

**Sunday, November 10, 2019**  
**Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 27 (Year C)**  
2 Thessalonians 2.1-5, 13-17; Luke 20.27-38  
*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

To quote Admiral Ackbar in the 1983 Star Wars movie, *Return of the Jedi*, “It’s a trap!” While this simple line became one of the most famous and beloved lines from the original Star Wars trilogy, and one of the more humorous, it speaks volumes when applied to the Gospel reading for today. But then again, for Jesus, “It’s a trap!” may be stating the obvious.

Today’s Gospel reading features the Sadducees, a powerful sect of Judaism that was responsible for maintaining the Temple in Jerusalem, as well as overseeing many formal affairs of state. Theologically, the Sadducees were very conservative, holding that only the Torah, the five books of Moses, and only in its written form, were the only valid authority when it came to religious matters. One of the defining points of their theology, which distinguished them from other sects of Judaism such as the Pharisees, was that they did not believe in an afterlife, nor did they believe in the resurrection of the dead. Moses didn’t write about resurrection, so it must not exist. And it wasn’t worth considering, in their not-so-humble opinion.

In today’s Gospel passage, some Sadducees come to Jesus with a hypothetical situation. A woman is married to a man who happens to die before producing an heir. According to Deuteronomy: “When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband’s brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband’s brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel” (Deut 25.5-6). In other words, so that the family line of the dead brother will continue. That the first husband’s name lives on through the son of his wife and his brother. This is what is known as levirate marriage.

In the situation posed by the Sadducees, the woman does marry the brother of her deceased husband. Husband number two dies without producing an heir. So leviratic marriage again kicks in with the next brother, with the same result—no heir. The widow, in course, proceeds to marry all the brothers—seven in all—without producing an heir to carry on the name of her first husband. Seems a little fishy—can you say “black widow?”—but that’s not the point. What the Sadducees want to know is, since the woman had been married to all seven brothers, “In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?” (Lk 20.33a). Of course this is a trap. The Sadducees do not even believe in the resurrection. What they ask of Jesus is ludicrous, is meant to be a joke that exposes, from their perspective, the absurdity of believing in life after death or resurrection. What they are seeking to do is to discredit Jesus, who does believe in resurrection. Obviously.

Seeing through the trap, Jesus provides a well-reasoned response: “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but . . . in the resurrection from the dead [they] neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God” (Lk 20.34-36). He then proceeds to make his case, citing the example

of Moses—appealing to the same authority that the Sadducees do. He uses the example of the burning bush, in which God says “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3.6). Jesus interprets God’s words to Moses as meaning that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, long dead by the time Moses lived, must be alive in the heavenly realm. And Jesus should know. He then concludes that, because of this, those who have died become “children of the resurrection.” That they experience a new life by virtue of being resurrected, of being raised from the dead.

Now, it’s kind of hard to give an accurate assessment of exactly what Jesus meant by saying that for God, all who have died are alive, given that we don’t have the full picture. We don’t know what resurrection looks like for us mere mortals. We don’t know what life post-resurrection will actually be like.

I don’t think Jesus intended for us to get bogged down in the minutiae of what life will be like post-resurrection. Rather, I think he was seeking to make a comment that there are earthly ways associated with this physical life we now live, and there are heavenly ways associated with the eternal life that we will one day enjoy after our own deaths and resurrections. As heavenly beings, the rules and practices of earthly life will not apply. Trying to understand resurrection in earthly terms is futile. It is impossible to use the realities of earthly life as a frame of reference for or as an explanation of resurrection. The Sadducees tried that and failed miserably.

That being the case, all we can really do is focus on what we know of the here and now. What Jesus implies is that we need to recognize that our lives in the here and now do not have a whole lot of bearing on what our existence in the afterlife will be like. That our perceptions of what is important in this life are not necessarily determinant of what life in the hereafter will be like. Well, for the most part. There are things in this life that are important and determinant of what the afterlife will entail, but we’ll get to that.

Jesus seeks to poke holes in the mental exercise concocted by the Sadducees. They are operating on the presumption that status in this life dictates status in the afterlife. In the Sadducees’ way of thinking—and all Judaism at the time, for that matter—men receive their status, their legacy, through their children. Men are remembered and, in a sense, live on, through their offspring. Particularly their male offspring. But what of a woman’s legacy? She may produce children, but does that guarantee that anyone will remember her after she is gone? And what of the woman in the Gospel? The clear implication is that she, who dies childless, dies a nobody. Without children, she has no significance. She has no legacy. But Jesus says, “not so!” In death, in the promise of the resurrection, the woman is restored to importance. Not as a wife. Not as a would-be mother. But as a beloved child of God. She is a child of the resurrection. That is her legacy. A legacy that trumps anything she might have accomplished in this life.

In this life, the woman’s identity was defined by her husband, by her fertility (or lack thereof), even by her sex appeal. But in the heavenly realm beyond this life, those things do not define her. Rather, her existence is defined by the unconditional, eternal love of the God who created her. After death, the woman will be fully alive, in the fullness of who she was created to be. Jesus’ point is that death is not the end. That God is always making things new, making us alive.

That being the case, we need to stop holding on to those things in this life, those pursuits of legacy that are not life-giving, that are deadening, that are transient and will ultimately pass away.

What it all boils down to is identity. The unspoken question in our Gospel is, what things in life define us? Define us here and now. Power, status, our profession, who we know, where we live, what we have? Those things may contribute to our identity in this life, but Jesus tells us that they do not define who we are once we die. For once we die, we enter into a new realm of existence, with a completely different set of rules. With the primary rule, the primary source of our identity, being our relationship with God.

Paul, in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, addresses the subject of our identity as those who follow Christ. He writes: “But we must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. For this purpose he called you through our proclamation of the good news, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers and sisters, stand firm and hold fast to the traditions that you were taught by us” (2 Thess 13-15).

In other words, because we are loved by God, God has chosen us as his own. In this life, we are comforted and strengthened by his Word. It is that Word Jesus Christ, it is that word the Gospel, that defines who we are. That true life is to be found in following Christ and living according to the Gospel. Because of God’s love for us, and what he has given us through his Son, we are forgiven, we are saved, we are made holy by the indwelling of the Spirit. And when we die, we will share the glory of Christ—that is, resurrection.

Admiral Ackbar’s warning—“It’s a trap!”—not only applies to the Sadducees’ mental exercise. It also applies to our own lives. To what we have bought into as being important, as defining who we are. When in reality, what defines us is not of this world. It is the fact that we are in relationship with God. That we are beloved of God. That we are and will be “children of the resurrection.”