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“God of the Living”

A sermon by Mark E. Diehl

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year C)

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Romans 6:1-11, Luke 20: 27-40

The ministry of Jesus is drawing to a close in the Gospel of Luke. The circle of enemies around him is tightening. Religious leaders who don't typically get along are finding unity in their opposition to him. Jesus enters Jerusalem to the acclaim of the populace. At the Temple, Jesus runs out the sellers of merchandise. He teaches and the people are spellbound.

The religious leaders find all of this too threatening, and Luke records that they kept looking for a way to kill Jesus.

Chapter 20 of the Gospel of Luke describes three attempts by the religious leaders to discredit Jesus, to trap him in a political or religious controversy, to trip him up in his words. The last of these efforts is the passage we read.

The religious leaders behind this final effort are the Sadducees. The Sadducees were members of the priesthood that ran the politics and the practices of what went on at the Temple. One theological characteristic of the Sadducees was their rejection of any notion of an afterlife. Persons live in this life, and then at death they are gone. Forever. That was it.

The Sadducees based this understanding on their interpretation of scripture. For this priestly group, what was authoritative and constituted their scripture was the Torah, the first five books of Moses. The writings of history and the prophets and the wisdom literature, which comprise the remainder of Jewish scripture, were considered to be liberal additions to the canon and untrustworthy. If Moses said it and wrote it, they believed it. If it could be found in Genesis through

Deuteronomy, they could trust it. In some ways, the Sadducees were very much like our present day fundamentalists.

In contrast to the Sadducees, most other religious Jews believed in resurrection. They believed in a judgment day, a time when God would resurrect the righteous from death back into life and reward them with eternal bliss. The understanding of a resurrection was not only popular, it was supported by most of the remaining Jewish religious authorities. Echoes and allusions to resurrection could be found in the prophetic literature as well as the Psalms.

The Sadducees pose a technical question on the resurrection in an attempt to trip up Jesus. This was the technical set up: Moses in the Torah required that a married man who dies before producing an heir should have his next of kin marry the widow in order to produce an offspring in the name of his deceased brother. In this manner, family lines might be saved from extinction. The perpetuation of the family was of great importance to the Jews at that time as it certainly continues to be in our own day.

The scenario they propose is one where a series of brothers marry a woman and none of them have children to continue the family. And they ask Jesus, “In the resurrection, if there is a resurrection, whose wife will this woman be?” It can’t be all of the brothers because the Torah prohibits a woman from having more than one husband (but somehow for men, at that point in time, it wasn’t a problem having more than one wife – one of those troublesome double standards).

The implicit attempt of the Sadducees is to ridicule anyone who might express belief in the resurrection. And if Jesus rejected the notion of resurrection, he would be taking a position that would undermine his popularity.

The explicit issue is this: if God does indeed raise the dead, why would Moses be concerned with the perpetuation of the family? Resurrection means no one is lost to God, and therefore the continuation of a family line is meaningless. However, if there is no resurrection, as the Sadducees believe, then the perpetuation of family is of paramount concern, and it makes sense for Moses to make the provisions that he did in the Torah.

So Jesus can voice support for belief in the resurrection, calling into question the wisdom of Moses and looking ridiculous at the same time, or Jesus can disavow a very popular position held by the masses. The Sadducees have put him between a rock and a hard place.

Jesus steps through this religious mine field and puts the Sadducees on the defensive. First he draws a distinction between the nature of present existence and the life which God will restore in the resurrection. Only those who can die need to worry about marriage and producing heirs. But in the resurrection, death has died and relationships are based on being related to God as God's children, not on being related to others as a husband or wife or child.

And then Jesus provides the final blow. From their own scripture that holds authority for the Sadducees, from the Torah, Jesus marshals an argument in favor of the resurrection.

“Remember the story about Moses and the burning bush?” Jesus inquires. “Moses there speaks about the Lord being the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. By Moses' time, these fellows are long dead. Is our God merely the God of the dead? No, God is the God of the living, and if that is true, then those who appear dead to us must somehow be living to God. God's covenant to God's people remains so certain and true that even death cannot wrest them out of God's grasp.”

It is a victory for Jesus, but only a temporary one. In the end, the religious authorities exercise their power over Jesus, put him to death, and silence him. Yet the Christian church believes that as the sun's rays broke through darkness on Easter morning, the light revealed the hope of which Jesus had spoken to the Sadducees. God is God of the living. Death does not have the last word.

The answer Jesus provides to the technical question of the Sadducees and its reality as understood in light of the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning have remarkable significance for you and me. Some may believe such questions about resurrection are purely theological quibbling. I believe they have a profound impact on how we see life, how we respond to life, and how we exercise responsibilities in this life.

The Christian church has not always used this doctrine of the resurrection wisely or well. And among thinking people of faith and intellectuals, there has been a shelving of this doctrine. Resurrection and the afterlife are considered speculative at best and are rolled out for display at funerals and Easter. The remainder of the time, they are kept safely tucked away in the back closet to avoid embarrassment.

The abuse or misuse of this doctrine typically took the form of a singular focus on the future. This focus led to passivity and manipulation in its worst forms. The goal of reaching heaven became a way of managing people's behavior. The promise of something better to come in the future was used as a way to justify and tolerate injustice today.

Karl Marx's critique of religion in general certainly was apropos for the church of his day: "Religion is the opiate of the people." It served as a drug that reduces the pain without changing the health situation. It is addictive and leads to destruction rather than wholeness. Marx's observation was on target as it accurately portrayed the culture of the church in his day.

In shelving this doctrine, the church has lost something beyond its misunderstandings and misuses. Resurrection addresses the need and possibility for something within the human psyche beyond itself, outside of itself. Humanity needs something beyond our reach. There can be something which energizes people, a hope that does not manipulate but rather motivates; there is a realization of value and meaning beyond our own limited human perspective and personal security that plunges those with such a hope into the fray for peace and justice and righteousness. Misuse or abuse of the doctrine of the resurrection should not lead to disuse. It should lead to rehabilitation and an appropriate employment for the church's understanding and ministry.

In answering the Sadducees' questions about resurrection, Jesus placed the life to come at the very center of *this* life. God is not the God of the dead but of the living.

A couple of years ago, I had an epiphany at a Harris Teeter parking lot. Let me explain.

I had seen the older gentleman at the grocery store on many occasions. He was old enough to be retired. I assumed he had taken on the task of sacking groceries and carrying them out to the car as a way to supplement his income or to stay connected with people or to provide some structure to his day or to give him a sense of doing something valuable.

I always carry out my own groceries, so my encounters with this gentleman were brief. I was putting my grocery sacks into the car when I had this epiphany. Did you know that epiphanies can come at the grocery store? I didn't either. In scripture, epiphanies often come when people are minding their own business taking care of the sheep, or watching a potter shape the clay, or saying your daily prayers, or some other mundane task. So I shouldn't be surprised if one happens at the grocery.

It was a beautiful moment, and I don't know why I was privileged to observe it. I haven't a clue how or why I even perceived it. But this is what I saw.

A little girl and her mother were hunched down with their shoulders against the cold wind. They were skipping and giggling out to their car. It was a moment of pure joy! And behind them was the old gentleman, pushing the cart with their groceries. I watched him watching them – and his face was illuminated with the broadest smile I could imagine.

I have no idea what was going on in his mind. It could have been anything. Maybe this mother and daughter reminded him of his wife's relationship with their daughter years and years ago. Maybe he was thinking of grandchildren, now far away, and this child was bringing them close again. Maybe he was appreciating the joy of this small moment because he had experienced such joys in the past, too.

The deepest relationships we know in this life are the ones of husband and wife, of parent and child. If we are really lucky, we might have a friendship to come that close, but that is rare.

How much more does God hold precious his children? Are we held in this life merely to be discarded when life is over? The Hebrew Scriptures testify to a God of remarkable compassion and love and hope. Jesus sharpened this point even more in his life and teaching and passion and death.

I know that the old gentleman at the grocery was not perfect; I know that the mother and her daughter have had conflicts and will have conflicts that seem to betray the moment I observed, but that does not detract from the love which existed in that moment, does it?

One of the sixth century fathers of the early monastic tradition, a group of folks I always consider so austere in the practice of the faith, wrote, “Monks ought not judge each other, because God judges us much more leniently than human beings are able to do.” (Philoxenus of Mabbug as quoted in *Christian Century*, November 2, 2004).

Have we been able to imagine such a God whose kindness and love outweigh any divine interest in our inadequacies? As the hymn asserts:

“There’s a wideness in God’s mercy, Like the wideness of the sea;
There’s a kindness in God’s justice, Which is more than liberty.
There is no place where earth’s sorrows Are more felt than up in heaven;
There is no place where earth’s failings Have such kindly judgment given.”
(“There’s a Wideness in God’s Mercy,” #298, *The Presbyterian Hymnal*)

One theologian writes, “When we ‘use’ God, the church, and ministry to appease religious curiosity and demand, determine winners and losers, gain an upper hand, or prove we are better than our competitors, we become participants in death.” (Michael Pasquarello in “Blogging toward Sunday,” November 5, 2007 on *Theolog*)

What I glimpsed in the parking lot was life and its joy, something I believe Jesus intends to preserve and protect and celebrate in the Kingdom he brings. Jesus knows that a relationship with God *is for life!*

Our world is full of things that oppose such life and joy, all leading to death. Too many are hungry, too many are homeless, too many are sick without care, too many are threatened by war and reprisals, too many hearts are heavy with loss and anxiety and hopelessness. In every age and in every life, the possibilities for moments of love and joy and meaning have been thwarted.

The vision we have in Christ is so much more than this. I think that is why the encounter between Jesus and the Sadducees speaks deeply about the nature of God's love for us and how we can respond to God.

Faithful people, those trusting in God, responsive to duty, obedient to the call, such women and men have been willing to give up privilege and rights and property in order to invest in something to benefit others. Many have done so because they trust in the God of the living, so that even in the face of death, they will say, "Into your hands I commit my spirit."

This weekend we remember veterans who have rightly served country in war and in peace. We need to remember all those who have trusted themselves to the God of the living, persons who serve the interests of others rather than self, not because they were manipulated to do so but because they chose to. Educators, nurses, doctors, agriculturalists, volunteers, non-profit agency workers, Peace Corp workers, missionaries, saints of old and saints down the pew.

God's promises transcend the limitations of this life and even the power of death. If God so loves and cares for us in this life – creating, providing, sustaining, forgiving, empowering, perfecting – will God's love not keep us in the life to come?

Jesus says, "Yes." God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

We must remember: To have a relationship with God is to have a relationship for life! And that has everything to do with wholeness of life for all people now!