

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today in our Gospel lesson the Sadducees make their first and only appearance in this Gospel according to Luke. The Sadducees however, do show up five times in the continuation of Luke's Gospel we know as the Acts of the Apostles or simply the Book of Acts. I want to begin with the Sadducees today because what they believe as Jewish elitists may be the mirrored difference of our beliefs as Christians, at the same time we are in some ways very similar. What I mean by this is that, the Sadducees do not believe in heaven or an after-life, however, what we assume about heaven and the after-life is nothing at all like heaven or an afterlife. In other words, neither side of the argument about an after-life or of heaven really have clue about it.

The Sadducees were members of the Jewish aristocratic sect that was made up primarily of priests and the wealthy elite. They only accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, known as either the Torah or the Pentateuch, or the books of the Law of Moses. They reject all others writings, notably those of the Prophets because the prophets forecast a savior and "new heaven and a new earth," (Isaiah 65:17, 66:22). The Sadducees held significant power, controlling the temple and temple worship as well as the supreme Jewish judicial and religious court system we know as Sanhedrin which was made up of elite Sadducees and Pharisees. They held dearly to their literal interpretation of the Torah and rejected any concepts NOT mentioned explicitly in the written law...such as the resurrection of the dead.

Luke's Gospel focuses on the broader story of the early church and its Jewish roots. And this is why they only show up once here in Luke's Gospel. The Sadducees' core beliefs, such as their rejection of heaven or an after-life, angels, and spirits, are emphasized in the book of Acts, which deals more with the theological disputes of the early church.

I begin with the Sadducees because the question they are asking Jesus is not a question because they want to know about heaven, they are merely attempting to show how ridiculous the concept of heaven is and how it cannot possibly work according to their understanding of Jewish Law. And, for a bonus, they think with their questioning they can make a fool of Jesus in front of all his followers. The Sadducees' question to Jesus is attacking the notion of an after-life based on the continuation of this life. The basic premise of their question is...if there is a continuation of this life, then according to the levirate marriage legislation of Deuteronomy, this woman would have to be one of the brothers' wives. Here is the heart of the passage that is before us today.

Jesus is not only challenging the Sadducees to see the reality of heaven, he is also showing us the same thing...and what he is saying is that heaven is not confirmed or unproven by our assessments, theories, or assumptions. While the Sadducees try to prove that heaven cannot exist, likewise, we attempt to prove heaven exists according to our theories, assumptions, and sentiments.

So, what is heaven for us, and what will heaven be like? Will we see the bloated-constipated-drug-addicted Elvis or will we see the handsome fit and trim Elvis in his gold lamé suite? Will we see our loved ones as children, young adults, or old and frail? Will we recognize those who died young? John Prine, one of my favorite singer-songwriters, in one of his last songs he wrote just before he died, says when he gets to heaven he's going to,

...get a cocktail

Vodka and ginger ale
Yeah, I'm gonna smoke a cigarette that's nine miles long
I'm gonna kiss that pretty girl on the tilt-a-whirl
'Cause this old man is goin' to town.¹

Yes, I know these questions and examples are somewhat ridiculous, but at the same time, our assumptions about heaven are, frankly just as absurd. They are absurd because we project ourselves, our comforts, our sensibilities, our sentimentalities, and our understandings all on what we think heaven is, *HOW* heaven works, and who *we feel* is deserving to be there. And in the same fashion the Sadducees are projecting their selves, their comforts, sensibilities, and their human understanding on heaven to prove that it *doesn't* exist.

The Law that the Sadducees hold so dearly to is a law that was given to them from God. So, it is in the context of that Law that they attempt to show how illogical they believe this life to come is. They are asking Jesus this question of whose wife will this woman be in the age to come with the assumption that heaven or the life to come will be a continuation of this life, so therefore the life to come needs human propagation to continue or it dies out.

I think the real absurdity of this question of the Sadducees, along with our assumptions about heaven is that we base heaven on what we know and not on God. But, *IF* our understandings and assumptions about this after-life and heaven apply in heaven, then God abides by us, a fallen humanity and God along with heaven is contained in our understandings. And I pray that our resurrection is beyond our theories and our sentimentality.

The answer that Jesus gives to the Sadducees about the life to come directly attacks the premise of their question and I believe Luke includes this solo encounter with the Sadducees to attack our assumptions as well. Jesus reminds the Sadducees that:

... "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵ 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. (Luke 20:34b-35)

In the minds of the Sadducees, the continuation of life along with a name, only takes place through marriage...that's why they want to know whose wife this woman will be. This woman, sad to say according to that time-period and the thinking of the Sadducees, is only a wife to carry on a name after the male spouse is gone. But Jesus is reminding them that marriage is not necessary to perpetuate life because there is no more death in the life to come or in heaven. Furthermore, our concepts, theories, and paradigms no longer apply. Simply put, when the Sadducees ask,

³³ In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?

It doesn't matter; she is raised to new life in the resurrection...a new life that is not like the life we know here on this earth. Her marriage status doesn't matter...marriage no longer applies nor is it needed because life is eternal and there is no need for procreation. Even the prophet Isaiah when speaking for God to a people who were silent before God, we hear God say this to the people:

I will create a new heaven
and a new earth.

¹ "When I Get to Heaven" John Prine, 2018 Oh Boy Records, *Tree of Forgiveness*, track #10.

Past things will not be remembered.
They will not come to mind. (Isaiah 65:17)

In the following chapter from Isaiah
we hear this:

The new heaven and earth that I am about to make will continue in my presence,” declares the Lord. “So your descendants and your name will also continue in my presence. (Isaiah 66:22)

Our imaginations and our understandings along with the Sadducees today, cannot fully turn away from the temporal to the spiritual. We ourselves along with our imaginations are bound by our sense of chronology, our sense of order. The resurrection and the concept of an after-life is beyond our intellect and our knowledge. It is therefore, through our faith, and NOT our intellect or our knowledge, that we know our redeemer lives. God offers us salvation through Jesus Christ, this means, God forgives of sins...we are reconciled with God, and in that reconciliation, we are given the gift of eternal life. We are promised a new life empowered by the Holy Spirit, which is a living hope, an inheritance that is kept in heaven. This is made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and is received through faith and grace. And it is in this promise of the redemption and resurrection of Jesus that we live. It is the promise of this redemption and this resurrection that gives us hope right now, today, and not the details of how it all works.

How then will we live in the promise of this resurrection?

With the resurrection there is hope...and we live in the hope of our redemption and our resurrection. Saint Paul reminds the church in Rome of this hope when he writes:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ² which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³ the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴ and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵ through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶ including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, (Romans 1:1-6)

Our human interpretations and systems will not break nor confound the promise and the hope of the life to come. Jesus seems to tell the Sadducees and us to not get caught up in the minutia but recognize that we are caught up in the promise of the resurrection and, in that promise for our future, there is hope and hope never disappoints.

This is what we share as we go from this place. This is how we serve the Lord when we share the promise of hope not just with those who meet our standards but we share the hope of the resurrection with all. How then shall we live in this hope? Saint Paul reminded the people Philippi this way:

^{2:1} If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ~~² make my joy complete:~~ be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of

you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, (Philippians 2:1, 2b-5)

Christ Jesus gives to us all a future, the promise of hope in the life to come. This is the Good News, this is what we share, this is the heart of what we learn today. So today, we live in the promise of Jesus Christ; that is the promise of our redemption and resurrection...it is the promise that gives us all hope now and always, until the end of the ages. May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loves us and through grace also gives us eternal comfort and hope...may that hope comfort our hearts and strengthen our faith as we go from here this day knowing full well that our redeemer lives and that we will live also in His eternal kingdom...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen