

Hespeler, 10 November, 2019 © Scott McAndless

Haggai 1:15b-2:9, Psalm 145:1-5, 17-21, 2 Thess 2:1-5, 13-17, Luke 20:27-38

I have a disturbing question for you here this morning. What if the Sadducees – the people in this morning’s reading from the gospel – what if they are right? No, I’m serious, they come up to Jesus because they don’t believe in the resurrection and they, just like all of the people you talk to on Facebook and Twitter these days, want to prove that they are right and Jesus is wrong.

And don’t get thrown off by the convoluted argument that they use. It seems rather silly – in fact it is kind of intentionally silly. They invoke a law that really doesn’t make sense to us. You see, in ancient biblical times it was seen as the duty of every Jewish man to have a son. This was because they believed that God had given the land of Israel very specifically to the families of Israel. That meant that every family had to produce an heir (a male heir because that was how that society worked) in every generation who would own a plot of land.

But, as we all know, things don’t always work out perfectly that way. Sometimes a man will die before he has sons. That’s just the reality of life in the real world. So, the Old Testament came up with the plan to fix that problem. It is a bizarre plan from our point of view, but apparently it worked for them. The dead man’s brother would take his widow and have a son with her, and this son would be the heir of the dead man.

Like I say, pretty weird, but it kind of made sense in their world. So anyways, these Sadducees come up with a somewhat ridiculous scenario in which an entire family of seven brothers dies one after the other after being married to the same woman one after another. Their argument is that there can be no resurrection simply because, in that society a woman was defined absolutely by her relationships, particularly her relationship with her husband. They think that there can be no resurrection because it will be unclear basically who she belongs to in the next life. You can’t have that!

So, we have lots of reasons to simply dismiss what they are saying. Their question is misogynistic, in that they assume that a woman has no identity apart from her husband, and it is based on an archaic law that makes no sense to us. But I’m not so sure that we should just dismiss what they’re saying. There is a kernel of truth in it.

Let me ask you this, who are you apart from your relationships? You are somebody, of course. You do have your own independent identity. But in many ways that identity has been shaped and formed by your relationships.



You are who you are because of who your parents were and what they shared with you and put in you. You are also somebody's sibling, somebody's friend, maybe somebody's mother or father. And, of course, there are particular relationships, like your relationship with your spouse, that have contributed much more than all the rest.

All of these relationships affect you, change you. Therefore, there is not just one you in this life but rather one long progression of yous as you grow and change throughout your life. So, who will you be in the afterlife? The person you were in the prime of life? What would it mean to be reunited in the afterlife, say, with your grandmother who may have known you and loved you when you were a child but who knows nothing about the person you have since become?

We remember today and tomorrow in particular those who served in wars and conflicts and in other very dangerous situations – giving special thought for those who went to serve and did not return, many of whom lie in graves far from home. We think with fondness of being reunited with them some day.

But, at the same time, you have to ask about what that reunion is supposed to look like. They say, you know, that the relationships that are formed in combat situations are unlike most any others. Men and women under fire together will form iron bonds with each other that will never fail.

In fact, so powerful are these relationships that it is said that, when it comes right down to it, they are what enable people to fight in impossible situations. In the heat of combat, soldiers won't necessarily put their lives on the line for abstract notions of patriotism or nationalism, but they will not hesitate to do so for their friends who stand on the right and on the left of them. The bonds formed in combat have, without doubt, changed the course of many a battle.

And of course, when you speak of such meaningful relationships, it is only natural for those who stood together under fire to want to be reunited with one another. But do you remember the words that we often repeat at this time of year: *"They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn."* That is what we say of those who did not come back from war. So, say that you have one comrade who is killed in World War II in Europe, dead and buried at, say 20, years of age. He doesn't return and he doesn't get to grow old. But his friends do. They return home, they marry and have children and have many things happen in their lives that change them and affect them profoundly. And then they die at 60, 70, 80 or more years of age.

They can be reunited in the afterlife, that's what we believe, isn't it? But what sort of reunion would it be between a 20 year old and an 80 year old who were once so close but who have now been so separated by life experience – one frozen in time while the other has changed profoundly? It is questions like that that make the afterlife so hard to conceive of. If I am to be raised after death, what person will be raised, the person that I was, the person that I am or

the person that I will be one day. As a resurrected person, how will I then relate to those I have known before?

Well that is the issue that the Sadducees are actually raising with Jesus with their question, and it's a pretty good one. But, fear not, for Jesus is not going to leave us hanging with this one. Jesus actually has an answer to the difficult question posed by Sadducees. Actually, there are two answers. First of all, Jesus says this: **“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 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.”** Now what is Jesus saying here? He is not saying that there is no reunion with people that we love in the afterlife. What he is saying is that the relationships that we seek to re-establish in the afterlife just don't work the way there that they do here. In other words, you may think that you know how it's going to work and how we're going to relate in the afterlife, but you are wrong. You have no idea.

And that is actually the biggest issue that we have in all our talk of a life after death: we don't have a clue what it's like. This is simply because we don't have the minds to comprehend it, nor do we have the language to describe it. Everything that the Bible says, everything that *anyone* has ever said of the afterlife, is not and cannot be an exact description. At best, what we have are similes and metaphors. We cannot say what heaven is, we can only say that it's kind of like this or kind of like that. But just because we cannot precisely describe it, that does not mean that it is not real. Just because we do not know how we will relate to one another after we are raised, does not mean that we will not be raised.

So, these words of Jesus are ultimately very helpful, but they might still leave us with some questions. If we can't offer a precise definition of the afterlife, after all, doesn't that make it a bit hard to take comfort in the very idea of an afterlife? And if we can't precisely define the relationships that we'll have with those who have gone on before, how can we be sure that there will be comfort in being reunited?

But, as I said, Jesus also has a second response to their question. He talks about that famous scene when God met Moses at the burning bush and said that he was **“the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”** Now, of course, by the time Moses came along, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had been dead and buried for a very long time. Nevertheless, Jesus notes, God spoke of being their God in the present tense, not in the past. That is like if I were to say, I am the brother of Robert. When I use the present tense, it implies that my brother Robert is still alive (which indeed he is). So, Jesus is saying that God was saying the same thing about the patriarchs long after their deaths, that they were still alive. Therefore, the conclusion is, there must be an afterlife.

So, Jesus' argument does make some good, logical sense. But I think the Jesus is doing more here than just offering a logical argument to counter that of

the Sadducees. Honestly, I would be disappointed if that was all he was saying because who wants to build your argument for the reality of life after death on something as minor as the tense of one verb in one thing that God once said.

But no, Jesus is not saying that it's just about the tense of the verb. He is saying that it's actually about the nature of God. **“Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”** You see, the true promise of the resurrection is not found in which of seven husbands a certain woman was married to and what happens to that relationship after she dies, it is found in her God. Her relationships might change; *she* might change with time and experience, but God remains the same and to God she is always alive.

And God is not just the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, but also the God of the soldier who was killed in action and left in some graveyard on Vimy Ridge and he remains alive to God. The same God is the God of the soldier who stood in the line beside that other soldier but came home and married and grew old and had a whole lifetime. Their reunion is possible because both are equally alive to God.

I get to preach at a lot of funerals – I find it to be a great honour – and so I am often very attuned to the things that make people feel a bit better at such times. And I know that people do talk a lot about that idea of being reunited someday. I know that promise is real, but Jesus is right, we really can't imagine what that future life is going to be like. It is far beyond our imagination and understanding. So how do I know that it is true? I know it because the same God who is there for us with each breath, giving us life and hope and meaning, is the God who will always be there for us. To God we are all alive, now and always and that it what provides for us the foundation of hope beyond this present existence. That is enough. That is everything.