

## Luke 20:27-38

Today's Gospel reading comes to us from deep in Luke's Gospel, very nearly to the end. In the chapter immediately before this one, Jesus will enter Jerusalem for the last time, the triumphant entry that we celebrate on Palm Sunday. He entered Jerusalem with praise, with glory, with people celebrating his arrival and waving palm branches like Jesus was some sort of conquering king. Of course, we know that that praise and joy and adoration will fade, that it all goes sideways in just a matter of days. Just half a week later, Jesus will be arrested and sentenced to death for the very same ministry the people were celebrating just days before.

In today's Gospel reading, we are in that lull between the days we now know as Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday. During these few days, Jesus and his followers will become fixtures in the temple, teaching people and sharing more about the coming kingdom of God. These days are fraught with tension. In Luke's Gospel, the religious leaders of the days are circling, probing, testing for weak spots in Jesus' theology and power. Several powerful groups, scribes, chief priests, religious leaders, elders, all of whom feel threatened by Jesus' rising influence, approach Jesus with various gotcha questions. They are searching for ways to discredit Jesus, to humiliate him, to draw the crowds away from him. These are the people who have benefited most from the "way things have always been," and they are desperate to return to the status quo, which they feel Jesus is threatening.

Today's Gospel reading is the third and last of these challenges portrayed in Luke's Gospel. Today, we meet new adversaries, the Sadducees. While the scribes, chief priests, and Pharisees have been constant forces of opposition for Jesus throughout the Gospel of Luke, this is the first time we have an appearance from the Sadducees.

The Sadducees pose a thorny question to Jesus, coming to him to ask about what life would be like in the resurrection. They ask their question with an illustration of a women, who marries seven brothers over the course of her life, each of whom die before they have any children together. In the resurrection, they ask, whose wife will she be?

On its surface, asking a great teacher, one who many are whispering just might be the Son of God, about what happens when we die and are resurrected is not at all ridiculous. Across almost all cultures, humans have grappled with the question of what happens to us when we die, where we go, what we experience, and, especially, whether or not we get to live on (most cultures have come away with a yes to that last question). Judaism, and later Christianity, is no different. As long as death remains a fact of life, humans seem bound to wonder about what will come next.

But while the question of resurrection itself is not absurd, Luke wants to let his readers know that the questioners themselves just might be. The first line of our Gospel reading tells us that the Sadducees don't believe in the concept of resurrection (for various complex doctrinal reasons that I invite you to ask Jack about later). It's curious then, isn't it, that people who don't believe in resurrection at all are coming to Jesus to ask him questions about it. Their extreme example of a woman marrying seven times, each time ending up a childless widow, is a farce, a hypothetical situation in which Jesus is pushed into debating a ridiculous situation. They come armed with a cruel caricature, not to seek pastoral answers about what it might be like for someone to marry seven separate times and to lose seven different husbands. Their callousness is even starker when compared to the rest of Jesus' ministry of love. From the very beginning, Luke has portrayed Jesus as one who is primarily concerned with the poor, the powerless, the

oppressed, those who are used and abused by the systems of the world. The people are often best expressed in the widows and orphans, women and children stranded in a system where only men had any reasonable claim to power. And this is a woman who has been widowed seven times over. But again, they don't come to ask about pastoral care, about what their obligation would be to such a hypothetical person. No, they instead use this made-up tragedy to ensnare Jesus and to poke holes in his ministry of love.

But the Gospels have shown, time and again, just how skillful Jesus is at evading those who would come to him in bad faith. This instance is no different. Instead of allowing the Sadducees to pull him into an obscure and thorny doctrinal debate, Jesus seizes the opportunity to reveal truths about the kingdom of God both to the Sadducees and to the people listening to this line of questioning.

Jesus responds to the Sadducees question in two ways. First, he reminds them that God is the God of the living, that God loves life, God loves us, and because of that, God gives us the gift of life, both in this life and in the world to come. Jesus uses imagery from Moses and the burning bush to drive his point home with a genius little if then statement: If God is the God of the living, and if God claims to be the God of Abraham, Issac, and Jacob, then Abraham, Issac, and Jacob must be meaningfully alive to God. In this little statement, Jesus has undermined the people who came to undermine him, knocking out one of their core beliefs, that the resurrection isn't supported by scripture, but showing that it, in fact, is.

Second, though, and perhaps the part that catches our attention most, is Jesus' statements on marriage in the resurrection. He brushes off the whole farcical charade of a question about the seven-time widow and whose spouse she'll be in the coming resurrection by telling them that in

the resurrection, there will be no marriage at all. Now, of course, if you are trapped in a bad marriage or, if like the majority of people in Jesus' audience, your marriage was more of a contract than a love match, perhaps the idea of there being no marriage in the resurrection will strike as good news. But for anyone who is happy in their marriage, anyone who misses a spouse who has already gone on to be with God, maybe this part of scripture isn't a source of comfort at all.

Here we return back to our earlier question of what happens when we die, or, more importantly, what happens when we are raised from the dead and God has finally made the world right and good and whole for the first time since the fall in the Garden of Eden? What will we be like then? I had a professor in seminary who told us never to use the phrase I'm about to use, but at this point it only seems fair: the answer is we just don't know. Jesus here seems to be telling both the Sadducees, who have come to him in bad faith, but also his other listeners, many of whom did believe in the resurrection, that God's coming kingdom will not be a direct continuation of the lives we lead now. Looking around at the messes we create and the problems humans have to endure, we can fully say thanks be to God for that truth. What we do know, what we are promised, is that everything will be good. Everything will be right. Everyone will be joyful, reconciled, filled, and surrounded by the real presence of a God who loves us so, so very much. The specifics we can leave up to God. The promise and the hope of a brighter, fuller union with God and each other is what we hope for and cling to.

Like Jesus does with all his questioners, throughout these last few days of his life and over the course of his entire ministry, Jesus subverts the expectations of the people before him. Jesus is subverting our expectations, too, defying the small, unimaginative, self-affirming boxes

we smush God into. The kingdom of God will show up just a little bit differently than anyone thinks it will. Questioners, outcasts, lepers, disciples, Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, Herod, Pilate, all of them come to Jesus seeking affirmation about their beliefs about who they are and how the world works, seeking for Jesus to confirm for them what they think they know to be true. We ourselves do the same thing, if we can be honest. But still God surprises. Thankfully, still God shows up in unexpected ways, defying our best attempts to entrap or ensnare. Instead God invites us to remain open, to remember that the kingdom of God is bigger, better, more encompassing than we can imagine, that we can't put a neat bow on it, but are instead invited to live into the promise that God is good, and that God promises us that, whatever the future hold, we are precious, we are loved, and, in the end, all will be well.