

November 6th, 2022

Luke 20:27- 38 “But What If?”

First of all, if you came here looking for a sermon about where we end up in the afterlife or what the afterlife is going to be like, that’s not going to happen today. To be quite honest, I cringed a little when I saw that this text fell on “All Saint’s Sunday.” On the Sunday that we’re supposed to be honoring the saints who died over the last year, the last thing we want to do is have a scripture lesson that seems to put the afterlife into question. But that’s *not* what’s going on here. What we have is another case of “plurium interogatum” which in persuasive address and argumentation terms means, “loaded questions.” If you’re on a debate team and you want to fight dirty, this is the tool you use. My old boss in Virginia said it’s like someone saying, “Yes or no - are you still beating your dog?” Because no matter how you answer the question, it’s going to make you look bad.

The people who are employing this tactic in our scripture lesson today are part of a Jewish sect called the Sadducees. They’re trying to set Jesus up by forcing him to respond to a no-win situation. Who are the Sadducees? Good question. Most of the time, the gospel writers lump them in with the Scribes and Pharisees. If you remember, the Pharisees were the keepers of the Jewish Faith. They were the mainstream Jewish practitioners during that time. Many of them had issues with Jesus and his teachings. They were always trying to catch him breaking the Law, and when I say “law” I mean The Law of Moses. They’re the ones who tried to get Jesus to agree that a woman caught in adultery should be stoned to death. “Yes or no, does the Law not say that a woman caught in adultery should be stoned?” They’re the ones who tried to get Jesus to say you shouldn’t pay taxes. “Yes or no, is it right to pay tribute to Caesar?” Every time they tried to trip him up and make Jesus look foolish, he turned things around and made *them* look foolish.

That seems to be what’s going on here too, but instead of Pharisees, we have Sadducees. Remember when I said that Pharisaic Judaism is what survived the test of time? Mainstream Judaism today comes from that tradition. The Sadducees did *not* survive. They were a product of *that* time and culture and eventually faded away. Consequently, we don’t know a whole lot about them. Amy-Jill Levine is a professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt

Divinity School. She's also Jewish. And yes, you heard me right. The professor of New Testament at Vanderbilt is Jewish. And she's considered one of the best New Testament scholars in the field. And the reason she's the best at what she does is that she's always reminding people that Jesus was Jewish! "Wait ... no he wasn't, he was a Christian!" Think of it this way - The people who established the church of Christ were the Christians. Jesus was a Torah-observant Jew who many called "Rabbi!" Anyway, Amy-Jill Levine had this to say about the Sadducees: "Either they rejected the idea of physical resurrection or perhaps denied that it could be found in Torah." That's what we know about *these* Sadducees. They put all their eggs in the anti-resurrection basket. And clearly that's what they're setting Jesus up for in this passage.

Why, you may ask, would they set up such a weird case study when all they had to do was say, "Hey, Jesus, what are your beliefs concerning resurrection?" Because that would be too simple, wouldn't it? There's this guy who works for a local cemetery who is obsessed with the Book of Revelation. In the same way that the Sadducees put all their eggs in the resurrection basket, this guy's concern is *always* "how and when is Jesus going to return to take believers away from this world?" One day he asked me, "Is your church pre-tribulation, post-tribulation or mid-tribulation?" I said, "None of the above. My church tradition is more concerned about following Jesus in the here and now rather than worrying about what's going to happen in the future." Sounds like a reasonable answer, right? One that would cause a person to say, "Oh, well that's good to know pastor, thank you very much," right? But this guy said, "Yes, but what do *your* church members think about how and when Jesus will return?" I said, "I don't ask because it's really none of my business," which as you can imagine, went over like a lead balloon with this guy. He wanted answers! "What, you don't care what your people believe about Christ's return?" I looked over at the funeral director in charge of that service. She was barely keeping her laughter contained, so she smiled, waved, turned around and walked away. No help from her. So I pulled out my Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) card and said, "We have a saying in our denomination, 'In essentials, unity; in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.' When and how Jesus returns is a non-essential. People are going to have different beliefs about that topic, and that's okay." But it wasn't okay with this guy. He finally said,

“Okay, what do *you* believe?” I said, “I believe the book of Revelation is an excellent example of first century common era apocalyptic literature produced by a Christian community of the Johannine tradition in response to the Neronian persecution of the church, although some scholars believe that emperors Vespasian or Domitian may have been the persecutors. In all honesty, the only thing about the Book of Revelation that matters to me is (Gwen?) ‘In the end, God wins.’” He said, “Oh” and believe it or not left it at that.

All this is to say, sometimes the simple and direct question doesn’t always get you what you want. So the Sadducees decided to set up a really twisted version of “Seven Brides for Seven Brothers” for Jesus to ponder because the only thing they were concerned about was whether Jesus agreed with their beliefs about resurrection. And true to form, Jesus managed to see right through their trap and responded accordingly. “Why are you all so worried about this? God is the God of the living, not the dead.” In other words, “Why does this even *matter* to you all?”

Well, what *really* mattered most to the Sadducees that day was whether Jesus knew his Torah, and if so, how did he interpret it. All things considered, the Torah itself, which is the first five books of the Old Testament, doesn’t say *anything* about resurrection. But because the Jewish faith welcomes questions and because rabbis enjoy a good theological debate, the issue of resurrection was a hot topic in those days. And as we’ve seen over and over, religious leaders were very interested in what Jesus had to say about certain topics, because they wanted to know whose side he was on. Or at least what side of a particular issue he was on. Think about how often we’ve done that over the years. “Are you in favor of open communion, or do you believe communion should only be served to church members who’ve been baptized and gone through some sort of catechism?” Or, “Do you believe that the King James version is the only valid English translation of the Bible or not?” We humans are obsessed with categorizing people. We want to know whether you’re “in” or “out.” Jesus’ way of answering the question about resurrection was pretty straightforward. He said, “In the Torah it says that God *is* the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Not *was*. God is the God of the living, not of the dead.” End of argument, right? It could have been, but that’s not the

chief concern here in this passage. It's part of the concern to be sure. But the bigger issue on the table here seems to be marriage.

This odd case study that the Sadducees set up to see what Jesus believed about resurrection ended up *not* being the center of attention. The scenario that the Sadducees set up asked, "If there's a resurrection, then who's going to be this woman's owner?" Owner?! That's awful! That makes it sound like women are property! Well. Let's think about that. If we were to draw a timeline from the start of recorded history to now, there's only a *very* small percentage of time where women have *not* been considered "property." And I've got to be careful here because there are *still* plenty of cultures *today* that still believe women are "property." Consider this - During a modern-era wedding ceremony, we don't think it's at all strange when the officiant asks, "Who then gives this woman to be with this man?" These days we think, "Oh, that's just symbolic ... this is the bride's way of saying, 'the person I've chosen to give me away is more like a spiritual cheer leader.' They're saying, 'I'm right here by your side kiddo! I'm honored to give you away!'" But where do you think that tradition started? What do you think those words meant *originally*? Historically speaking, it wasn't that long ago that it *really was* about "giving one's daughter" away to be married. And again, that's still a thing today according to some cultures.

What Jesus had to say about *that* topic was the jaw-dropper. He said, "Those who belong to *this* age marry and are given in marriage; 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."

Suddenly this isn't about the afterlife anymore, this is about the here and now. This isn't about some theological thought-experiment designed to figure out what the afterlife is going to be like. This is about justice in *this* life. The message here is, "In *this* age, the age of emperors, marriage is all about property. It's all about being 'given.' But in *the age to come*, the age of God's reign, it's about belonging because no one is going to be 'given' to someone like a piece of property. In fact, the practice of 'people as property' is going to come to an end when God's reign is fully realized." Those Sadducees were probably thinking, "How is *that* going to happen? And *why*?"

To answer that, let's take a break and consider something that the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the churches in Galatia –

“Therefore, the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus *you are all children of God through faith*. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.” – Galatians 3:24-29

Jesus shut down the Sadducees' argument about resurrection and put the spotlight on the more important issue. It's like he was saying, “You may *think* this little case study you cooked up for me is about resurrection, but not really. It's about justice for *everyone*.” This was Jesus saying, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” This issue about whether there's a resurrection takes a back seat to what we really need to be concerned with, and that's “everyone matters, and all are equal in God's eyes.” That's what the reign of God will be like regardless of what you believe about resurrection.