

Pentecost 22C (11/10/2019)

Job 19:23-27a

Psalm 17:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

Jesus doesn't provide a great deal of clarity on the subject of life after death. But, by sidestepping the smug certainty that so often characterizes religious conviction, he's able to address our real, deep-seated concerns with wisdom and grace.

Have you ever noticed that the voices of Holy Scripture, and Jesus in particular, speak with less precision about the afterlife than we often do? Attend a funeral, and you're likely to hear a variety of reflections on the present circumstances of the person who has died. She is reunited with her beloved spouse who preceded her in death, or enjoying the heavenly version of an activity she loved in life, or watching over her family and friends with a smile. Biblical or not, musings like these are beauties in the eye of the beholder. It's a gentle antidote to grief to imagine that there is continuity between this life and the life beyond death, so we cling to the notion that a person who has died is not completely isolated from our plane of reality, that we can still somehow know her in the way we have before.

The truth is that **there is precious little in Scripture that speaks in concrete terms about life after death. It's mostly poetic approximation, stirring our hearts to hope while avoiding any kind of certainty, no matter how badly we might crave it.** Luther is reported to have put it rather bluntly at the table one evening: "It is true, souls hear, think, see after death, but how they do it we do not understand.... If we think of it in terms of this life, we are fools. Christ has nicely solved it, for no doubt his

disciples were also curious to know. [He simply said, ‘Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live.’]”¹

There’s wisdom in that. Faith ceases to be faith as soon as it insists on the details. Nevertheless, **religion so often veers into all-or-nothing territory, pronouncing the truth with a capital T as though human institutions could ever encapsulate it, as though we had full access to the great mysteries that fall under God’s purview alone. And, when we become preoccupied with possessing the truth, when we insist on having all the right answers, we don’t leave much room for entertaining new possibilities.**

This is the case, for instance, for the Sadducees, a religious sect affiliated with Israel’s elite who accepted the authority of only the written Torah, the first five books of the Bible. Because they did not find a doctrine of resurrection in those books, they rejected it altogether. This distinguished them from the Pharisees, who accepted the later additions to Torah, to include the book of Daniel, which presents the earliest biblical reference to the resurrection.² Yet, in spite of their disagreement on this matter, both the Sadducees and Pharisees, together with the chief priests, scribes, and elders, are portrayed in Luke as representatives of the religious establishment, the opponents of Jesus who repeatedly challenge his authority in the temple throughout the twentieth chapter.

For this reason, it’s safe to assume that the Sadducees’ question in today’s Gospel is not sincere. It’s meant to highlight the absurdity of resurrection in light of the Sadducees’ understanding of Torah. *If a woman is wed to seven brothers in succession,*

¹ *What Luther Says*, Vol. I, 384. John 11:25 (NRSV).

² See Vernon K. Robbins, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 285.

according to the law, and every marriage fails to advance the family line by producing offspring, whose wife will the woman be in the resurrection? Never mind the tragedy of the proposed scenario, as the woman is passed from one man to the next through a series of losses and disappointments. The Sadducees' question rests on the law of Moses, but it has no good answer. **It's a case of self-satisfied religious experts relishing the opportunity to humiliate a lowly rabbi. You can practically hear their contempt.**

You see, the Sadducees have all the right answers. And what's more, they exercise enough power to impose those answers on others. In typical fashion, however, Jesus sees through the their trap, and refuses to take the bait. Yet, **while he doesn't answer their mocking question, he does recognize the very real concern that lies beneath it. Whereas the Sadducees lean on the certainty of their theological conclusions, Jesus leans into the crisis that death presents to actual human lives, and he acknowledges the legitimate questions that people might ask about it:**

What will happen to my loved ones when they die? What will happen to me?

Referring back to the Torah, Jesus cites the story of Moses' encounter with God in the burning bush: "[Moses] speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him, all of them are alive." We could do with a few more specifics. But, **Jesus is not as interested in the details of resurrection life as he is in reassuring us that God's reach extends beyond the boundary of death. Although life as we presently know it must come to an end, and although human institutions like marriage may not apply in eternity, God nevertheless embraces the dead in mercy. They are gone from us, but they are very much alive to God.**

In this way, Jesus speaks both honestly and expectantly to one of the fundamental questions of our existence. And in the end, to borrow the words of one interpreter, “it is much, much more important to be present and engaged with the deeply felt questions of faith and the human beings who bring them than it is to have the right answers.”³

Dear church, **Jesus doesn’t provide a great deal of clarity on the subject of life after death. But, by sidestepping the smug certainty that so often characterizes religious conviction, he’s able to address our real, deep-seated concerns with wisdom and grace. And thus, he models earnest faith, honoring both “the mystery of the unknown”⁴ and the God of all the beloved who’ve gone before, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, yes, and the God of our saints, the God of Alvin, Eugene, Ron, Marge, Carol, Carol, Dennis, Ruth, Carolyn, Eleanor, Eddie, Joe, Jean, Sandy, Betty, Liz, Henry, Rodney, Joy, Randall, Mark, Elaine, and all the rest.**

Now God is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive!

³ Cameron B.R. Howard, “Be Present and Engaged,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=5391>.

⁴ R. Alan Culpepper, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX, 390.