

Transfiguration  
Dallas, Texas

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Job 19:23-27aLuke 20:27-38

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The Sadducees don't really want to know the answer to their question about a woman widowed seven times to seven brothers. All they really want to do is poke fun at what they think is the absurdity of the resurrection. They just want to show their cleverness and score a point in a rabbinical debate that raged in the first century with their extremely unlikely hypothetical situation.

In case you missed history class the day they taught about first century Jewish groups, the Sadducees were a small group of Jewish elites who totally rejected the idea of life after death. Unlike the Pharisees, whose Bible included most of what we now refer to as the Old Testament, including passages like the one we heard this morning from Job, the Sadducees exclusively read the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, and Torah doesn't mention anything about resurrection. So they dismissed all notions of eternal life as theological make-believe, and they wanted to show their disdain to this new rabbi getting everyone's attention, Jesus.

I have a lot of compassion for the Sadducees, because they struggled with the same thing that has afflicted most religious zealots down through the ages: a constricted imagination. They thought of resurrection as more algorithm than art, more like a rule-bound homeowners association than a state of eternal joy and peace. No wonder they didn't like the sound of it, and chose not to believe it.

But while their question may not have been sincere, Jesus' answer was. Here's how it is translated in The Message:

“Those who are included in the resurrection of the dead will no longer be concerned with marriage nor, of course, with death. They will have better things to think about, if you can believe it. All ecstasies and intimacies then will be with God...God isn't the God of dead people, but of the living. To him all are alive.”

When Jesus answers the Sadducees in his lovely poetic way, what he's saying is that the events and relationships by which we order and make sense of our lives – things like marriage, childbirth, new jobs, retirement...all the things that mean so much to us now – will not characterize our eternal lives, because resurrected life is not merely an extension of this life but something wholly different.<sup>1</sup> Resurrection is not simply a continuation of what we know now, with a few system fixes and upgrades, like

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<sup>1</sup> David Lose, “Questions About the Resurrection,” <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=2859>

some sort of Apple operating system update. According to Jesus, the nature of resurrected life is different in ways we can't even comprehend.

My friends, there comes a time when we have to set aside our need to know what the afterlife is going to be like...who will be there and what we'll be doing. The best that the venerable Saint Paul could say was that it's a mystery (1 Cor 15:51) and then offer his own attempt at poetic words about how we'll be caught up in the air at the sound of a trumpet at the end of time. Christians have been straining to comprehend and characterize the nature of eternal life since the beginning, but ultimately it's a matter of *trust*: we have to trust that, even without the details, it will be good; we have to find peace with the truth that our imaginations are too limited to comprehend what the limitless imagination of God can create; because faith in the resurrection comes not when we know all the details, but when we finally decide to trust in God.

The thing about the Sadducees is that they don't have a lot of trust. They certainly don't trust Jesus, but I also wonder how much they trust God. In my experience, it's when you don't trust someone that you try to trip them up with wildly unlikely scenarios or obscure questions. Like that old adage about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin...when we ask questions that aren't real questions, we show that we don't really trust the one we're asking.

It's not just a Sadducee problem, though, is it? Christians today can easily play according to this trust-less rule book, too. When we bend ourselves over backwards worrying and arguing about the details of the afterlife – what it looks like and what we'll be doing, who is in and who is out, what formula is necessary in order to get there – then we are worrying about the wrong things. We are refusing to trust God. In Enneagram language, we're failing to ask the question: "Is this mine to do?"

Because when we spend our time doing the things that aren't ours to do, then we don't have the time to do what *is* ours to do. God has told us, "Eternity is mine to worry about, not yours. You have to trust me to keep my promises and take care of the details. Eternity, that's mine to do."

But living a transformed life now—that's ours to do. Living with compassion and love...that's ours to do. Showing mercy and forgiving others...that's ours to do. Seeking and serving Christ in all persons...that's ours to do. And when we get these backward, when get fixated on what is God's to do, that's when we lose sight of what is ours.

Which helps explain why Jesus spends so little time talking about resurrection. Comb the gospels and this is the only time you'll hear him mention it specifically. There are the occasional oblique reference in parables, but nothing direct or specific. Jesus was far less interested in conveying the details of the life to come than in trying

to get us to embrace God's way in our lives now. So, for example, just last Sunday we heard Jesus teach, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; do to others as you would have them do to you (Luke 6:28-31)." Two weeks ago, we heard Jesus teach, "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 18:14)." And three weeks ago we heard him tell a parable about our need to pray always and not to lose heart (Luke 18:1-8). And on and on.

Questions about the nature of eternity can be a source of tremendous hope for people who are living right now in the shadow of death, but for the rest of us, they can easily become distractions to our pursuit of holy and faithful living *right now*. Besides, fixating on the nature of the afterlife can have the effect of turning God into little more than a cosmic customs agent, stamping our passport and sending us on to our next destination. But God is not just waiting to deal with us when we die. God is totally and completely invested in who we are and what we're about now. Why else would God send the Son into the world to live, preach, teach, heal, feed, and transform lives? Why wouldn't Jesus have simply climbed out of the crib and onto the cross? Or better still, why enter the world at all...why not just allow us to die and then sort it all out then?

This precious gift of life matters a great deal. It matters to us as we live it, and it matters to God as God witnesses it. Because our God is God of the living and to God all are alive. So, I want to invite you...instead of asking God questions designed to trick or trap, questions that are more about our distrust than about finding answers, questions about essentially about matters that are not even ours to do, what if instead we asked God real questions about things that actually are ours to do. Questions like:

- How can I seek and serve Christ today?
- What can I do for others today that I would hope they would do for me?
- How can I love my enemies, and do good to those who hate me, and give without cynicism or regret?
- How, that is, can I live more and more like Jesus taught me to live?

Because these are questions about life and our Living God, who isn't just waiting around for us until the day of our death, but who is moving with love and power around us all the time, will be ready to guide us to the answers.