

Proper 27C 2016 Sermon

November 6, 2016

Luke 20:27-38

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

Jesus said to them, "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. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And 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. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive."

Most of you know that my dog Serena has run away twice in less than a year. A dog trainer has offered his services to help Serena with whatever it is that is causing her to run away and fail to return home.

Serena's biggest issue became evident the very first day of training: she has all the symptoms of attention deficit disorder. I may have a piece of liver sausage in my hand (which she loves!), yet all it takes is a sound a block away, or the scent of something that has just wafted through the air, and her attention is immediately drawn toward that sound or scent.

When she ran away on Ash Wednesday, she was gone for 5 days, during which time she got sprayed by a skunk, hurt her foot so that she badly limped, had to scrounge for whatever food or water she could find, and, when finally found, was so thirsty and hungry that she inhaled all the water or food I could give her and was so exhausted that she slept for 24 hours straight. She was found in Wolf Park where there are coyotes always looking for their next meal.

Does Serena not know that as long as she is with me, she will have plenty water and food and affection, and she will be safe from skunks and hungry coyotes? Yet the distracting sounds and smells coming from all directions seem to draw her away like a powerful magnet. For some reason I don't understand, these distractions are often stronger than the grounding of her own home, where she is safe and loved and nourished.

But maybe I **do** understand. For if I am honest, the same thing easily happens to me – and perhaps to you. All manner of distractions – the multiple news outlets hawking their sensationalized stories, the programs and advertisements on television, Facebook, iPad, iPhone, email, texting – all these, and more, can too easily capture my attention and, if I am not constantly practicing prayer, can draw me away from my center, my home in God, into the maelstrom of this world’s distractions and anxieties.

There is a perfect example in today’s Gospel. In the Judaism of Jesus’ day, there were two groups of religious leaders who disagreed with each other (not unlike our two political parties today). The Sadducees focused all of their attention on the Torah, the Law; while the Pharisees gave considerable weight to the later books of the Hebrew Bible – the prophets, the Wisdom literature, etc. Since no mention of resurrection is found in the Torah, the Sadducees didn’t believe in resurrection; but the Pharisees *did*, as did Jesus. In today’s Gospel, the Sadducees give Jesus a hypothetical scenario which they think proves that resurrection is absurd. Now, we must first understand that in Jewish law, if a man died childless, then his brother was required to marry the deceased man’s widow and have children with her, because in ancient Israel, where there **was** no concept of resurrection, “eternal life” was understood in a very physical, materialistic way: “eternal life” meant that your seed, your bloodline, your progeny, your descendants would never die out. To the Sadducees, then, talk of “resurrection of the dead” conjured up images of dead people returning to this space-time continuum and being subject to the same physical and biological laws that are now in effect. So they ask Jesus, “If a woman’s husband dies childless and the deceased man’s brother marries her and also dies childless, and on and on until all seven brothers have married her and died childless, whose wife will she be when all her dead husbands are resurrected and return to this mortal sphere?”

But the Sadducees’ concept of resurrected life is not at all Jesus’ understanding of resurrected life, eternal life! Jesus responds to the Sadducees by saying that those who enjoy resurrected life are children, not of *Abraham*, perpetuating and multiplying Abraham’s DNA on this earth, but rather are children of **God**, perpetuating and multiplying God’s Spirit on this earth. Fr. John Shea notes that *Jesus’* concept of resurrected life, eternal life, is “defined by the operations of the Spirit rather than the restrictions of the flesh. Resurrection of the dead does not look to a future time when the dead will rise and go on just as they did when they were alive. It is a whole new order of existence.”¹ And this existence is **now**, in the present! To prove this, Jesus quotes the Torah, the Sadducees’ own source of authority, reminding them that in Exodus (3:6, 15), God says to Moses, “**I am** the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” using the *present* tense. God does not say, “**I was** the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” but rather “**I AM** the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” These patriarchs, Jesus is saying, are *alive* in God! And Jesus insists that this *being alive in God* is the **heart** of the Jewish faith, not some derivative social regulation about widows marrying brothers-in-law. Jesus is saying to the Sadducees (and I use John Shea’s

words): “Those who read the works of Moses without distinguishing the center from the periphery are caught in trivia... God always ‘is’ and those who are of God always ‘are.’ **This** is what ‘resurrection of the dead’ means.”²

My friends, I feel this speaks directly to us today! Like my dog Serena, *we* are constantly distracted by, and drawn to, that which does NOT feed and nourish us, but rather lures us away from our true home, centered in God. The many distractions of this world draw us out of our center, out of its grounding in resurrected life, out of our oneness in God, out of the Kingdom of God, out *into* the periphery, the social constructs of our day – just as the Sadducees were. And what is the result? The American Psychological Association recently did a survey in which they found that more than half of American adults – both Democrats and Republicans – report that the 2016 election is a somewhat or *very* significant source of stress.³ Like Serena, we are pulled like a magnet toward this or that distraction with its **claim** of utmost importance. The latest scandal in the presidential campaign, the inflamed rhetoric, the name-calling, the conspiracy theories, the doomsday scenarios that each candidate insists will inevitably happen if their opponent wins the election – all of these *seem* of utmost importance. And so we get such ec-centric – literally “out of center” - situations where, to give one example, staunchly moralistic Christian leaders are discounting egregious moral lapses in their preferred candidate! And that’s just one example of what happens when we lose our center and are distracted and drawn away to the periphery.

In a recent article, the Episcopal News Service noted that the Episcopal Church has a vital role to play in post-election “after-care.”⁴ If recent promises about not accepting the results of the election if one’s candidate does not win are followed through, then it means there will only be *more* polarization following the election. But, my friends, **we** are not living in the *materialistic* reality in which the Sadducees lived; we who are in Christ are living in the *spiritual* reality of the Kingdom of God, where healing and reconciliation **must** happen. The mission of the Church - God’s mission, Christ’s call on our lives – will go on, no matter **who** wins. And we – the body of Christ which is Christ Church – are called to join in that mission, from which we must *not* be distracted: the mission to be healers and reconcilers in a broken and divided world.

AMEN

¹ John Shea, *The Relentless Widow*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006, p. 307

² *ibid.*, p. 308

³ <http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2016/10/presidential-election-stress.aspx>

⁴ <http://episcopaldigitalnetwork.com/ens/2016/11/03/episcopalians-on-cutting-edge-with-election-season-pastoral-care/>