

The Best is Yet To Be

By: Stephanie Doeschot

November 10, 2019. What if death is a second birth? Pastor Stephanie's sermon today is about the Sadducees trying to box Jesus in with a ridiculous question, to which they think they know the answer. But Jesus doesn't take the bait, and instead teaches about the different kind of relational life we will enter in the next life.

*** Transcript ***

Now, I'm no lawyer. But I've heard enough about the role of trial lawyers to know that they largely live by this rule: never ever ask a question to which you do not know the answer. That should probably be a rule that people who give children's messages should also live by. Can you imagine asking an open-ended question, and then having the enthusiastic children give a multitude of answers that may or may not be related to the question? I know I've done it. You hear me do it. And children, I am only saying this in a joking kind of way. I actually really enjoy hearing what's on your minds. So please, whenever I ask the question, I do like to hear your answers. Just for the sake of time though, we can't always hear all the things that you have to say. So sorry about that. Maybe we can try and catch up downstairs after the service. The truth is, as we give children's messages it is too true that we are often fishing for some specific answers that we want to elicit. So we do think we know the answers that we want to hear, before we ask the question.

I could really step into dangerous territory, by mentioning how this business of asking questions to which we already at least think we know the answer goes awry between married couples. For example, one couple might inquire of the other, "Who told our daughter that she could stay out until 1:00am tonight, hmm?" Or, "Who said we'd go on vacation with your family for a whole week? I don't think it was me." Well, that line of questioning isn't very effective, is it? Or very wise. In most cases in life I like questions where people are genuinely curious to know more, to learn something, to find out about another person, what he or she thinks or feels and why that is so. I imagine you appreciate those kinds of questions better, too.

It seems to me that Luke, in our gospel reading today, goes to great lengths to express the various ways in which questions were posed to Jesus throughout his ministry. People came to him in chapter 10 and said, "Who is my neighbor?" seemingly wanting to understand that commandment better. So, Jesus happily obliged them with a story about a Good Samaritan that made a point, one that stretched them for sure, but it was a great and helpful answer. In chapter 11 the disciples say, "Would you teach us to pray?" and there we have the Lord's Prayer. Helpful question, helpful answer. But now, deep into Luke's gospel, we enter a realm something more like a courtroom scene, where the questioners are less interested in learning something than they are in entrapment.

These questioners pose their queries in ways that are designed to box Jesus in. They are crafty like that. No matter how he answers, one group will cheer him and the other group, they figure, will despise him. So in chapter 20 alone, on two occasions they pose questions that will force Jesus, they think, to say something that will rile the crowds. First they ask him by what authority does he teach, and then they ask him whether it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar. Both intended to divide. In each case, Jesus gives a straightforward answer that does not play into their hands, but is clear enough to those who are willing to ponder the meaning of his answers.

Now we come to today's gospel reading, and the religious group called the Sadducees are pulling out all the stops. They pose a question to Jesus in which they think they know the answer. It's about the resurrection, and they are known for not believing in the resurrection. They're also known as the scribes meaning that they are considered quite the experts on all things in the Torah, the books of the law. So they draw upon a concept known as levirate marriage in the Torah, in which to preserve a man's lineage a woman must bear a son to carry on. If the man dies before a son is produced, the wife is given in marriage to the man's brother and any resultant son is known as the dead brother's son. It's patriarchy with a capital "P" and these scribes see nothing wrong with the fact that women in these scenarios are viewed as property. They accept this as their gospel truth and draw the story to present to Jesus all the way to the point of ridiculousness:

Suppose a man dies. His wife is passed down to his brother. That one dies. She's passed on again to the next brother, and on and on this goes, they say, through seven husbands. This is not only a tragic story. From a woman's point of view it's downright creepy. But not to the Sadducees. They continue, "Okay, Jesus. Whose wife will she be then in the resurrection?" Jesus will not be trapped. He sees what they're doing. So he pivots to a vision for all those who are actually interested in what he knows about life after this life, to cheer and to comfort them and us, rather than to engage in this silliness. As pointed out by serious scholars, as far as the Sadducees were concerned Jesus had two options. Option one: he could pick one husband out of the seven and proclaim that particular pairing was linked forever. But that answer would be indefensible. After all, you cannot choose one when all the marriages were considered legitimate. Therefore Jesus, they assumed, would be forced to pick option two. That option would have Jesus acknowledging that he had been living a lie proclaiming an untruth. If the woman could not belong to just one husband in the age of resurrection, and yet she certainly could not belong to all the husbands in the age of resurrection, the logical conclusion would be that there is no age of resurrection. Once they forced Jesus to admit that, Jesus would be unmasked as a religious charlatan and the people would take matters into their own hands, they reasoned.

But Jesus did not take that bait. He could have said to the Sadducees, "You're comparing apples to oranges. You clearly do not know of what you speak." But without saying, "You don't know what you're talking about," he instead starts from his platform that resurrection is real. He says that in this life we marry, but in the next life there is no marriage. We enter into a different kind of relational life. Lest we be concerned about that, because it is so unknown to us, he assures us that in the resurrection age we cannot die anymore, because we are like angels, and are children of God being children of the resurrection. Just to make sure that the Sadducees know that he too knows what's in the Torah, he reminds them of the story of the burning bush where a person they consider their hero, Moses, speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob -- present tense. He doesn't say he was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob while they were alive. No, he says he is continuing to be their God now. And then, if we must be in a courtroom-like setting, Jesus says in summation, now he is God not of the dead but of the living. For to him all are alive. Mic drop.

The lectionary cuts off the next two verses, but I think they need to be shared. Some of the teachers in the law responded, "Well done, teacher." This needs to be noted so that we don't fall into believing what the made-for-TV movies of Jesus' life can cause us to think -- that all of the Jewish religious leaders were out to get Jesus. That was simply not the case. Many of them did give Jesus an honest hearing and honor his teaching. Many, many, many of the Jews were Jesus' first followers and the initial members of the church. So there is that "well done, teacher" comment, and then the chapter ends on this note: "And no one," I think referring to those who would entrap Jesus, "dared to ask him any more questions."

All well and good for us. Jesus tells us that God is the god not of the dead, but of the living. For to him, all of them and us are alive. If Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are still living, then somehow those we have loved are alive. And so we will be when we pass from this life to the next. Jesus is saying that there is a continuity to the life we live in God. Yes, we do pass from this life. Since this is the only life we know it is hard to imagine life beyond this one. All we can know for sure is that it is a life beyond our imaginations: no marriage, but then no marriage breakups, either. No boundaries of who is related to whom. No hierarchies. No patriarchy, or matriarchy for that matter. No injustice. No violence. No illnesses. Every tear shall be wiped away -- that gets me every time -- and we will gather around the throne of God with joy and celebration. There are so many images in scripture that sustain and give us hope regarding this. Jesus says in his Father's house there are many dwelling places where a place is prepared for us to dwell in, to go on living. The promises for life beyond this life, while difficult to fully grasp how they will be experienced, depict relationship with God and others that is beyond our wildest imaginations of ongoing abundant life, peace, beauty, and joy. We accept and affirm that death is not the end. But do we really grasp the continuity of life in Christ that we experience now, and will continue to experience throughout eternity in a new fashion?

Father John O'Donohue uses a metaphor to help us think about the continuity of life we have with God, who is as Jesus says, not the god of the dead but the god of the living and in whom all are alive. What if we got it all wrong about death, O'Donohue says? What if we got it backwards by thinking of death is an ending? What if death is a second birth? Imagine if we could talk to a baby just before it was about to be born and describe to the baby what's going to happen? We might say to the little one, "You're about to be expelled from the shelter of the womb where you have been formed. You'll be pushed along a passage where you will feel at every moment that you are being smothered. You'll be squeezed to the point where you'll feel like you're suffocating. You'll be on a journey without a map. You won't know where you're going, and anything can happen to you. Finally after a long time, you'll be pushed out into the vast vacancy with cold, bright, merciless light, and then the cord that connects you to your mother whose life has sustained yours? Well, that will be severed." If you could tell a baby this, you could imagine them saying, "Oh, no. I don't want to go. It's been so great in here. But now it sounds like I'm going to die. I'm going to lose everything that's been wonderful and comfortable." We might think of death like a baby might think of birth, if a baby could think about it. We tend to see the destructive side of death, to see what we are losing and that's natural. It is much harder to think about a bigger world actually opening up to us. In the resurrected life we enter into a new kind of relationship with God in which the loneliness of space and time will no longer have a hold over us. No one can tell us exactly what that will be like. There is not a map, and things that are unknown to us can frighten us.

That's why Jesus' words in the gospel are so compelling. He does not engage in a theological discussion. He moves into the relational side of things. He explains how we humans are related to God and how God is related to us. Just like all those who've gone before: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, perhaps your grandparents and mine, and all whom we remembered an All Saints' Day, are very much alive. God is still their god, Jesus said, because they are alive to God. God is still actively in a relationship with them. This is the message Jesus gave the Sadducees about resurrection: our relationship simply can never be broken with God. With that assurance, we can live in freedom and joy. The life we have in Christ is already rich and meaningful, and we need to cherish each day that we have breath and look for the ways that God's grace, power, and love are present to us and to the world around us.

But the best is yet to be. We are on a continuum that extends farther than any I can see or anyone's imagination can fully grasp. With Job we can say, "I know that my redeemer lives." Because he lives, we too will live forever with him. He is not the god of the dead but of the living, because to him all are

alive.

Thanks be to God for this inexpressible gift.

*** Keywords ***

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