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Weekend of Sunday, November 10, 2019
22nd Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 32/Proper 27/Year C

Primary Text: Luke 20:27-38

Sermon Title: “*On Becoming Like Angels and Children of God*”

Theme

The Sadducees, who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead, try to trap Jesus. They formulate the convoluted case of a serial widow who marries a succession of seven brothers. Jesus responds by teaching about God, to whom all are alive and in whom all relationships are fulfilled.

Text

²⁷Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to [Jesus] ²⁸and 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. ²⁹Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; ³⁰then the second ³¹and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. ³²Finally the woman also died. ³³In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

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

Sermon

Today's gospel reading is one that stirs up all kinds of questions.

- Why does Luke bother to tell us that the Sadducees don't believe in the resurrection? Who are they and why don't they believe there is a resurrection? After all, there is isn't there?
- What is the deal with the situation that the Sadducees present to Jesus and why?

In my opinion, these questions are not the front burner issues of the text, but in order for us to get to the front burner issue of the text, some explanation is called for.

The Sadducees were a sect or subgroup of Judaism not unlike the subgroups of Christians we have today such as *evangelicals* and *liberals*; *mainliners* and *independents*; *Protestants*, *Catholics* and *Orthodox*.

The Sadducees were closely aligned with the leaders of the synagogue and temple, both lay leaders and the priests, and so they had the respect of most Jews.

In Jesus' day, the *resurrection of the dead* was not a widely held and believed concept. A person lived on, so to speak, through his descendants. And to be more specific, a man lived on through his sons. Women were considered little more than property; fertile ground for producing male offspring. That is why there was so much importance placed on male descendants throughout the Old Testament.

So when the Sadducees presented to Jesus what seems to us to be an absurd scenario, it is not just to try to challenge Jesus on this crazy subject of resurrection. Their scenario had a lot to do with the Pharisee's legacy after his death; a thing of critical importance on par with our own understanding and hope in our own resurrection and life eternal.

There is a practice spelled out in Deuteronomy (25:5-10) called levirate marriage that was put in place just so a man who died without descendants would continue to live on even if it only happened because the deceased man's brother produced offspring on his brother's behalf through his brother's widow. It all sounds bazaar to us but that is how important perpetuating a man's name was.

Now I am the third brother of four. If my oldest brother would have died without having a child with his wife, that would have been tragic. If my second-oldest brother would have decided to marry my oldest brother's widow, that would just be weird in our culture. But if my second-oldest brother also dies, I can tell you with certainty, my sister-in-law, the black widow, will never be my bride. Can't you just imagine being the sixth or seventh brother to be married to this woman in the story? "Momma, don't make me go!" But in this post-resurrection Christian age we understand that our mortality or eternality is determined by our faith in the Lord of life and death, Jesus Christ. This has not yet been settled in this Gospel Reading.

When Jesus says that in the age to come that the children of this age neither marry nor are given in marriage, he is countering the sinful worldly materialistic and pragmatic view of the Sadducees, in which the wife is handed from brother to brother as property to assure male honor.

Now some will no doubt wonder if Jesus' words in this story tell us something about what life in the age of the resurrection will be like. Will we, in the resurrection, be reunited with our loved ones, namely our spouses? I don't know specifically, but generally I assure you, yes and no.

If you are familiar with the television sitcom, "Everybody Loves Raymond," there will be some, like Ray's parent's Frank and Marie, who look forward to death as an escape from a long and difficult marriage. On the other hand, those who have enjoyed lifelong intimacy and companionship in marriage may well object that God has invested so much in establishing faithful loving, and fulfilling relationship in this life, that it is unthinkable that such relationships would be terminated in the resurrection. Fact is, among the many couples I have ministered to, I have met both types of couples.

One way of approaching Jesus' answer is to recognize the *sietz en lieben*, the setting in time. This story takes place in a time when marriage was viewed primarily as an arrangement on a man's rights to a woman and a women's right (if that can be said) to male support. Jesus is telling us that in heaven there will be no need for such arrangements. Leaving aside the physical side of love and marriage (which belongs to the flesh), there will be no need to restrict love, intimacy or companionship to a monogamous relationship. We will all be part of that great company of saints in light.

But another way, a less unsettling way, of saying that may be to say that heaven is one of those mysteries of God that we simply cannot get our minds around – but I assure you, it is beyond our imaginations.

I tried to explain this to someone the other day using a metaphor from my own life. Several years ago now, I was given a surprise 40th birthday party. I knew a surprise party was coming. I didn't know when and I didn't know how. But the night that it finally happened, I was caught totally off guard. I opened the door between the garage and the house and what seemed like a hundred people yelled "Surprise!" I was so surprised that I know I just stood there in shock that I had been surprised by so many, so well.

Personally, I believe that is what heaven will be like only infinitely better (and without the *old fart* gag gifts). When we arrive, we will be so overwhelmed at the beauty and the magnificence of the place that none of those earthly mortal concerns will matter. All mysteries will be made known, if we'll even care.

- Imagine the joy of a woman still grieving the loss of a miscarried baby being able to see that child mature and complete.
- Imagine seeing dear old Uncle Ed who died of lung cancer, vibrant and whole.
- Imagine Aunt Edna who lost a leg due to diabetes, complete and restored.
- Imagine your drug addicted cousin who took his own life to escape the pain of his addiction without track marks and beaming with joy.
- Imagine a woman glad that her abusive husband had died years before she did so that she had a couple of years of relief; imagine her seeing him and him not being filled with anger and hatred and them being able to embrace each other, not as adversaries in life, but filled with the love of God in finally being able to be perfected in their likeness of Christ.

You fill in the rest of the story with your own relationships (good and bad, broken and whole) and just try to imagine something that we acknowledge is beyond our human capacity to imagine.

And to clear up a long-held misconception, when human beings die, we do not become angels. Jesus said in this passage that the dead are "like angels" emphasis on the "like" and he went on to clarify that by "like angels" he meant that like

angels, human beings cannot die anymore and become children of God and children of the resurrection.

I guess people placate their own grief after the loss of a loved one by this false thinking, but angels are the supernatural spiritual heavenly beings, created by God, that have been a part of the heavenly realm since before human history.

So then finally, we are able to approach what I think is the real front burner issue of this story. The real issue of this story is simply your relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ who promises that all that we have discussed is what awaits those who put their faith in him.

That Sadducees are all tangled up in things that don't matter and so often we are too. Some of us who have been around the Lutheran church will remember the old SBH days (back before the LBW days). I remember members of my home church being incensed over the introduction of the green LBW. Everyone knows Jesus' favorite color was red! How could they change our hymnal to green! So guess what, when they introduced the latest hymnal, they went back to red! Now we have people who bemoan the abandonment of the now beloved green hymnal!

We laugh but we've had our moments when we've lost sight of what is really *status confessionis* (things that are so important that we say they have confessional status), and things that are *adiaphora* (things that don't really matter). When allow ourselves to get confused by our own stinking thinking and popular culture we lose sight of truth revealed in Holy Scripture.

It is probably enough for most of us to know, really know and believe, that Jesus Christ who died on a cross to open the gates to heaven *for us*. When we get that right, these other less significant details don't really seem so important do they? And that is what Jesus was trying say.

The God who created all of life including the institution of human marriage, has also provided for life after death for those who have cultivated the capacity to respond to God's love. The biblical teaching is that life itself comes from God. There is nothing in or of the human being that is naturally or inherently immortal. If there is life beyond death, it is God's gift to those who have accepted God's love

and entered into relationship with God in this life. They are or will be "like angels," but won't be angels. They are children of God and children of the resurrection.

Prayer

O God, our eternal redeemer, by the presence of your Spirit you renew and direct our hearts. Keep always in our mind the end of all things. Inspire us for a holy life here, and bring us to the joy of the resurrection, through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen