was

never successfully analyzed but had all the ear marks of a stroke, put her into the wheel chair she never left, and in which she sat when I did *their* wedding, which because of Terry's request and that history, the pastor who succeeded me in early 2003 reluctantly said I could perform. Even after ceasing to be their official pastor when they and some others became estranged from the Merrillville church, I had continued to make pastoral visits on Terry and Fran, the actual last of which visits was two years ago when I had travelled from Tucson for one of my Illinois football games; six months later, she died.

I recently received a phone call from Terry wondering about how long I had waited after Carol's death before dating again. And other widowers — and another friend who has been a widow for a tad less than two years — have approached me and quizzed me about dating again and about re-marriage.

Well, as our Gospel lesson today shows, even though these Sadducees are insincere in their question, religious Jews not only accepted but in some cases expected widows to remarry, and while there may have been some economic concerns about inheritance of land behind that, I presume that widowers remarrying was also accepted, and nothing, nothing in the New Testament suggests that Christian thought has ever diverged from that. I am an aspiring biblical scholar, not a psychologist or sociologist, but I believe the reason men want to remarry — never having been a woman, I cannot say they do want to remarry, or, if they do, why? — I believe the reason men want to remarry is to have someone to love, hence the title of my meditation.

But, but, while our Gospel lesson is *indirectly* about remarriage, it is a passage that as a pastor — and as a romantic — has never brought me great comfort, because Jesus' words suggest a life after that is not quite what we might envision, to which I can only say, "I'll take my chances."

And "I'll take my chances," because when I look at the somewhat amplified concept of "salvation" we find when we read the Good News with the benefit of the Old Testament, we see that salvation is not just — not that this is anything insignificant — salvation is

not just “saved from our sins to ‘eternal life’ or ‘the kingdom of God’” but something very promising *here and now*, and not just for widows and widowers, but for all of us when we experience distressing events in our lives. To wit, God — Jesus — does not just *save us from*, God *delivers us to!*

God did not just deliver the people *from* Egypt, *from* Pharaoh, but though it took forty years, delivered them *to* Canaan, to the land God had promised; in the context of the conquest and exile of the people of Judah by the Babylonians, fifty years later God not merely — not that it was “merely” — delivered the people *out of* captivity, but *to something new, something good!*

In our reading from the prophet Haggai, and today we read essentially history from him, the people have been *delivered to their homeland* and are either in the process of, or have just finished, rebuilding the Temple that was destroyed. The new Temple might not be so physically imposing or grand as the original, or so we through the Bible are led to believe, but it is still good, it is still good and God promises good things about it even though different things from before! God *delivered out of captivity and into a new beginning!*

And I believe that when we are people of faith, we can be *delivered to* something very good even though at times we might feel as low as the people of Judah in exile in Babylon. “Yes,” as people of faith, we understand that God through Jesus delivers us from death to sin, that our sins are forgiven, but that is not the limit of what we find in Jesus: We are not simply freed and left standing outside the fence of whatever constrained us, we are put down someplace that offers the opportunity of newness and goodness. It might not be the same goodness we have lost, but we err if we do not recognize it as good in its own right.

There are scars that stay with us even when we are delivered from our personal exiles, in some cases actual physical scars, but I am talking spiritual and emotional scars that may stay with us the rest of our lives; the loss of a loved one is such a scar, but so may

be the loss of a friend, or a job, estrangement from children. These are human exiles into spiritual and emotional Babylon's, but God through Christ can deliver us from them . . . can deliver us from them, and deliver us to something new, even if different.

"Yes," that with which I am most familiar is widowhood, and as I pointed out, our Gospel reading today, which has a parallel version in Mark, from which it most probably originates, and in Matthew, is not reassuring to us romantics, whose first and probably continuing wish is to be reunited with our deceased loved one. It simply provides no such assurance.

Yet it is good. Sometime between when I became engaged to Patricia and when we married, she asked, "In heaven, to whom will you be married, Carol, or me?" Though I was of course familiar with today's Gospel lesson, my answer was, "God will work that out."

*God will work that out.* God will work that out because our Scripture readings today are indeed about the power of God not merely to deliver us from states such as grief, but about the power of God to deliver us *to* something, and on an earthly basis, that can mean as for Cliff Kuhns, widower of at least eighty years of age whom I just met last week and who is engaged to be married again, that he can enjoy earthly love and loving again . . . and he can trust that when earthly love ends with the end of earthly life, he will be delivered to something very good.

And so shall we all. But let us not wait until that last time, but rather trust always that God will not merely deliver us from, but always deliver us to, and let us never have concern about what that "to" might be, for it's about God, not about us.

Amen