

Sermon for 11-10-19
Gospel -- Luke 20:27-38
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The exchange between Jesus and the Sadducees in today's Gospel passage reminds me of the dramatic, high-stakes gamesmanship that we see on political talk shows these days. Whether it's MSNBC or Fox News, the basic script is the same: the pundit, acting as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong, invites someone of a different position onto the show, and then proceeds to aggressively question them. The guest is immediately put on the defensive, and the best pundits (who seem like terrible people, but are great at what they do) trap the guest into making a mistake, saying something stupid or offensive, or revealing a secret and sinister purpose. It's a nasty game.

The game between Jesus and the Sadducees is similar. It's the 20th chapter of Luke; it's Holy Week; so Jesus has already entered Jerusalem and cleared out the Temple, and now he's facing a series of questions that are really challenges to his authority. The religious powers that be -- the Temple officials, the high priests, the ones who are invested in the existing hierarchy and way of doing things -- want to embarrass Jesus, and hopefully trap him into saying or doing something that will be good ammunition for their accusations against him. Jesus knows exactly what they're doing, and, unfortunately for them, he doesn't fall into their verbal traps.

This particular question -- 'She married all 7 brothers, whose wife will she be in the resurrection?' -- comes from the Sadducees. We don't hear a lot about them in the Gospels, but here they are. Two really important things to know about the Sadducees: first, they only accepted the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, as Holy Scripture (no Psalms or Proverbs, no histories like Judges or 1 & 2 Kings, and no prophets like Isaiah or Jeremiah).

Second, based on their reading of the Torah, they did not believe in any kind of resurrection -- no new life after death. So their question to Jesus here isn't

actually about marriage (although it sure sounds like it is). Their question is about resurrection; they're trying to use marriage to prove that resurrection is a stupid idea, it's completely impossible.

Levirate marriage -- it's in the Book of Deuteronomy -- was a religious practice; where, if a married man died without any surviving sons, then his brother was obligated to marry the widow and have children (hopefully sons) with her. This practice served two purposes: it ensured that the dead man's name, his lineage, would continue into the future; and it ensured that the widow would have a man to take care of her (first the new husband, and then later their sons).

This practice has nothing to do with love. We hear the word marriage, and we think about love and devotion and lifelong partnership (hopefully!). But levirate marriage is not about love at all; it's about ownership, and survival, and honor. A woman belonged to her father until marriage, then she belonged to her husband, and, if she outlived him, she belonged to her eldest son. The Sadducees are not asking, 'If she married all these brothers, which of those partnerships takes priority in Heaven?' They're saying, 'She belonged to all seven of them at one time, so whose is she in Heaven?'

These Sadducees (and not just them, but most everyone back in those days) cannot conceive of a woman not belonging to a man. And it's not because they're terrible, chauvinistic pigs -- maybe they were, maybe they weren't -- but the reality of the world in which they lived made it impossible for a woman to survive without belonging to a man. From a man came her name, her identity, her worth and status, her home... she was nothing without him. And the Sadducees' question demonstrates their crucial mistake, the one thing they cannot understand...

They think that this resurrection, this eternal life -- which they don't believe in anyway -- is just like life in the here and now. They think that the rules are the same; the powers are the same; the hierarchies and structures and practices are the same. They think resurrection means dying, and doing it all over again, just

like before. Maybe with better luck, maybe making better decisions, but within the same systems, under the same powers and principalities.

And Jesus says -- You guys just don't get it. You don't understand resurrection.

Think of Inigo Montoya in *The Princess Bride*: "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

Resurrection -- newness of life, wholeness and holiness in God's eternal realm -- is so much bigger, so much better, so much more glorious and sanctified and miraculous than anything the Sadducees can imagine. Resurrection changes everything. It's not just more of the same; it's a new and drastically different life: given by God, ruled by God, defined by God's goodness and light and love.

No more barriers, no more hierarchy, no more earthly powers, no more -isms or -phobias, no more separation or exploitation, no more pain or violence, no more death... that's the promise of resurrection. And no wonder the Sadducees can't wrap their heads around it. We can't either, right? It's so radically different from the life we know.

But if we pay attention, if we open our eyes and hearts and minds, if we listen for God's voice and seek God's presence, we can catch glimpses of resurrection in our lives, and in the sacred stories of those who've gone before. For the Sadducees, Jesus points not to his miracles, or to the words of the prophets, or to the visions of the Psalms, but to Moses.

Remember when our ancestor Moses stood barefoot on that holy ground at Mount Horeb? Remember what God said to him from that burning bush?

"I AM the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."ⁱ

I AM, not I was, not I used to be. I AM God then, and I AM God now, and I AM God always. The story is always unfolding. God is always working. The Spirit is always moving. God is eternal, and so are God's promises.

The lectionary cuts off today's Gospel reading just a bit too soon. Jesus finishes with: "[H]e is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."ⁱⁱ

"Then some of the scribes answered, 'Teacher, you have spoken well.' [And] they no longer dared to ask him another question."ⁱⁱⁱ So we don't know if all of them 'got it,' but at least some of them did. Some of them got Good News -- the Good News of resurrection.

And here's perhaps the best news of all -- for the unnamed woman in the story, and for all of us. In this broken world, she became a victim of an unjust system. She was dominated by powers and principalities beyond her control. She was stripped of her dignity and her agency. She knew grief, and fear, and insecurity. But resurrection is different. In the resurrection, she is not owned. In the resurrection, she is not an object. In the resurrection, she has nothing to fear.

In the resurrection, she who had no name, and no dignity, and no worth receives a new name, a new identity. We all do! In that age -- says Jesus -- in that age we cannot die, we are like angels. In that age, we are called Children of the Resurrection. Jesus gives us that name -- Children of the Resurrection -- and no person, or structure, or power can ever strip it away. That's who we are.

Thanks be to God! Amen.

ⁱ Exodus 3:6 NRSV

ⁱⁱ Luke 20:38

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 20:39-40