

Proper 27 C Sermon
Luke 20:27-28
November 6, 2022

God of the Living
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

²⁷Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus ²⁸and 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. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰then the second ³¹and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³²Finally the woman also died. ³³In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” ³⁴Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵but 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. ³⁶Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷And 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. ³⁸Now God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive.”

~o~

A very zealous soul-winning young preacher recently came upon a farmer working in his field. Being concerned about the farmer's soul the preacher asked the man, “Are you laboring in the vineyard of the Lord my good man?”

Not even looking at the preacher and continuing his work the farmer replied, “Naw, these are soybeans.”

“You don't understand,” said the preacher. “Are you a Christian?” With the same amount of interest as his previous answer the farmer said, “Nope my name is Jones. You must be lookin for Jim Christian. He lives a mile south of here.”

The young determined preacher tried again asking the farmer, “Are you lost?” “Naw! I've lived here all my life,” answered the farmer. “Are you prepared for the resurrection?” the frustrated preacher asked. This caught the farmer's attention and he asked, “When's it gonna be?”

Thinking he had accomplished something the young preacher replied, “It could be today, tomorrow, or the next day.” Taking a handkerchief from his back pocket and wiping his brow, the farmer remarked, “Well, don't mention it to my wife. She don't get out much and she'll wanna go all three days.”¹

~o~

The resurrection. For Christians, this concept both refers to the unique experience of Jesus that his followers had in the days following the crucifixion, and to the belief that, like Jesus, his followers in all times and places will one day be resurrected from the dead to be with him. The idea of resurrection, however, was not new with Jesus. The religious leaders of his day were rigidly divided over the idea with the Sadducees, religious elites who presided over the Jerusalem Temple, ardently and categorically denying the idea of resurrection, and the Pharisees, religious progressives who enjoyed the support of the common people, passionately supporting it.

In our reading from Luke's gospel, a group of Sadducees posed a very tricky question to Jesus about the resurrection, hoping to make

¹ Emmitsburg.net, http://www.emmitsburg.net/humor/archives/religious/heaven_9.htm.

the whole business seem unbelievable. Ancient law stipulated that if a man died without children, it was his brothers' responsibility to marry his wife and produce children for the deceased. The Sadducees, intending to make Jesus look foolish, asked him whose wife a woman would be at the time of the resurrection if she'd married each of seven brothers and all died childless. To us this may seem like a ridiculous question, but I have personally talked with women who, referring to this passage, have avoided remarrying after the death of a spouse, so there would be no confusion about whose wife they really are at the time of the resurrection.

As per usual, Jesus was not so easily ensnared. He makes two important points. Firstly, Jesus essentially deconstructs "the entire patriarchal structure that makes the possessing of women as property possible."² To paraphrase Jesus, "in the future, in the resurrection, women won't be the property of men to give and to take in marriage." For those of us looking for examples of biblical feminism in the face of the prevailing patriarchal biblical witness and of the church's own role in the subjugation of women through history, this is an important claim on Jesus' part. He looks forward to a time when women aren't simply the property of men to be sold and bought in marriage.

Secondly, Jesus makes a point that speaks to the very controversy between those who believe in a bodily resurrection and those who do not. I might add, this controversy is alive and well in Christianity today between those supernaturalist believers who look forward to the actual physical resurrection of the dead and those naturalist believers who do not hold a belief in bodily resurrection. To both sides, Jesus says this: "God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive."

On this All Saints Sunday as we remember those who have gone before us in life and in death, Jesus' words to his hearers, I believe,

² Richard Swanson. "Commentary on Luke 20:27-38," Workingpreacher.org., November 10, 2013, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1852.

bear two very important implications. Firstly, Jesus refers to Moses, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, people whose memory and history continued to play an important role in the lives of Jesus' hearers. In so doing, he reminds them that the definitive life-cycle of a human being does not have the final word – an individual's memory lives on in the lives of those they touched – resurrection or not.

Secondly, Jesus reminds his hearers that God's primary interest is in the living – in life – in here and now. While this does not definitively settle the question of resurrection, it does reframe it in a way that offers perspective. The great benefit of religion is not for the dead. It is for the living – for us. Religion challenges us to appreciate beauty, truth, and goodness; to recognize one another as equal heirs of the divine image; to work for social and global change for all who share life with us; and to ensure that those who come after us will inherit an earth, better than the one we did. Religion is for the living – yesterday, today, and tomorrow, for “God is a God of the living.”

I think Jesus is ultimately saying, that we shouldn't get too worked up trying to figure things out for those who've gone on before us and focus, instead, on living our lives well. Leave worrying about the dead to God, because the whole dead vs. alive dualism just isn't really a thing as far as God's concerned.

I don't know about you, but I have to admit that, especially when I was younger, I spent a lot of time worrying about death. I was deeply concerned with how and where I would spend eternity. These words of Jesus remind us to live right here right now, to love God and be grateful, to love our neighbors and make a difference, to live as well and as passionately and for as long as we can. But ultimately, to trust that the God who loves and cares for us in life, will love and care for us in death. I wish I could share this wisdom with my younger self. I would have lost a lot less sleep worrying and would've been a much happier kid!

Life is meant to be lived. God is God of the living. None of us really knows how long we've got and no one really knows what awaits on the other side. What we do know is that life is meant for living—living fully and living well. What we do know is that worrying about death doesn't make us live longer. Perhaps that's all we need to know to keep us from pointless arguments like the one detailed in this morning's text from Luke's gospel.

Today, as we remember those who lived, let us not forget those with whom we share life now and those who are yet to come. The memory of our actions will live on. Let us live in such a way as to celebrate life here and now and to make the world a better place for all those with whom we share it. Let us live in such a way as to make the world a better place for those yet to come. Amen.