

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 6, 2016
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Job 19:13-27
Psalm 17:1-8
2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5
Luke 20:27-38

In today's Gospel lesson, Luke tells us that Jesus is confronted by the Sadducees, a group of wealthy, aristocratic priests who regard only the first five books of Moses as authoritative for faith and practice. Luke tells us parenthetically (but very importantly) that the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection.

The Sadducees often "baited" their opponents with impossible "what if" questions, and that's what happens here. They ask Jesus a question based on an elaborate story about a widow woman, and which of a series of brothers would fulfill the role of caring for her in the resurrection. (Interestingly, the one who fulfilled such a role was often referred to as the "redeemer kinsman.")

The Sadducees have no interest in the answer to the question, because they do not believe in the resurrection.

Now in Matthew and Mark's version of this story, Jesus answers the Sadducees by telling them that they do not know their own Scriptures, and they do not understand the power of God.

The Sadducees make a key mistake in their thinking, and it is a mistake common to many Christians today. Their mistake is this: They view life in the hereafter as essentially a *continuation* of life here on earth.

For the Sadducees, relationships that people enjoyed on earth would continue in heaven. That meant that marriage would continue in heaven. And given that folks here on earth often have multiple marriage partners during their lives, it makes the notion of bodily resurrection a ludicrous notion – at least to the Sadducees.

Christians today are often infected with a similar kind of thinking when it comes to heaven and the afterlife. That is, they view heaven as merely the *continuation* of those good things they experience here on earth. I myself have been stricken by this kind of thinking many times in my life. Heaven, we think, will be like the best things we experience here on earth, only *better* and *fuller*.

Think about how often we do this. A loved one or a friend dies. And part of the way we grieve and process that death is to think about what that friend or loved one thoroughly enjoyed in life, and then we imagine heaven as the place where they are constantly engaging in that beloved activity in some perfect and unencumbered way.

From the time I was young, I have always loved big band music. And for a long time, my picture of heaven was one where I would have a big jazz club,

where the praise of God would be played by a big band while folks danced in a large ballroom in tuxedos and lavish gowns.

That's embarrassing, and we laugh at it. But we all do this in some way. A friend who is an avid gardener dies. And we say: "Well, Millie is growing beautiful roses in heaven now."

A friend who is an avid sportsman dies. And we find ourselves saying: "Well, old Joe is enjoying the best round of golf of his life now."

We are like the Sadducees. We assume that everything good about our life here will just automatically go on forever. In heaven, we'll continue drinking our favorite beer, we'll continue reading Shakespeare and looking at the Mona Lisa, we'll continue reading the Wall Street Journal. And, of course, we will watch ESPN. Life in heaven becomes merely an *idealized* form of life here on earth.

But Jesus says "no" to all of that. That kind of thinking, says Jesus, exhibits a severe lack of imagination. Life in heaven is not marked by essential *continuity* with life on earth, but rather by *discontinuity* with life on earth.

In the age to come, says Jesus, marriage will be a thing of the past. Further, he says, people raised up in the resurrection will be like angels.

This statement would have boggled the minds of the Sadducees, who did not believe in angels. But many of us moderns don't believe much in angels, either,

and certainly not to the extent that we think about them in our day-to-day lives. So the implications of Jesus' statement here can be enormous for us.

First, it means that we will become immortal, that we will live forever, and that marriage and having children will be a thing of the past. Angels don't marry. Angels don't have sexual relations; and angels don't have children. Marriage, says Jesus, makes sense only as part of a life and death cycle we know here today. Once that cycle is gone, we'll have a new, eternal, angelic kind of life, which implies that marriage will have outlived its usefulness. The wife of seven husbands won't have any of the seven as her husband anymore.

Marriage is part of the cycle of life and death. But the power of God is such that He can overcome the life and death cycle in which we are caught up today. The power of God can turn mortal people into immortal people. The power of God is such that when He raises people from the dead, He gives them a heavenly, angel-like dimension that is beyond anything we have ever dared to ask or imagine.

In his answer here to the Sadducees, then, Jesus seems to affirm what Job said so many years earlier. We may die, we may be buried, and we may literally rot in the grave. But our bodies will be raised up, we will stand before God, and those corruptible bodies will be transformed into bodies that do not know pain, disease, or decay. These bodies will be raised to a kind of existence *not* known to

us here on earth. And God not only has the *power* to do this; God is *faithful* to do it.

So between Job and Jesus we appear once more to be at the heart of the mystery of Christian faith. The mystery is this: When we die, we are buried, and our bodies may rot in the ground. But on the last day, we shall be raised up, bodies and all. And those bodies will be unlike anything we know and experience here on earth. And the life of heaven will be unlike anything we know and experience here on earth. For heaven is not merely an idealized continuation of our present experience. Heaven is beyond our understanding.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, the bread and wine are tangible signs to us that what Job and Jesus said is true.

So come with faith. Receive these signs of God's promise, and the grace that comes with them. And then walk out these doors and live your life in the assurance of this truth.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.