

Proper 27 – 24 Pentecost – Year C – November 7, 2010
Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 18-22; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38
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For those of you who didn't make it to Wednesday evening's service, we talked about how politically correct terminology has led us into the world on tiptoe to the point where we tread carefully around just about everyone and everything. The whole era of being P.C. even makes us reluctant to share the Good News of Jesus Christ for fear of offending someone's spiritual sensibilities. The point is that Jesus really told it like it is, and still managed to maintain a loving and compassionate response and a large measure of mercy in all He said and did. Our lives would be a lot easier today if everyone was as honest *and* as compassionate as Jesus was. Having said that, I think church historian, Roberti Bondi, gives it a good shot. She at least gets ten out of ten for honesty and avoiding the P.C. snare! Here's what she writes about today's Gospel lesson, "Jesus gets himself out of the Sadducees' trap neatly by stating that in the resurrection there will be neither giving nor taking in marriage. I wish he had also made it much clearer to that bunch of jerks [her words] that women, even their own wives, were not the property of their husbands, nor were they put on earth for the sole purpose of providing men with children."

Whatever else the Sadducees were, their lack of belief in the resurrection was not widely held. According to first century historian, Josephus, the Sadducees were the moneyed elite of Jerusalem, who only garnered support amongst the equally wealthy. Their views are not taken seriously by anyone else. As ludicrous as the one bride for seven brothers scenario is, the Sadducees' question to Jesus is indeed intended to be an amusing trap. Yet Jesus does not just laugh it off, or ignore it, He meets the questioners precisely where they are in His careful and persuasive response. Why does Jesus even bother to engage the Sadducees? What's not immediately apparent, is that there is much more at stake here than a simple debate about the resurrection. What is on the line includes the issue of Jesus' authority to interpret Torah, especially the five books of Moses, and most importantly for us, what resurrection living means in this life, and the life to come.

As a start to unpacking this exchange, we need to understand why the Sadducees were so sure of themselves concerning the question of marriage in the resurrection. As a group of like-minded religious folks, the Sadducees only considered the five books of Moses as authentic Scripture. And there is, in fact, nothing in the writings of Moses concerning this issue. In the opening salvo of the debate, they use the Levirate laws of remarriage to mock the more common belief in the resurrection of the dead, one that Jesus clearly shares. As Christians, we might think that belief in the resurrection began after Jesus' own resurrection from the dead. Not so, the elements of belief in the resurrection of the dead, as well as divine vindication of martyrs began much earlier. As far as the Levirate laws on remarriage are concerned, the closest male relative of a dead man's widow was compelled to marry her, and endeavor to produce children in the man's name. Producing progeny is one of two notions of achieving life after death. The second is through the resurrection. For the Sadducees, or any first century Judean man, there is really no question of what a woman may or may not desire on her own behalf. Woman of that era were essentially property, and their most important role was to bear children in their husband's name.

Jesus' response concerning proof of the resurrection uses Moses and his first conversation with YHWH at the burning bush from Exodus 3:6. In that passage, God speaks of being the God of all Moses' ancestors in the present tense, as God of the living. Using Moses' own direct experience with God as recorded in one of the Books of the Pentateuch is the only way that Jesus has any credibility in his response to the Sadducees. Since, part of this challenge is about authority to interpret Scripture, Jesus' cleverly meets the Sadducees on their own ground, maintaining faithfulness to their sacred writings, as well as interpreting that Scripture faithfully. Jesus does not stop with that elegant proof of the resurrection, but includes a most beautiful picture of resurrection life. One that we can embrace now, and one that offers all the faithful hope for the future, in the promise of our new and eternal lives with Christ.

In the first part of Jesus' argument, He speaks of the reality of the resurrection where children of that age no longer marry or are given in marriage, because they have received the gift of everlasting life. In other words, there is no need to bear children in order to achieve life after death. Resurrection life is God's gift to all who are found worthy of a place in that age. The comparison, offered to the Sadducees for due consideration, is between children of this age, and children of the age to come. The latter are named by Jesus as children of God, and children of the resurrection, strongly implying that the Sadducees' beliefs limit and define them purely as children of this age, and unworthy of being considered children of God, despite their religious observances and influence in the Temple at Jerusalem. As we heard earlier, the Sadducees were amply cushioned by their worldly wealth, but were not known for their generosity towards the poor or oppressed. Luke's Gospel is adamant that faith demands a response that is manifest in acts of faithfulness. According to earlier readings in Luke, worth or worthiness is always God's gift – salvation can never be earned. However, our resurrection begins long before our earthly death, and is clearly manifest in those whose lives even now are characterized by mercy, unconditional love, and generosity, in faithful response to our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus' brief description of resurrection life packs an even greater punch for the privileged and self-righteous Sadducees, and anyone else who fits that description today. Heaven and earth are most definitely not the same. In the resurrection life, death has been defeated, and all who have a place are beloved children of God. In the age to come, notice that Jesus speaks of one group of people, "children of God". There is no form of stratification like the systems that exist in our world today, which are used to subjugate others for the sake of profit. Every child of God is equal in God's sight. Those who are dehumanized in this life are restored in the age to come. The oppressed are released. Those assumed to be inferior, are raised up. Women are no longer the property of men. The dignity and equality of women is reflected in the language Jesus uses to talk about marriage. Whereas the words used by the Sadducees, assume the tone and meaning of women as property, Jesus' response incorporates a radical re-interpretation of that patriarchal notion. Jesus speaks with authority proclaiming that women have a joint and equal right in making decisions about marriage. In doing so, Jesus turns the world, as the Sadducees know it, completely on its head. He describes resurrection life in the heavenly kingdom as one where all live in love and hope, equality, peace and freedom, as beloved children of God. As any of the saints in heaven can tell us, you and I only have to die to self in order to be alive in Christ now, and share in Christ's mission to establish the kingdom of God on earth during this lifetime.

Martin Luther says that, "Our Lord has written the promise of resurrection, not in books alone, but in every leaf in springtime." Unlike trees, every season of our lives is potentially a season of growth. Every day we have the opportunity to live into the reality of resurrection hope and equality, justice and peace. In Christ, we are truly "free, at last" as Martin Luther King once said, as part of his dream for racial justice. Freedom in Christ has no limits, no boundaries. It is a gift for **all** God's children. This week let's consider all the ways we can grow into our freedom in Christ. How does our faith in Christ expand and reorient our relationships? How is God working in our lives, transforming our vision so that we see more clearly not only how God desires equality for all, but also what our own role is in making that a reality today? How does loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves, rewrite the world's rules on the value of human life, and especially the lives of all the saints whose voices are silenced by oppression and violence. Life is too short to spend it dancing around trying to conform to an ever-changing kaleidoscope of cultural idols like political correctness. Instead, we are called to focus on imitating Christ, speaking the Truth in love, and living the Good News.

Amen.