

## **Sunday after Pentecost [Proper 27C]**

November 10, 2013

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Job 19:23-27a; Psalm 17: 1-9; 2 Thessalonians 2: 1-5, 13-17; Luke 20: 27-38

### *Before reading the gospel:*

Before I read today's gospel, I would like to tell you two things. First, the Sadducees were one branch of the Jewish leadership at the time of Jesus. They "played well with the Roman" occupiers, which helped to keep the peace and kept them in a good position to maintain their wealth and power. The Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Hebrew Bible as authoritative. They did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Though usually at odds with the Pharisees, the Sadducees fully agreed with them about the need to stop Jesus — Jesus who had entered Jerusalem to shouts of "Hosanna!"

Second, from the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy came a law called levirate marriage. It required a brother to marry the childless widow of his deceased brother. Her firstborn in this new marriage would then be treated as the child of the deceased brother not the genetic father. The child would be considered the full heir and descendent of that deceased brother. Why? At that point in Hebrew history, when there was no talk of resurrection of the dead, the only way a person would live on past his death was through his descendants. Without a descendent a man's lineage came to a dead end, disappearing for all time.

Knowing this about the Sadducees and levirate marriage, listen to the Holy Gospel according to St. Luke, the twentieth chapter (**Glory to you, O Lord**)

### *After the reading of the gospel*

The late comedian, George Carlin, like to poke fun at his Catholic upbringing. He attended a parochial school and recalled that once a week, Father Russell would come to their religion class. He and his class mates would save all their weird questions for Father Russell. In fact, the class would take a whole week thinking up trick questions for Father Russell. 'Father, Father! if God is all-powerful, can he make a rock so big that he himself

can't lift it? Huh, father, huh?" Or else they'd take a sin and surround it with the most bizarre circumstances you could imagine. For some reason, the example Carlin gives reminds me of today's gospel. Carlin said:

"There was one sin which was not receiving communion during Easter time. As good Catholics we had to receive communion once between Ash Wednesday and Pentecost Sunday and if we didn't receive it, it was considered a mortal sin, provided it was a deliberate choice not to receive communion. So we would ask the priest 'Hey, Father, hey, uh, Father. Suppose that you didn't make your Easter duty...and it's Pentecost Sunday...the last day...and you're on a ship at sea...and the chaplain goes into a coma...but you wanted to receive. And then it's Monday, too late...but then you cross the International Date Line!"<sup>1</sup> and suddenly it's Sunday again. What then? Huh, Father, huh?"

I wonder if poor Father Russell found reassurance in knowing Jesus also had to deal with folks asking questions simply to cause trouble or try to make him look foolish. The Sadducees weren't seeking a thoughtful discussion or a rabbi's insight. They were out to mock Jesus and the idea of resurrection. They didn't care about levirate marriages either. It was just an example they could exaggerate to ridicule Jesus and show eternal life to be silly and unworkable. "Married to seven men – who will be her wife in heaven, huh, Jesus, huh?" The Sadducees really don't care about his answer. They think resurrection is nonsense." "There is a Jewish saying, "Rake the muck this way; rack the muck that way. It's still muck. Meanwhile we could be stringing pearls for heaven."<sup>2</sup> Or, in this case, how long can one rake the muck with word and "what if" games rather than seeing the Lord right in front of you?

Jesus sees the ruse. Instead of anger or insult, he takes the opportunity to teach. Jesus first points out that the Sadducees are incorrectly assuming that the resurrected life

will just be an extended version of this one rather than being God's new creation, where there will be no more death, separation, sorrow or fear. Further, Jesus says, one's eternal life is not dependent on marriage with offsprings to carry on one's genes. Eternal life is God's gift to us. Eternal life is God's kingdom coming from the future to us. Though Jesus doesn't tell us much more about that resurrected life, he tells us enough to know we can look forward to it as children of God, united with our Lord and one another in sweet communion.

Jesus goes on to point out to the Sadducees that if they *correctly* interpreted the Hebrew Scriptures that they **do** accept, they would see further proof of resurrection. "The fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed." Jesus reminds them of the holy name for God given by God to Moses at the burning bush. That sacred name, not spoken aloud, was Yahweh — "I am," not "I was." God IS — present tense — the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the God who *was* their God. If God IS their God than Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob must in some sense still be alive. "God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." Therefore, he concludes, there must be resurrected life. According to Luke, the Sadducees have no response to Jesus or his masterful, logical argument. They will simply continue to seek a way to permanently silence him.

All of today's readings lift up the reality and power of the resurrection. Job declares, "I know that my Redeemer lives." Paul urges, "As to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered together to him, we beg you , brothers and sisters, not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed." The Sadducees wanted to debate resurrection in the abstract. But what God was about to accomplish through the death and resurrection of Jesus was far from mere theory. "Jesus would pioneer the way through death and out of the other side. Jesus would himself go through into the new world... the newly embodied existence in which death itself is defeated and God's new creation comes to birth."<sup>3</sup> .

From the recent popularity of books like “Proof of Heaven” and “Heaven is for Real” it seems we remain curious about what lies ahead in the longer side of eternity. We may wish that Jesus would have been a bit more forthcoming on what resurrected life will be like. But Jesus showed us a great deal of what resurrected life is like in the miracles he performed and the love he extended — the blind see, the hungry are fed, the outcast finds acceptance, the lost are found, the power of sin and death are broken. His life is a peek into a glorious new world under construction. We may not know the details, but we can trust that this world will be only a dim shadow of the eternal life prepared for us by the God who created the heavens and the earth, who died and rose, who remains at work through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Father Murphy walks into a pub, and says to the first man he meets, "Do you want to go to heaven?" The man said, "I do Father."

The priest said, "Then stand over there against the wall."

Then the priest asked the second man, "Do you want to go to heaven?"

"Certainly, Father," was the man's reply. "Then stand over there against the wall," said the priest.

Then Father Murphy walked up to O'Toole and said, "Do you want to go to heaven?" O'Toole said, "No, I don't Father."

The priest said, "I don't believe this. You mean to tell me that when you die you don't want to go to heaven?"

O'Toole said, "Oh, when I die, yes. I thought you were getting a group together to go right now."

Who wouldn't want a resurrected life with God and all those we love? Jesus gave us a window into that resurrected life. Jesus enacted the Kingdom of God in his living and through his resurrection. But it's not just about individual salvation and life beyond the grave. The resurrection of Jesus means that “God's new creation has begun” and

believers are “commissioned to go off and make it happen.” Living in that assurance of Jesus victory over death and sin, we are freed and commissioned to find ways — through prayer and Bible study, love and fellowship, service and celebration — to bring the new creation into being for God’s suffering world.<sup>4</sup> Heaven awaits us but for now our families, neighbors and world need us to make God and God’s love real through our lives and churches... they need to know Jesus and we’re the ones God is sending to show them Jesus. Amen.

Linda M Alessandri 11/8/2013

#### ENDNOTES

1. George Carlin, “Heavy Mysteries” on his album, Class Clown., 1972
2. Rev. Porter Taylor, “Love the Question”, All Saints Sunday, November 7, 2004 as posted on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)
3. Adapted quote by N.T. Wright from his sermon “The Resurrection” cited in Sermon Review IV by Scott D. Deay post on [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)
4. N.T. Wright