

All Are Alive to God 11/10/201

Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him 28 and 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. 29 Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; 30 then the second 31 and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. 32 Finally the woman also died. 33 In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

34 Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 35 but 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. 36 Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 37 And 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. 38 Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

ALL OF THEM ARE ALIVE TO GOD

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been dead and gone a long time.

But, according to Jesus, all of them are alive to God. They were alive to God back when Moses encountered God’s presence in the burning bush. They were alive to God when Jesus confronted the Sadducees.

And I would say that they are alive to God even now.

How can this be? How can those who died long ago be alive to God? And if it is true, what difference does it make?

Those were the questions asked long ago by the Sadducees. And those are the questions that we are asking even today.

THE SADDUCEES

The Sadducees did not believe in the possibility of resurrection. Like many in our world today they did not believe such a thing could happen. They found no Scripture passages in the Torah that would support such a belief. In fact they found the idea of resurrection to be rather silly, wishful thinking.

That's why the Sadducees used that story about a woman who had seven husbands before she died. Yes, technically it was possible for something like this to happen.

But, it wasn't probable. They didn't really care about whose wife this theoretical woman would be in the resurrection. It was just a way to make fun of belief in the resurrection.

Jesus said that they were thinking about it in the wrong way. In the resurrection the old rules no longer apply when it comes to marriage or anything else for that matter.

DECISIONS ABOVE OUR PAY GRADE

I read this week about a couple that wanted to write their own marriage vows. And instead of saying "until death us do part" they wanted to say "for all eternity."

The pastor would not allow it. He said that was a decision above his pay grade.

And there many decisions that are above our pay grade. Faith begins with two basic assumptions:

1. There is a God.
2. You are not it.

We must make allowance for uncertainty and mystery in our religion. And if we don't do that, we will develop a religion that is more human than divine.

DOWN TO EARTH RELIGION

Since the Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection, they developed a religion based more upon how we should live here and now. Faith was about morality and preserving a good and godly way of life for future generations.

In this scheme of things, children became very important. In fact, if a person died without having children this was thought to be the greatest of tragedies. For the Sadducees “eternal life” could only be achieved by leaving a great moral legacy and children who would carry on the family name.

Now many people believe that today. And there’s something to commend in this approach. I don’t see anything wrong with wanting to leave a great moral legacy. I certainly want all our children to do well and carry on important traditions.

But, if we believe that’s all there is. If we believe that everything is dependent upon what we do and the legacy we leave, that makes a very poor religion. In an effort to secure our future and the future of our children we can use theology and what we think is moral to justify almost anything.

A DEAL WITH THE DEVIL

And that’s exactly what the Sadducees did. They made a deal with the devil in order to stay in power. In this case the “devil” was Caesar and the Roman government. They cooperated with Imperial rule as long as Rome left them in charge of the Temple.

And (surprise, surprise) they made money off of this arrangement.

Why do you think Jesus had such a sharp confrontation with the moneylenders in the Temple? They had turned religion into big business.

So, when Jesus attacked the moneylenders and those who sold sacrifices in the Temple, he was attacking the religious leaders, and the politicians. Jesus posed a threat to the wallet of the movers and shakers. (Luke 19:45-48)

What happens when you do that? The “powers that be” want to kill you.

When Jesus threatened their ability to make money, religious and political factions united in their condemnation of Jesus. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were usually bitter enemies, but their fear of Jesus brought many of them together.

In Luke 19:48 we read, “From that point on, the chief priests, the scribes and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him.” In John’s gospel when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, the religious leaders seek to kill not only Jesus but also Lazarus.

TRYING TO TRAP JESUS

Resurrection was not only a hope for the future. It was a threat to the present order. It challenged everything that the religious leaders held dear.

So as Jesus teaches in the Temple, various groups come and try to trap him. They ask him questions about authority, questions about paying taxes, and today they ask questions about the resurrection. They are doing all they can to discredit Jesus.

When Jesus went up against the religious and political leaders he knew this would happen. He predicted this would happen over and over again in all the gospels.

The cross was not an accident. The cross was an inevitable result of the actions Jesus took.

THE RESURRECTION KINGDOM

Then why did he do it? Why didn't Jesus just avoid this conflict?

Jesus didn't avoid this conflict because the conflict was necessary. It was God's plan. This conflict would be the start of God's kingdom on earth.

Jesus took on this conflict because He was God in the flesh. Jesus was bringing in the kingdom of God. The kingdom that came in Jesus was not based upon performing certain rituals or maintaining political power.

It was based upon resurrection. It was about a power that came from above that transforms life today. God's kingdom was eternal.

And that meant freedom from those who would use religion as a tool to control things here and now.

Jesus proclaimed a kingdom that was not hampered by the constraints of time and space. He proclaimed a hope that was eternal and a life that was eternal.

For Jesus talk about the resurrection was not just speculation about what might happen some day. This was a hope woven into the very fabric of daily life. This was a hope that would make a difference from day one.

HEAVENLY MINDED

Today some people talk about those who are “so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.” That’s a very catchy and clever phrase, and if it had been around in biblical times I think that would have been a favorite saying of the Sadducees.

The Sadducees said in effect, “Let’s cut out all this talk about resurrection. Let’s just concentrate on what we can control here and now.”

But, Jesus reversed that old saying.

Jesus said in effect, “Those who are heavenly minded do the most earthly good.”

Hope in the resurrection makes life here and now worthwhile. Hope in the resurrection gives us the courage for the living of these days.

THE TWO BY TWO CLASS

A seminary professor was invited to teach a Sunday school class in a large church in Dallas. The class was called the “Two by Two Class.”

She said that she arrived about fifteen minutes before the class was to begin and looked over a room full of senior adults, mostly women.

She noticed a woman standing off to the side, and she went over to her, asked her name and how long she had been a member of the class. The woman whose name was Evelyn said,

“My husband and I joined this class in 1955. He died a year ago. We were called the two by two class, but now it’s more like the one by one class.” She paused and said, “Now all of us are old and many of us are dead.”

Suddenly realizing how morbid she was sounding she attempted to smile and said, “And we’re so glad you’re with us today.”

Many of us know what Evelyn is talking about.

Everywhere I go people decry the fact that the Presbyterian Church is such an old church now.

The unspoken part of that statement is the elephant in the room. If we don't get some young people interested in the faith, our denomination might go out of existence.

Or, as Evelyn put it, "Now all of us are old and many of us are dead."

HOPE THROUGH THE LENS OF ETERNITY

Don't misunderstand. I believe we need to pass on the Christian faith to our children. I believe this is critically important.

But, I don't believe, the Christian faith is totally dependent upon our actions.

Ultimately, the Christian faith depends upon God's promise and not upon our faithfulness.

Christians don't look for hope through the lens of human achievement. We look for hope through the lens of resurrection, the lens of eternity.

We shouldn't put our faith in having a large youth program or a successful church or having a lot of money. We shouldn't put our faith in any religious institution or any family relationship.

That's what the Sadducees did. They thought that carrying on the family line and the religious tradition was the most important thing in the world. They worked with an old crazy despot like Herod to make the Temple even bigger and grander than it had ever been before.

And what happened to those Sadducees?

Jesus predicted it, and it made everyone boiling mad. But, Jesus got it right. When the Jews revolted against the Romans in 70 AD, the Temple was totally destroyed.

And the Sadducees, the priestly ruling class disappeared from the face of history. There were no more Sadducees after the destruction of the Temple.

Yet the followers of Jesus continue to this today. Why? Jesus located our ultimate hope in the eternal instead of the temporal.

THE ALPHA AND THE OMEGA

How would you respond to Evelyn's lament, "All of us are old and many of us are dead?"

I think today's lesson suggests a wonderful answer. With Jesus we can say, "We are all alive in God." Just as Abraham and Isaac and Jacob were alive to God long after they had died, so we are alive to God. God knows us forever.

From God's perspective time is like a giant scroll rolled out from beginning to end. The Bible tells us that God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (and everything in between).

And in this eternal God we live and move and have our being.

With our most powerful telescope we can literally see into the past. We can see light that began its journey billions of years ago when the stars were just being formed.

If we can see the past through a telescope, is it too hard to imagine the Almighty being present with us eternally?

All are alive to God.

God is the God of the living, and all are alive to God. God is not limited by time and space because God created time and space.

THE NEW CREATION

The doctrine of creation and the doctrine of the resurrection are closely linked. In the Christian church we talk about salvation and the hope of life eternal as the new creation.

And this new creation that started with Jesus continues even today.

Last week we sang a hymn to celebrate All Saints Day. The hymn, "For All the Saints" emphasized this eternal connection, this idea that all of God's children are alive to Him.

We don't talk this way much any more.

We may affirm our belief in the resurrection, but in practice rationalism has won the day with many. We don't make room in our lives for the mystical and the holy.

We have become for all practical purposes Sadducees, those for whom the doctrine of the resurrection makes no difference in how we live.

And yet Christians in "days gone by" thought deeply about this. They sang "we feebly struggle" and "they in glory shine."

But, despite the struggle, they firmly believed that the saints living and dead were still connected.

The hymn continues, "Yet all are one in Thee for all are Thine. Alleluia! Alleluia!" The Confession puts it this way, "In life and in death we belong to God."

On this side of eternity we do feebly struggle. We become very discouraged.

Jesus did not dismiss this. Jesus understood sorrow and struggle. He experienced it in many ways.

But, in his death and resurrection Jesus tore down the wall between heaven and earth. Jesus tore down the wall between God and humanity. Jesus tore down the wall between life and death.

And in doing that he showed us a world that is so much larger and so much more mysterious than we had ever imagined.

LORD LIFT US UP

Frederick Buechner in his book, *Whistling in the Dark*, recalled a friend musing on the meaning of death as an ascent into a new plane of existence. He did that by thinking about the take off of a passenger plane.

He wrote,

"The great craft lumbers its way to the take off position, the jets shrill.

Picking up speed, you count the seconds till you feel lift off. Once airborne you can hardly see the wings at all through the grey turbulence scudding by. The steep climb is as rough as a Ford pick-up. Gradually it starts to even out. The clouds thin a little.

The pilot levels off slightly. Nobody is talking. The calm and quiet of it are almost palpable. Suddenly in a rush of light, you break out of the weather. Beneath you are a furrowed pasture. Above, no sky in creation was ever bluer.

Possibly the last take off of all is something like that. When the time finally comes you're scared stiff to be sure, but maybe by then you're just glad to leave the whole show behind and get going.

In a matter of moments, everything that seemed to matter stops mattering.

The slow climb is all there is. The stillness. The clouds. Then the miracle of flight as from fathom upon fathom down you surface suddenly into open sky. The dazzling sun.”

A popular song of a few years back expressed the same sentiment,

“Lord lift us up where we belong, where the eagles fly on a mountain high.”

Friends learn to look up instead of about.

We are the people of the resurrection. We trust in a hope that is above and beyond us. We trust in a hope that is eternal...for all are alive to God.

Amen.