

Remembrance C November 10 2019

Luke 20:27-38

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace, peace, love, and life are yours from Father, Jesus, and Holy Spirit. *'Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, "Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her." Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 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. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.'"* Let's pray:

One of the more sinister facets of the age we live in, is the non-stop cycle of character assassination by media. Watch the telly during an election campaign and you'll see it in overdrive. The Sadducees in today's gospel try to pull something similar. They're not asking Jesus the question about resurrection because they actually want the answer. They're trying to get Jesus to stumble, or even better, to have an answer that they can tear to pieces like a pack of wolves. The Sadducees are threatened by Jesus' popularity and they try to bring him down to boost their own egos, because they're "sad-you-see".

Corny Dad jokes aside, a little history will help set the context for this challenge.

The Sadducees haven't appeared at all in Luke's gospel until now, just after Jesus enters Jerusalem for the last time. We read a little about them in the gospel of Matthew, but they're usually paired with the Pharisees. And the only time the Sadducees would join forces with the Pharisees was when it came to Jesus. Usually, they fought like cats and dogs.

Sadducees were priests at the Temple; Pharisees taught out of their homes.

Sadducees inherited their positions; Pharisees, through hard work and study.

Sadducees only accepted the Pentateuch/Torah – the first five books of the Bible — as authoritative. The Pharisees considered all of the other books of what we call the Old Testament, which is why the Pharisees believed in the resurrection and Sadducees didn't. There's no *explicit* reference in the Pentateuch to resurrection. As an added bonus, the scenario the Sadducees concoct in an attempt to belittle Jesus, also has the effect of making the Pharisees look stupid.

The question that the Sadducees put to Jesus is about Levirate marriage. The Law said that if a man died without leaving behind an heir, his brother (if unmarried) must marry his deceased brother's wife to provide a legal heir for his dead brother. This was to ensure that the inheritance—especially the land—would remain in the tribe to which it belonged from generation to generation. This was a big deal. So big in fact, that the gospels constantly remind us that Jesus is called "the son of David", the greatest king of Israel.



In the farcical, hypothetical situation [although Elizabeth Taylor comes close to making it plausible] that the Sadducees propose, one poor woman marries seven times, and everyone dies without even one child being born. Then the Sadducees, thinking they've got Jesus cornered, move in for the kill so to speak and ask, "In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?"

The wolf pack starts salivating. Jesus starts speaking. And five verses later, the wolves retreat to lick their wounds.

First, Jesus makes a distinction between marriage in this age and post-resurrection, where, Jesus declares that there will be no marriage. In essence, Jesus is saying to the Sadducees that their assumption that everything in the resurrection will look exactly like it is now, simply isn't correct.

He then goes on to say that in the resurrection, our "success" in life won't be defined by how many children we have, but by whose children we are. The people who are "'worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead'" [Luke 20:35] are God's children, says Jesus. That's the relationship that matters.

Finally, Jesus puts an end to the Sadducees' nonsense by heading straight to their own playing field, the Pentateuch, where they were sure there was no mention of the resurrection. Jesus reminds them that when God appears to Moses in the burning bush, God says, "'I *am* the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'" [Exodus 3:6]. Not, "I was their God." "I am their God." Because to God, Jesus tells us, all of them are alive.

The Sadducees confront Jesus, fully expecting to put him in his place, but Jesus ends up redirecting them, pointing them back to the central truth that God's vision is a lot bigger, a lot more beautiful, and a lot different from ours.

And as much as I want to do a little celebrational dance and enjoy the smug satisfaction that comes with seeing a bunch of people who don't like Jesus get their comeuppance, I feel I'd be a fraud in distancing myself from the Sadducees. Why?

Because it's scary to have your understanding of the world rocked by someone else, and to be left without an answer. It hurts to hear that God's vision for the world isn't what you thought it was—especially if you work for God.

We see evidence of that pain everywhere in the division of the church. We argue vehemently with our Christian neighbours about whether baptism is a gift of God or a decision on the part of the believer, about whether the bread and wine is really Jesus' body and blood, about whether God is okay with pastors being married, or female, about who goes to heaven and who doesn't. We take comfort in the doctrines of our flavour of church, and fight with a furious self-righteousness when others try to take them away. What this means is that we aren't at all comfortable with the truth that Jesus teaches the Sadducees: God can't be confined to the boxes we try to fit God into.

That's the struggle we have. Right in the tension between who we understand God to be and the overwhelming truth of who God is, God speaks to us.

For example, when God spoke to Moses from the burning bush he said, “Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” [Exodus 3:5]. Poor Moses didn’t know where to look and he was too frightened to look at God.

And when God-made-flesh said to the Sadducees: “Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living” [Luke 20:38], they too turned away, no longer game to face Jesus.

God leapt off the page for the Sadducees that day, when Jesus invited them to discover that God was too big to be contained, even by the holy words of the scrolls of the Torah. God wasn’t just the God of dead, dry, understandable, quantifiable words anymore. God couldn’t be contained by the Torah... or by heaven... or even by God’s very divinity. That’s how God ends up sitting on the Temple steps in Jerusalem, letting anyone come to him who wants to listen. That’s how God ends up sitting in a Temple full of worshippers looking to worship the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, and all the while, they’re facing the wrong way.

Thankfully, God was so eager to be with us, to save us, to love us, that God couldn’t wait for us to understand or get things right. God was so eager that God became flesh and walked on the stony, dry earth two thousand years ago, all the way to the holy city of Jerusalem. There God wept, because the city couldn’t see the One for whom it yearned, in the body of a thirty-something, sweaty Rabbi who walked the land and ate with outcasts and sinners, and hung out with lepers and prostitutes and failures.



Encountering God doesn't start with us understanding, or even recognising God. It starts with God understanding us perfectly; understanding our faults and flaws and fears and wanting to be close to us anyway. It starts with God wanting that so badly that God just couldn't wait for us to understand, to get everything right, but just went ahead and became human so that God could walk among us, full of grace, truth, and love.

So, let the joy of this grace, truth and love fill you. Having faith isn't about knowing all the answers and always getting things right. It's about God knowing us, and loving us so deeply and passionately that God is willing to step in, and on the wood of the cross, make atonement for our sin, even murmuring as he died, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" [Luke 23:34].

We don't have all the answers. We don't have to. God loves us as we are: broken and beloved, sinners and saints. Thanks be to God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.