

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
11/11/07

Luke 20:27-38 (NRSV)

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

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

HOSTILE QUESTIONS

As a minister I'm asked all kinds of questions and as a rule I've found that there are two types of questioners ... those who really want an answer and those who want to best me in a verbal duel.

We often have a vested interest in believing what we have always believed, and any time an authority figure, such as a minister suggests that something else is true people can respond in a very hostile way. It's a shock to the new minister when he or she learns how people project their own views onto the Bible and defend them with a vengeance.

And so we more experienced ministers learn to think about the questions and the questioners who come our way before we open our mouth. You can get

into a heap of trouble if you think that all questions are just about giving the right, orthodox answer.

And be especially careful when someone asks you a question about eternity. There may be more to the question than meets the eye.

Such was the case when the Sadducees asked Jesus a hypothetical question long ago.

ETERNAL FAMILY

In those days hope for the future was determined by your family. It was very important to “be fruitful and multiply.” If you had lots of sons who could inherit your property and take care of the women after you died, then you were a lucky man. God was on your side.

But, what about the poor guy who died before he was able to have a family? That was a big problem. There would be no son to carry on the family name and inherit the family farm.

The law provided for a solution to this thorny problem. If you had a brother, he would marry your widowed wife, and the boy child he had by her would be yours. Your family line would continue, and in a way you would be remembered forever. It was a kind of eternal life based upon having a family line that continued. You lived on through your children.

Some people still think of eternal life in this way. They insist on trying to fulfill their dreams through the lives of their children.

All the men, both Pharisees and Sadducees alike agreed that this was a good thing to do. (I’m not so sure they asked the women, but in that day their vote didn’t count.) All the men thought it was a good idea so it became law.

RESURRECTION CONTROVERSY

But, the Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed on another important point, namely the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees believed that there would be a resurrection. They reasoned that this was the only way to right the

terrible wrongs they saw in society. There had to be a resurrection so that the good people could get rewarded and the bad people could be punished.

The Sadducees thought this was ridiculous. They couldn't imagine a life beyond this life. More than that, they couldn't really find any Scripture in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible that would justify such a doctrine.

And they had a rather clever story to prove their point. This was the story that we heard in our lesson for today, and I'm sure Jesus was not the first religious leader that they used it on.

Essentially it goes like this: a brother died without having any children. His widow, according to the law, married a brother. But, this brother also died before the woman could produce an heir. Fortunately, this was a big family with lots of brothers ... seven to be exact. And so brother number three married the widow, but he too died before a child was born.

It turns out that this family had the worst luck of any family in the whole land. Brother number four married her and died before there was a child.

I wonder if brothers five, six and seven were a bit reluctant to take their turn, but they did. And they suffered the same fate. They all died before any children were born. There wasn't one child born to carry on the family tradition.

And finally, the poor woman also died.

Now here's the trick question. "Jesus, in the resurrection, whose wife will she be? Surely we're not going to have polygamy in heaven? What about family values?"

One commentator suggested that this might be the first use of marriage as a "wedge issue" to trip up a political opponent. These religious leaders didn't really care about getting a good answer to this question. They just wanted to make Jesus look foolish. All they cared about was playing a game of theological "gotcha".

WRONG ASSUMPTIONS

The great Methodist minister, Carlisle Marney was once asked by a cocky young theology student, “Can you summarize what you believe about the resurrection in just a few words?” And the delightfully brusque Marney replied, “I won’t discuss that with people like you.”

Taken back the young student replied, “Well, why not?”

Marney said, “I don’t discuss such matters with anyone under thirty. Look at you. You’re in the prime of life. You’ve never known honest-to-God failure, heart burn, brick walls, mortality ... so what can you know of a dark world that only makes sense if Christ is raised?”

I’m not so sure Marney should have been so dismissive of the student, but I can understand his frustration. I’ve known people who act like the idea of resurrection is a philosophical challenge or an intellectual puzzle to be solved.

No matter how hard you try you can’t have an honest conversation with people like this. They think that they already have all the answers, and their only purpose in any discussion is to make you look bad. They come to the conversation with assumptions that they are unwilling to evaluate or change in any way.

That was the essence of what Jesus said to the Sadducees. He said in effect, “You’ve made a wrong assumption about the life to come. You describe the resurrection as if it’s going to be just like this life only bigger and better.

You’re wrong. The life to come will be more than you can imagine. When life is eternal, there will be no more need for marriage or any of the other human institutions.”

I love the way one preacher put it. He has Jesus say to the Sadducees,

“You know that’s the dumbest question I’ve ever heard. You know John Dowling? John is a funeral director. His father before him was a funeral director. And his father before him was a funeral director.

Now, since they have all died tell me this: in the resurrection who will be in charge of that great funeral home in the great beyond ... John or his father or his grandfather?

That, of course, is a really stupid question. No one will be in charge because there will be no funeral home. There will be no more need for funeral homes or morticians. In the resurrection there won't be any more death."

It's the same way with marriage. Marriage is a great preoccupation here. It's necessary to carry on the species. But, in the world to come, believe it or not, you won't have to worry about things like that.

For those of us who have a good marriage this is hard to understand and maybe even a bit disturbing. We can't imagine anything greater than the companionship and love we have experienced in marriage.

But, there can be something better. The one who created marriage, the one who made us male and female has something even better planned for us in the age to come.

According to the Bible, resurrection life will be eternal. And a lot of the stuff that has bedeviled us in this life will be missing in the life to come. There will be no more suffering or grief. God himself will wipe away every tear from our eye. God has a special place prepared for his little ones.

Where is that special place you ask? It's greater than our greatest dream. It is more than we can even imagine.

HONEST QUESTIONS

Jesus is dismissive of those who question the possibility of resurrection out of hostility, but what about those other folks, those folks who ask questions about the resurrection not because they want to challenge the possibility but because they need to know more. What about those folks who are facing the great tragedy of death? In their great pain these folks have questions ... honest questions about the nature of eternal life.

The questions vary. Some ask if they will recognize their loved ones in heaven. Some ask if they will see their favorite pet in heaven. I wonder, “Will I see my old dog Tramp again when I reach the pearly gates?”

What about those who are cremated?

Will we be resurrected right after we die or will we lie in wait until Jesus comes again at the resurrection?

These and many more questions are legitimate ones.

And I don't have answers to any of these questions because Jesus didn't give us any answers. You can sort of understand why the Sadducees had such a problem with the idea of resurrection. There are just too many unanswered questions.

When someone dies in this world they stay dead. And the only one who was bodily resurrected didn't tell us a whole lot about the experience.

We say each week in the Creed that we believe in the resurrection. More specifically we say that we believe in the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting”. How can we say the Creed with integrity when we have so few details about the resurrection?

Jesus told the Sadducees (and Jesus tells us) that the details would be too hard for us to understand. In the age to come, it will be a whole new world; it will be a whole new way of being that is just beyond our understanding.

I often liken our status to that of an unborn baby. Imagine that we could somehow magically communicate with a baby before it is born. Imagine that we could say to that child in her mother's womb,

“Let me tell you about mountains. You'll love mountains. They are tall and cool and full of beautiful trees. Let me tell you about love. Let me tell you about all the wonderful things you will encounter.”

But, the baby would say,

“I don’t understand what you’re saying. I don’t believe in mountains because I’ve never seen one. I don’t believe in love because I’ve never felt it. All these things you talk about don’t make sense. In fact I’ve decided to stay right where I am. It’s comfortable. It’s warm, and I have just what I want.”

Of course the baby can’t make that choice. One day the baby will be born despite her protests. And it is no wonder that she protests. She cannot conceive of a greater world because her experience is so limited and her world is so small. But, one day she will know the reality of a greater world.

We’re like that baby in the womb when it comes to the resurrection. In this present age our vision is limited by our mortality. We cannot understand the hope of resurrection because it is too much for our limited minds. We can only think about the things of this world only bigger.

But, the life to come will be more than just bigger or higher. It will be, according to Jesus, a whole new ball game. The Bible refers to that new ball game as a “new heaven and a new earth.” (cf. Isaiah 65:17, 2 Peter 3:13, and Revelation 21:1)

In the Bible we read that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him”. (I Corinthians 2:9) We can’t see it or hear it or understand it because the power of resurrection is above and beyond us.

GOD OF THE LIVING

But, Jesus does give us an inkling of what resurrection might mean in his answer to the Sadducees. Jesus pointed the Sadducees toward the story of the call of Moses at the burning bush.

In that story Moses wanted to know God’s name so that he could tell it to his people. In that way the Israelites would know that he was really the one appointed by God to lead the people to freedom.

God obliged. God told Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”

Now when Moses heard that proclamation, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had long been dead. In fact God's people carried Jacob's bones out of Egypt when they began their trek to the Promised Land.

But, Jesus said,

“Notice that God didn't say to Moses I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God said I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God is not the God of the dead but the God of the living. Apparently, even those who are dead are alive to God.”

Our perceptions of life and our world are bound by time and space. One of the most amazing sights to me was when the Hubble telescope took a picture of the universe being formed.

Can you imagine that? There is a place so far away that the light from creation itself is just now making it to a place where we can see it. When we look at the light of the stars we are literally looking into the distant past.

In the same way I think that God looks at the whole of human history like one great story being unfurled on the canvass of eternity. To us things come and go, but to God there is just one big now. All are alive to God because God is not bound by time and space.

God created time and space. God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. God is eternal, and God is with us always.

One of the reasons that we have trouble with the resurrection is that we tend to look at it from the wrong side. We're always worried about resurrection from our standpoint.

We ask things like, “Will I still be bowlegged in heaven? Will I still need to wear glasses? Will Uncle Joe still walk with a limp?” Once again, like the Sadducees our questions are too small. We show by our questions that all we're concerned about is me, me, me and us, us, us.

But, the resurrection is really not about us. It's about God. It's about a God who will not abandon the children of his creation. This God has been known

to breathe life into a valley of dry bones. This God has been known to even raise his Son from the dead as a harbinger of things to come.

The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that we put our trust not in what we can do but in the creative power of God. This is at its heart the meaning of resurrection. Resurrection is the “gift of God who calls into existence the things that do not exist.” (Romans 4:17) Resurrection is the re-creation of a world that has fallen from grace.

This God is a God of the living and not a God of the dead. And this God has promised to be with us “always” even until the end of the world. (cf. Matthew 28:20)

That’s all we know, and that’s all we need to know.

A FUNERAL MESSAGE

Last week I was sitting where you sit. It was a funeral service for my young nephew, and the Methodist minister was about to speak on the resurrection.

We did not slump in our seats with a bored expression on our face. We sat on the edge of our seats and listened carefully.

In our situation the question about the resurrection was not an academic one. It was the only question in the whole world worth asking. I liked the answer he gave. He said in so many words that though there is much we do not know, this we know for sure, “in life and in death we belong to God.”

To close the service we sang a famous old song, “It Is Well with My Soul.” I’m not sure, but I think this is one of the songs we used at my father’s funeral. The pastor chose to tell the famous story behind that song at the funeral.

Horatio Spafford, a forty three year old Chicago businessman, suffered financial disaster in the great Chicago fire of 1871. He and his wife were grieving the death of their son shortly before the fire, and he realized their need to get away for a vacation.

Knowing their friend, Dwight Moody was going to be preaching evangelistic campaigns in England that fall, Spafford decided to take the entire family to England. His wife and four daughters went ahead on another ship, and he planned to follow in a few days.

But, on the Atlantic Ocean the ship was struck by an iron sailing vessel and sank within twelve minutes. Two hundred and twenty six lives were lost ... including the Spafford's four daughters. When the survivors were brought to shore at Cardiff, Wales, Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband, "Saved alone."

Spafford booked passage on the next ship. As they were crossing the Atlantic, the captain pointed out the place where he thought the ship had gone down. That night, Spafford penned the words, "When sorrows like sea billows roll ... it is well, it is well with my soul."

After the sermon we too we began to sing the words to that song. The final verse went,

"And, Lord haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend,
Even so ... it is well with my soul."

And I thought to myself, "Who is that woman singing so clearly above all the rest?" And then I knew. My sister could barely speak through this terrible ordeal.

But, now she was standing straight. Her brown eyes were glistening with tears as she sang in perfect pitch with all her might, "It is well, it is well with my soul."

Resurrection ... who can explain such a thing? It is indeed above and beyond us. But, it is the one thing that allows us sing even in our darkest hour.

As one preacher put it, "We can't explain the resurrection. The resurrection explains us. The resurrection explains how, in the middle of all the suffering and pain and evil in this world, we Christians can still have hope."

Friends, hear the good news. In life and in death we belong to God. And God is with us ... always.

Amen.