

Luke 20:27-40
November 10, 2019

God of the Living

Have you ever wondered what a Sadducee was? Whenever we read the gospels, we see over and over these two words: pharisee and sadducee. They are familiar to us because we read the gospels a lot, but stop and ask what we really know about them, and one realizes that we don't know very much.

All three of my sons were blond when they were young, and they grew up around many other blond headed children. They were often called "tow-headed." I am left-handed and was often told that I was a "south-paw." Some of you may know where these references come from and perhaps I have mentioned one or the other of them before, but for most of my life I did not and never questioned them.

It is the same with pharisees and sadducees. They are a part of the biblical story and I accepted them as such, but don't really know who they were. Often they are spoken of negatively because they were Jesus' opponents in the gospels, but that may not tell the whole story.

Recently I read a book by an Old Testament scholar named Michael Satlow, who suggests that it was disaffected sadducees who left Jerusalem for the Dead Sea and are responsible for the cache of ancient manuscripts that are called the Dead Sea Scrolls. Of course, he has not been able to prove it because they did not call themselves by that name.

All we really know is that they were connected to the Temple in Jerusalem, though they were not all priests. When the Romans destroyed the temple in 70 CE, they faded from the scene. Apparently, part of their importance is that they were concerned about preserving the literary heritage of the Jewish people, which means, likely as not, that we would not have the Bible, or at least not the Old Testament, without them. We are told in our text today that they did not believe in life after death, or what they called the Resurrection of the Dead.

The Question

So it is with some irony that we are told that some of their members came to Jesus with a question about marriage in the resurrection, in which they did not believe. It was a trick question. Jesus knew that, they were trying to catch him at words.

The question had to do with levirate marriage, an old patriarchal idea that if a man married and died without children, his brother would marry his widow, and the first son she bore would be considered his. We find this rule articulated in Deuteronomy 25:5-10. And the question is, whose wife would she be in heaven?

They made it absurd by by positing a hypothetical family of seven brothers who all ended up married to the same woman. Whose wife would she be in heaven? They apparently thought the whole idea was funny and served as proof that the Resurrection of the

Dead was not true. Not to belittle them, we sometimes ask similar questions.

Jesus was more of a pharisee and did believe in the Resurrection of the Dead, but he also knew a trap was being laid, so he gave them an enigmatic answer, one that even we don't really like.

The Answer

In Mark's gospel, he said that they knew nothing about the scriptures, or the power of God, which is a blunt thing to say to people who fancy themselves experts about such things. Here in Luke it is tamer, he says that it is in *this* life that people marry and are given in marriage, but those who participate in the resurrection do neither.

This answer strikes at the heart of our belief that when we get to heaven there will be some connection there to our present familial relationships, that our marriages in *this* life extend into the next.

The answer is often dismissed by those who say that Jesus was giving a provocative answer to an absurd question and it shouldn't be taken in any way as a characterization of the way things are in heaven. While this dismissal may be right in the end, it threatens to cause us to miss the larger point of the text, which is given in the next memorable statement Jesus utters, "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living," and then Luke also adds, "for to God, all are alive."

Nowadays

These days we as Christians don't practice levirate marriage, largely because we have mostly abandoned the patriarchy of our ancestors and consider a woman to be free, and equal, and autonomous, and we do not practice primogeniture. A woman can vote and run for office. She can own property, get an education and make decisions for herself, including decisions about to whom she will be married, and that includes to whom she will be married if she is widowed.

But we can still ask the same absurd questions. If someone has had more than one spouse, then when they get to heaven, to whom will they be married? And Jesus would answer us in a similar way. That we are focused on earthly things. That question is an evasion, an attempt to escape the implications of eternal life, which are beyond our comprehension.

Life

The gospel itself, and the bible is the authority for this assertion, is largely about three things; right versus wrong, and the whole question of morality, and life versus death and the whole question of mortality (an also about the question of life's meaningfulness). This text is about the middle question, so for today anyhow, issues about life and death are in focus. So what should we say about these two statements?

There is no marriage in the resurrection?

God is the God of the living and not the dead . . . for to God, everyone is alive?

The first thing to say is that we should be humble before the idea of the Resurrection of the Dead, in which we firmly believe. These questions about family will be sorted out, I am sure, We have made of mess of things, earthly life has made a mess of us. God will sort out the mess, rest assured.

The second thing to say is that we are alive now, that much is sure. What is most important is how we live our lives, in this life, with all its wonder and beauty and tragedy.

The promise is that God *is* engaged in our lives presently. Remember Proverbs 3:13, “in all your ways, acknowledge God, and God will direct your path.” We are to focus on our lives here and now, and the goal is to lead lives characterized by faith, which is to say, we are to trust in God’s care.

The third thing to say is that the surest sign of a life characterized by faith is a life characterized by love, this English word that means so much more than our most common notions. It means that instead of being immersed in our own well-being, we come to be, by God’s grace, immersed in the well-being of others.

By “others,” means others generally; it means being for equality and against racism and sexism and any kind of discrimination, which I realize are modern terms, nonetheless, the biblical message clearly

suggests them. It also means that God directs our lives more specifically.

Though I don’t believe we should be too pretentious about his, we can see the other people whom God has placed in our lives as people whose well-being we could be concerned about more than our own. Remember Paul in Philippians, “Look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others . . . do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves . . .

And these questions, like the sadducees, will disappear from our own histories. Take a cue from the old hymn,

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus, looks full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of God’s glory and grace.

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