

Luke 20:27-38

²⁷Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him ²⁸and 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. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰then the second ³¹and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³²Finally the woman also died. ³³In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

³⁴Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵but 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. ³⁶Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷And 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. ³⁸Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Now and Then.

November 6, 2016

Last weekend I was asked to sing at a funeral for an old friend. She and her husband, who is a Methodist minister, were the most amazing people, who extended love and encouragement to everyone they ever met. They were actively involved in the lives of college students while I was at Lees-McRae, and left a legacy of love and acceptance that continues to live on in the memories of all of us who were in attendance. Her husband, Bud, will miss her deeply as will we all. She loved life and made it comforting and beautiful for all those around her.

The service was beautiful and I think there were at least 8 ministers in attendance with 5 or 6 who participated in one way or another. As you would expect the tone of the service was one of celebration and joy for her life. We heard those wonderful words of comfort from scripture that spoke of being in God's eternal presence and of life eternal. "I go and prepare a place for you." and "The Lord is my Shepherd I shall not want." We heard words from Isaiah about those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength and they shall mount up with wings like eagles. We heard from Ecclesiastes, that there is a time for all things, both living and dying. We sang, "I'll Fly Away" and other hymns of praise which reminded us that we hope in a life with God that continues after death. I sang an old song called, "I'll Walk with God" which spoke of our journey of faith and God's presence with us on this earth.

You may be wondering why I am telling you this story. Well, I guess it's because when I read the reading for today I was struck by the conflict that I felt between this service of hope and joy and the story that Jesus tells his adversaries this morning which casts a bit of doubt on what we all hope to be true when we die.

And I don't think I've ever heard this scripture used at a funeral or celebration of life, and you can see what a problem that might present if you did. No ongoing relationships in heaven? What we know now will not be how it is there? This is this, and that is that? Holy Cow, Jesus, what do you mean by that? I don't want to do anything to cause discomfort about what you believe about the resurrection or the life to come this morning but sometimes we must let Jesus surprise us with what he says, and, with what he doesn't say, and try to live faithfully into that understanding.

Last week we found Jesus calling Zacchaeus out of a tree and surprising those around him by announcing that he would stay with him and that Zacchaeus was accepted into the family. Since then Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem amid cheers and praises that "He is the One who comes in the name of the Lord." He has wept over

Jerusalem, he has cleansed the Temple of those selling sacrifices, and challenged just about everyone in authority in the temple.

In an effort to discredit Jesus the Pharisees and scribes and priests have begun trying to trap him by asking him difficult and tricky questions about the baptism of John or who should we pay taxes to. He responds by asking them difficult questions they either can't or won't answer, and then he tells them the parable of the man who owned a vineyard and leased it to tenants, which didn't go over very well with the scribes and chief priests.

Then the Sadducees decide to take a crack at him which bring us to our reading today. According to the NRSV commentary the Sadducees were an elite class of landed gentry who operated the Temple and wielded power from that religious base of operations. They gave strict adherence to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible which we refer to as the Pentateuch or the writings attributed to Moses. As such, they did not believe in the resurrection of the dead since it was not stated anywhere in the writings they held sacred. Their question to Jesus is based on an understanding of the practice of levirate marriage found in Deuteronomy 25 which in essence, speaks to the need to provide security both for the family lineage as well as protect the wives or widows in the family. Something we don't understand in our culture but was perfectly acceptable in Jesus' day.

It is a ridiculous question particularly in light of the fact that they don't believe in resurrection. I found another example by Ruth Caspar from the book *Homilies for the Christian People*, which might give you a present day take on this where she says,

“A child is born through the new reproductive technologies. Donor parent one contributes the sperm to fertilize the egg from donor parent two. The resulting embryo is implanted in parent three, the surrogate mother, who carries it to term. The child is then given to adoptive parents four and five who are committed to raising it, but they are both killed in a car crash. The child, now a toddler, is adopted by another couple, who become parents six and seven. Now at the resurrection whose child will this be?” This is where I think Jesus would be rolling his eyes and saying “Really? This is your question?”

We are so human, aren't we? I think that is what God loves about us and Jesus too for that matter. We can't help but see things through the lens of our own experience and the Sadducees are no different. They are working under the assumption that if there is a resurrection, which they don't believe, it will consist of more of the same experiences and relationships we have now. We often think that way as well.

Barbara Brown Taylor in her sermon shares this, she said, “I guess there is a little Sadducee in all of us. However much we want to believe, bodily resurrection does not square with the law of Moses or any other law we know about. If it is true, then it breaks all the rules, and it definitely leads to absurd situations. For instance, if resurrection is real, then what about cremation? I do not want to spend eternity in an urn. And what about people who have lost their limbs, their gall bladders, or their minds? Will they be raised with or without their missing parts? Will my old springer spaniel Chip be there or is resurrection for human beings only? Will any of us recognize each other or will we all be morphed into creatures of light?”

We want to make sense of this looming experience for ourselves and we do it in very human terms. We live in the hope that when we die we will be greeted by all those we loved and knew here in this world. We hear countless stories and read best sellers about those who've had near death experiences and have been met by loving relatives or friends or angels and have been sent back because it wasn't their time yet. They still had some living to do.

And of course there are those for whom life is such a struggle that looking toward heaven as a release from all the troubles of the world is all they can hope for. That this life is not worth living but the next one will be better. That is the plaintive cry of every Negro Spiritual I've ever sung. *“Oh, by and by, by and by, I'm gonna*

lay down this heavy load.” We get that don’t we? We feel that way too sometimes. And those are some of the promises that we hope in.

But this morning Jesus is telling the Sadducees and those of us who will listen that these relationships we have on earth may not be the way things will be in heaven. He tells them that in that age, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. That they will be like angels, they will never die. They are children of the resurrection. He goes on to tell them that they didn’t read the story correctly because when Moses encountered God in the burning bush it was made clear that God was the God of the Living. That Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were alive in God. God didn’t say “I was the God of Abraham, but I am the God of Abraham. “Now he is God not of the dead but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” And that puts an end to the questioning.

While challenging the Sadducees premise about their understanding of the Pentateuch and resurrection, Jesus is also suggesting that heaven or whatever comes next is not the point; not the focus of our lives. God will take care of that. But we must live. We must follow the God of the living with emphasis on the living. Living lives of hope and faithfulness and not just waiting around for the next life. God will take care of that for us. Theologian and Priest Henri Nouwen wrote, “The spiritual life is not a life before, after, or beyond our everyday existence. No, the spiritual life can only be real when it is lived in the midst of the pains and joys of the here and now. (From his book, Making All Things New.)

This week as I made my visits at the hospital I had a visit with a delightful woman. She was older than I, perhaps in her late 70’s. I can’t use her real name but let’s call her Lavinia. She, like many patients, shared her story with me, a story that was heartbreaking. Many years ago, her oldest son was killed in a car accident. He had a young daughter and that daughter came to live with her. She raised her and loved her as if she were her own daughter instead of as a granddaughter. This child grew up and was a delightful and lovely young lady. She married and had children and then a couple years ago on a Halloween night, she too, was killed in a freak car accident. Lavinia was heartbroken and was having, as she said, “a hard time getting over that.” She had stopped living it seemed. I sat there with tears running down my face as I took in her story. But then the thing every pastor dreads happened. She said, “For years I’ve asked, Why did God do this to me? Had I done something wrong? Is God punishing me? Why me? Nobody’s been able to answer that for me, but maybe you could?”

I took a deep breath and then I shared with her, that I don’t believe that God punishes us or that God makes these terrible things happen. That we live in a world that is both beautiful and sometimes terrible. That the world is fraught with things that can both give us joy and hurt us. That God, who is always loving, (and I base this on the life and words of Jesus, the one that we find our solace and hope in), that God, promises to be with us in all the circumstances of our lives be they good or tragic. That the death of your family members was not because of something you had done or not done, that God loves you still and nothing can separate you from that love. That our God is not a capricious or vengeful God who decides to hurt some people and let others have joy.

These things happen to everybody. But that in any circumstance God can turn sorrow into some good when we trust that he is with us. I reminded her that even Jesus felt abandoned by God on the cross when he cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me.” That God knows what it is to live this life and die this death. All our sorrows are God’s sorrows and all our joys are God’s joys and he is with us through them all.

As we talked you could see the weight of this burden lifted off her spirit. She was nodding and connecting the dots and smiling, as she considered all the ways that God had been with her in her life, that there was still a reason to live and even find joy and hope in that living.

We prayed together a prayer that spoke honestly and openly to God about our doubts and troubles. We prayed with affirmation that God had been with us our whole lives and would continue to walk with us to the end and into whatever life was to be for us next. That we would live in God's grace and hope, this day and in the days to come.

I left that room moved beyond words. This is the life of restoration and daily resurrection that I think Jesus was often sharing with others as he brought them messages of healing and new life. This was a, "being alive in God" moment and I won't soon forget it.

In our Book of Confessions, the first question you read in the Heidelberg Catechism is this:

Question. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

Answer. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly *willing and ready from now on to live for him*. (emphasis mine)

You see the story this morning for me, is not about what happens in the resurrection or what relationships will remain or who I will meet there. But that I belong to God. That I am, that we all are, alive in God! That it is in God that we live and move and have our being, both now and in whatever life comes next.

If we look at the very, "Alive" Jesus, we can see that he was about Life, about resurrection in daily things. Restoring people to relationship with God and to each other and that this resurrection experience is a "God Thing," something God does for us and through us, not something we do for ourselves. And while we acknowledge that this may be a future event for us, it can also happen every day of our lives. Jesus loved being alive in God and it showed in his every action and encounter with those he loved.

So I guess the question I will struggle with this week, is how am I alive in God? How are we children of the Living God and what does it ultimately mean to be alive in God and live for him? Paul reminds us in Romans 14 verses 7-9 "*We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord; then whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lords. For this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.*"

Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, who you know is one of my favorites wrote a wonderful lyric for this text and I want to close with her last verse which goes like this.

Some People Who Questioned

ASH GROVE ("Let All Things Now Living")

*O God, we're still trying to understand dying
And many still wonder if heaven is real.
Yet Christ clearly told us that death cannot hold us;
We'll know of a new life your love will reveal.
Through Jesus, remind us, by your loving kindness,
As Abraham, Isaac and Jacob still live,
When all stand before you, we'll praise and adore you;
And sing with the angels of life that you give!*

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Let us pray.

Loving God, we thank you for the mystery of eternity and the life that we have in you. We won't kid you that we long to be with you and enjoy the promise of resurrection life but we know also that you are alive in us right now, right here. And you call us to bring life to all those we encounter. To bring life to our work, our families, our community, our study and intellectual pursuits, our hobbies, our leisure, all the areas of our lives. Let us live, knowing that this is what you desire for us, to live and live abundantly. Remembering that you call us to let your kingdom reign here on earth just as it will someday in heaven, and that there is work for us to do right here at home.

We pray this day for those who struggle with living. Those running in fear and desperation for their safety and the safety of their families. We pray for those who have been caught up in tragic events of war and violence, of random shootings and vitriolic rhetoric. We pray for those who feel that you are against them and not for them. we pray for our nation and the nations of the world as we finally come to election day. Let there be peace and civility as we allow our political process unfold.

We pray for those who care for others. For those who stand against injustice and discrimination. For those who assemble in protest for the earth and all those who care about the earth. For peace makers and healers. For leaders and followers. Loving God let our peace be found in you and let that peace extend to all the earth and all your creation.

We remember this communion day those saints who have gone before us. those people who shaped our lives of faith and loved us even when we felt unlovable. We know they will be with us today as we remember you in Holy Communion. We also remember those who are dear to our hearts and who we carry daily in prayer, offering them to you and placing them in your loving care with prayers both spoken and silent.

Eternal God, you never fail to give us each day all that we ever need, and even more. Give us such joy in living and such peace in serving Christ, that we may gratefully make use of all your blessings, and joyfully seek our risen Lord in everyone we meet. In Jesus name we pray remembering the prayer he taught us saying, Our Father...