

## Luke 20:2 7-38 “Wiping the Hard Drive”

Ever been in a situation where no matter what you say or do, you lose? Don't worry, I'm not going to be one of these whiney pastors who say, “Welcome to my world every day of the week,” because *everyone*, no matter what they do vocationally faces this. Most of the time these no-win scenarios come up when it looks like there are only two solutions to a problem. And no matter which option you choose, there's either going to be winners who are happy or losers who are unhappy. Because I am who I am, I like to try to find a compromise in the middle somewhere so that both sides feel like they've won something. Or at least they feel like they've been heard and taken seriously. In “Idealic Jesse World” both parties would walk away feeling satisfied, and maybe feeling a little in awe of my talent for finding paths of compromise. But in the real world, both parties usually end up walking away mad. Again, welcome to life in a world where the ability to reach a compromise is increasingly seen as a weakness rather than a virtue.

Most of these no win scenarios happen on their own, but on occasion, they are specifically engineered by people who know exactly how to use them to their advantage when they want to prove a point or win an argument. When I was in college taking Persuasive Address and Argumentation from Dr. LeRoy Lane, I learned about the “Complex Question,” also known as “The Loaded Question.” In legal terms, it's a question that contains a controversial or unjustified assumption of guilt. The classic example is, “Yes or no ... have you stopped kicking your dog?” Whether you answer yes or no, you will admit to A.) Having a dog and B.) Having kicked that dog at some time in the past. With loaded questions, the facts are presupposed by the question, and in this case, it's considered an entrapment. This kind of question is a fallacy because it narrows the respondent to a single answer, in which case, the “fallacy of many questions” has been committed. You can't get away with this in a court room. You're not supposed to be able to get away with it in a debate or public discourse either, but as Bob Dylan once said, “Oh the times they are a changin'.”

While Jesus was never asked, “Have you stopped kicking your dog,” he was often put into no-win situations, especially by religious leaders who wanted him to look foolish. That’s what’s going on in the scripture we have in front of us this morning. But before we get too far into this scripture, I need to address Jesus’ relationship with the Pharisees and the Sadducees. As odd as this sounds, Jesus probably had more respect for and far more in common with the Pharisees than he did with the Sadducees. We tend to beat up on the Pharisees because the gospels give us quite a few examples of Jesus butting heads with them. Honestly though, the kind of Judaism that exists today is basically Pharisaic Judaism. And we’ve got to be especially careful of always thinking of the Pharisees as “the bad guys.” They weren’t. Did Jesus have problems with some Pharisees? Absolutely. But again, Jesus was a Torah-observant Jew who just happened to have issues with Pharisees who “didn’t get it.”

In today’s reading, we come across the other most common faction of Judaism during Jesus’ day. They were called the Sadducees. What set the Sadducees apart from the Pharisees was that they didn’t believe in resurrection after death. Which is interesting because you really don’t hear much at all about an afterlife in early Judaism. The idea of a resurrection didn’t even come along until the time of the prophets. As far as our scripture for this morning goes, it just looks like another story in a series of stories about religious leaders asking Jesus questions about his interpretation of the Law. But this story about Jesus and the Sadducees is different. It *looks* like the Sadducees are setting Jesus up with this ridiculous scenario about a widow whose husbands keep dying. But there’s *way* more to it than that. What’s happening here is that the Sadducees are setting Jesus up with a “have you stopped kicking your dog” question. This isn’t the Sadducees engaging Jesus in an honest debate. This is them playing “gotcha journalism.” This is all about trying to trip Jesus up to make him look foolish. The question and, more importantly, the answer is about the reality of resurrection life. Three out of the four gospels place virtually identical versions of this story right as

Jesus is preparing for his last journey to Jerusalem where he's arrested and executed which means this is an important story in Jesus' ministry.

Here's what you need to know about the Sadducees: They were a wealthy, powerful, upper class of Jewish society who had a cozy relationship with the Romans which helped them maintain their positions of privilege in the Temple hierarchy. If the Pharisees were the religious Puritans of the day who were trying to get everyone to live by the letter of the law, the Sadducees were more like the ruling elite who were concerned with maintaining stability and a security for Israel. But in this story, they're simply introduced as "those people who don't believe in resurrection." Don't get me wrong – Sadducees weren't the kind of folks who threw scripture out the window. As I said earlier, belief in an afterlife, or future resurrection of the dead or heaven and hell was a relatively new development in Judaism. What you had was the belief in "Sheol," which was the land of shadows where dead souls hover forever in this kind of vague shadow half-life. But there was no thought that anyone would ever be raised back to life from there.

So don't think of the Sadducees as heretics for not believing in a resurrection. For most Jewish people then, and even for most Jewish people in our society today, the concept of life after death has way more to do with the legacy you left in this world when you depart. This is mostly true in the Christian faith too, especially in contemporary culture. Death is a celebration of the life where we give thanks for a person's legacy. That's how the Sadducees saw it too. And, to be honest, they could quote scripture to back this up too. So here's why this weird hypothetical question they throw at Jesus about a wife who is widowed by seven brothers in succession is such a loaded question: What these Sadducees are picking up on is a section of the Law of Moses known as the Levirate law. The Levirate law said that if a married man died childless, his brother is supposed to marry his widow and then *their* first-born child would be counted as the offspring of the *dead man*. Why? To ensure that the dead man's legacy lived on. Sounds weird to us, but it made sense to Jewish folks in Jesus' day.

So the point that the Sadducees were trying to make was that this law somehow *proved* that Moses believed that the only way a person lives on after death was through their children. And who's to argue with Moses, right? So, then according to the Sadducees, any belief in a resurrection was invalid. But here's the thing. They knew that Jesus believed in a resurrection! So they came up with this wild, hypothetical story in order to ridicule Jesus as much as possible. This scenario that they came up with would have been considered so absurd that it's funny. It's like those insurance commercials where the guy keeps coming up with weird scenarios to see if his policy will still cover him. "What if a pack of honey badgers got into my house through an attic vent, turned on my upstairs bathroom sink and it flooded my entire downstairs. Would my policy cover *that*?"

So let's just throw the whole bit about marriage out the window for now. A lot of people want to focus on this part of the story. Let's just get that off the table now. The Sadducees only used this loaded question to ridicule the idea of resurrection. They wanted Jesus to focus on the marriage part. But Jesus saw right through it. He didn't fall for the trap by giving them a quick answer. He went right to their main point and said, "Hey, listen, Moses himself showed us that resurrection is a thing. He showed us in the story about the burning bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

This is really about Jesus trying to get the Sadducees to re-think their understanding of God and the power of God. He's saying, "Listen, our God is a God of the living. God is all about life, life and more life. And God is calling us to recognize how radically this contrasts with what we *think* God is all about. Because what the Levirate law really shows is that we are way too obsessed with death and the fear of what will happen if we die before we've carved out a legacy in the world of the living." Ever get mail from banks and insurance companies trying to hook us in with fear by saying, "How will your family be provided for if

death suddenly comes your way?” It’s a powerful fear! Part of what Jesus is saying here is that, for many of us, death is this predator that’s shadowing our every move and whose victory over us is only a matter of time. But for God? Death is nothing to be feared at all. It’s just a minor annoyance in the big picture.

Here’s a sad reality though. Many Christians fall into the same trap that the Sadducees laid for Jesus. Even though we say we believe in resurrection, a lot of our understanding about life is still dominated by death. So we end up looking at salvation as sort of insurance policy against “Death the Stalking Predator.” So I imagine the message that Jesus would say to some Christians today is, “As long as you all think salvation is mostly about what happens after death, then you, like the Sadducees, don’t understand God or the power of God. God is all about life, life and more life. For us, before death and after death are like BC and AD on the calendar ... it’s this big divide that separates two fundamentally different eras. But from God’s perspective, before death and after death are no more significant than before Thursday and after Thursday. God is not God of the dead, but God of the living. Like we learned last week during All Saints Sunday, to God all of us are alive whether we’re here on this earth or not.

Just like the Sadducees, this change of mindset is not going to come easily. It’s a radical conversion. It’s a total wipe-the-hard-drive and start re-programming our thinking kind of thing. We don’t understand and we can’t fully understand. Jesus is the only one who *really* gets it and we’re only capable of catching glimpses of it as we read about him in scripture. But as we read scripture and as we gather here regularly around this table, those little glimpses will come more often and it will begin transforming us. So let all our praise and glory be to the God of life!