

## Proper 27C 2019 Sermon

November 10, 2019

### *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, a few years ago, my dog Serena ran away twice in less than a year. A dog trainer friend offered his services to help Serena with whatever it was that was causing her to run away. It became evident the very first day of training: Serena has all the symptoms of attention deficit disorder. I may have her favorite treat in my hand, yet all it takes is a sound a block away, or the scent of some other animal that has just wafted through the air, and her attention is immediately drawn toward that sound or scent, and off she goes.

The first time she ran away, 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 and 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 of water and food and affection, and she will be safe from skunks and hungry coyotes? Yet the distracting and alluring sounds and smells coming from all directions seem to draw her away like a powerful magnet. For some reason, these distractions are often stronger than the comfort of her own home, where she is safe and loved and nourished. I don't understand.

But, on second thought, maybe I **do**. For if I am honest, the same thing *easily* happens to me – and perhaps to you. All manner of distractions – television, Facebook, email, texting, the multiple news outlets hawking their sensationalized stories with a sense of urgency, politicians warning that the world will end if they

are not elected, the fascinating stories on my iPad's Apple News – all these, and more, can too easily capture my attention and can draw me away from my center, my home in God, into the maelstrom of this world's distractions and anxieties. *Good* things, too, can draw me away from my center in God; for I can easily fill up every moment of my day with “good” activities of one sort or another, so that there seems not to be any time for re-centering myself in God, re-grounding myself in my soul through faithful prayer. It is so easy to slip into the mindset that it is all those “external things” which are most important. I forget what organization development expert Otto Scharmer teaches the Fortune 500 companies who hire him: that it is not so much *what* you do, but **where** your actions are coming from that makes all the difference – whether from your ego, your false self, or from your true self, your spiritual self.

Today's Gospel offers an example of how a total focus on externalities can draw us away from our true home, our spiritual life in the Kingdom of God.

In the Judaism of Jesus' day, there were two groups of religious leaders who disagreed with each other. The Sadducees focused all of their attention on the Torah, the **first** 5 books of the Bible; 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 belief in resurrection is absurd. Now, we must first understand that in Jewish (Levirate) 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, would never die out. Until the end of time, your biological descendants would be walking the face of this earth. *That*, for the ancient Jews, was eternal life.

To the Sadducees, talk of “resurrection of the dead” conjured up images of dead people physically returning to this space-time continuum and being subject to the same physical and biological laws that are now in effect in this earthly existence. The Sadducees 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.”<sup>1</sup>

And this new order of existence is to be lived **now**, in the present! To prove this, Jesus quotes the Torah, the Sadducees’ own source of authority, reminding them that God says to Moses, “I **am** the God of your father, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” using the *present* tense (Exodus 3:6, 15). God does *not* say, “I **was** the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” but “I **AM** the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” These patriarchs, Jesus is saying, are still *alive* in God! And Jesus insists that this *being alive in God* is the **heart** of faith, the real meaning of eternal life; not the eternal perpetuation of a man’s DNA through his biological descendants. 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.”<sup>2</sup>

My friends, 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, our spiritual home, our center in God. The many distractions of this world draw us out of our center, out of its grounding in resurrected life, out of our true self, out of our oneness in God, out *into* the periphery, the social constructs of our day – just as the Sadducees were drawn out into the periphery by their social constructs. And what is the result? Like Serena, we are pulled like a magnet toward this or that distraction with its **claim** of utmost importance. The latest celebrity scandal; the inflammatory political rhetoric intended to hook us and keep us at the level of our emotional, reptilian brain; the advertisements and junk mail hawking miracle supplements or products with no basis in scientific fact. And so we get ec-centric – literally “out of center,” drawn away from our true center and out into the periphery, into the games the ego-world plays.

My friends, our true center is not to be found in any of the plethora of outer distractions and over-busy-ness in which we often find ourselves (at least, I do!). St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “For we fix our attention, not on things that are seen, but on things that are unseen. What can be seen lasts only for a time, but what cannot be seen lasts forever.” (2 Cor. 4:18) Our final hymn today invites us deeper into our center, into our true selves, into the kingdom of God which is our *real* home, where we are safe, loved, and nourished. Our hymn invites us to:

Come and find the quiet center in the crowded life we lead.  
Find the room for hope to enter, find the frame where we are freed.  
Clear the chaos and the clutter, clear our eyes that we can see  
all the things that *really* matter, be at peace, and simply be.

I pray that we might all find our true center in God, and live our lives, day by day, from that space.

AMEN

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

2 *ibid.*, p. 308