

Sermon for November 17, 2019
Luke 20: 27-40

Easter in November

What an odd bit of reading we have before us this morning. It almost sounds like a word problem. Yet what an important passage. At first glance, it seems to be about marriage and whether we who are married will still be married to our spouses in the afterlife. Or whether those of us who have been widowed or divorced and remarried will know who we belong to after death. Our forefather John Calvin would simply say, “It’s not your business to be curious about what God plans.” Thankfully, Jesus says something else.

To begin to approach this story, we need to back up and put it in context. Much has happened before Chapter 20 in Luke that did not appear in our lectionary. Jesus has been questioned and tested on many religious, social, and political issues by various groups of people intent on one thing: saying “Gotcha!” If these groups can pin a heretical or treasonous reply on Jesus, then they can begin to discredit and even get rid of him.

Those scheming actions are mirrored today in our own political arenas, even more so with the upcoming elections. The questions that each party throws at the other often have less to do with substance and more to do with entrapment. It’s as if the most important goal in a debate or interview is to be able to say, “Gotcha!” What politicians and political pundits fail to understand is that their poor examples of compromise and communication infect the rest of the country. We become influenced by them and walk around suspicious of each other, ready to point the finger and say, “I’m right; you’re wrong. Gotcha!” Gotcha becomes contagious. Gotcha is not of Christ.

Throughout his ministry, however, and throughout the gospels, Jesus was a target of the “Gotcha-game.” In his politically intense world, three groups were out to get him: the Herodians, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. The Herodians were those who opposed Pontius Pilate and wanted one of Herod’s sons on the throne. The Pharisees were the orthodox elders and “teachers of the law” who believed in an afterlife. The Sadducees were the aristocratic, priestly, conservative class who did not believe in any type of resurrection. Overall, these groups of Jews were a divided, partisan people looking out after their own interests. Sound familiar? The only things that these three groups held in common were a hatred for the Romans and much suspicion and worry about Jesus, who they viewed as a threat to their own little corners of power.

Politics makes strange bedfellows. The Herodians, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, often at odds with each other, teamed up to discredit Jesus. They didn’t, at first, want to hang him; instead they wanted to give him enough rope to hang himself by catching him in a foolish “gotcha!” moment. So they each asked him a trick question in front of the crowds.

The Herodians wanted a Jew, one of Herod's sons, to be governor, not Pontius Pilate and not this wandering preacher who claimed he was the Messiah. "Pretending to be sincere," they asked Jesus the famous taxes to Caesar question. If Jesus told the Jews that they shouldn't pay their taxes, he would be arrested on grounds of treason. If he said they should pay their taxes, he would enrage the common folk. Instead, he told the Herodians to "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's." In other words, government does have a legitimate claim on our lives, but so does God, and since God is sovereign, God has the greater claim. No one could argue with Jesus.

Another question came from the Pharisees, the guardians and keepers of the Law. They asked him which was the greatest commandment, which of course they already knew. Quoting from Deuteronomy, Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God, love your neighbor, and love yourself." His implication was that if they truly followed that particular commandment, then they wouldn't need their 635 scribal laws, or their positions as "teachers of the law," which were all devices for maintaining control. No one could argue with Jesus. No one could say "gotcha."

Now, in today's text, the Sadducees step up to toss their loaded question. They are only mentioned in this one place in Luke, which suggests even more strongly how every group was out to get Jesus. The Sadducees, associated with the priestly and aristocratic classes, have clout and money. With these earthly possessions in hand, why worry about an afterlife? Because they do not believe in resurrection, and Jesus and the other groups know that, their question is even more ridiculous. Their scenario about seven brothers marrying the same widow is a planned attempt to make Jesus stumble and look foolish so they could say, "Gotcha" and ratchet up their power. But as Jesus so often does, he turns the tables on them and uses their question as a teaching moment on the very concept they discredit: resurrection.

The assurance of resurrection is the question we cannot dismiss but we also cannot prove from reason or experience. We want to know for sure if there is life beyond death and what it will be like and who else will be there. Jesus addresses the pseudo-marriage question by saying that what happens here in this earthly life is not like what will happen in the afterlife. In Jesus' time, marriage wasn't a byproduct of love. Most marriages were arranged for financial and social reasons. Women were second class pawns totally dependent on their fathers, husbands, and brothers. The brother-in-law of a widow was required to marry her because she had nowhere else to go and no one to protect her. In order for her husband's family's name to live on, not her own, she had to produce children by his brother. Those manmade particulars, Jesus is saying, will not be factors in life after death so it doesn't matter whose wife the widow is. What is important in this story is not who is married to whom but the truth of resurrection. Happy Easter in November!

In the gospels, Jesus never says much about what the resurrection will be like because it is not about being immortal but about *being made new*. In Luke's gospel, he tells a story about Abraham, Lazarus, and a rich man, and he promises the thief on the cross life after death in "paradise." All he says about resurrection is: 1) it will not be a continuation of life as we know it on earth; and 2) it is real because "God is not the God of the dead but of the living, for to him all are alive." All are alive—those who have died—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, and your beloved and mine. There is our assurance. Jesus states, "They cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection." Jesus knew it wasn't just about where we go when we die, but who we will become when it happens.

Surely just days before his entry in to Jerusalem, with all sorts of groups trying to set him up with a "gotcha," Jesus, more than any other person, trusted in resurrection. Surely, just days before his conviction, Jesus didn't waste time on silly speculations but on preaching the truth. At the cusp of sinking to his knees because of Jewish and Roman politics and power plays, Jesus' own focus was on the God of the living and the victory of resurrection, his and ours. So was the Apostle Paul's, who with complete faith in the resurrection, firmly stated, "But if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching *is* in vain, and your faith *is* in vain" (1 Cor. 15:14). Paul's preaching was never in vain. Gotcha game over. Jesus wins.

But wait. What about our loved ones? Will we know them when we get to heaven, wherever and whatever heaven is? Will they know us? I know the answer to that as much as you do. But what I do believe is that a God of love, which John defines God to be, the same God who gave us the ability to love, is not going to deprive us of the power and beauty of love that we have experienced in our earthly lives. As the playwright Thornton Wilder wrote, "Love is a bridge that can never be broken." Whether it is the love of a spouse, parent, sister, brother, friend, child, whoever, that love spans eternity. God is love, and all that love is part of who God is and what we will experience when we come, as Paul put it, "face to face."

It's significant that this reading about resurrection, an Easter passage, is placed just a few weeks before Advent, when we await the celebration of the birth of the Christ. Perhaps it is there to remind us that while, yes, Christmas is an incredible miracle, God come down to earth, it is Easter that defines who we, as Christians, truly are. Many a good person has been born and sacrificed his or her own life for others, but only one has opened the doors to life with God. We are Christians because we are *Easter* people, children of the Resurrection. We are already in process of being made new creations and that, my friends, is good news, gospel news, indeed.

As we continue our own journeys toward our own resurrection day, let's remember the good news of Jesus Christ and live accordingly. Jesus never says, "Gotcha." Instead, Jesus says, "Walk that extra mile. Turn the other cheek. Pray for your enemy. Forgive

each other. Give the government its due, but give God his due, as well. Love God. Love your neighbor because God asked you to. Love yourself because you are a child of God.” Let’s celebrate our claim to resurrection and our loved ones’ resurrections not just in March or April but in November and in every day of our lives, praising and thanking and trusting in the God of the living. Thanks be to God!