

Trivial Pursuit
Luke 20:27-38
November 11, 2007

In recent years it seems as if people are more interested in promoting their own point of view than in listening to someone else's. Political debates aren't debates any more; they're extended speeches given by each candidate, usually about why the other candidate is dead wrong. And in the church, issues that are of concern to many can really no longer easily be discussed in an open forum without anger or finger pointing on both sides erupting; we say in the UMC that we have open minds, but many Methodist clergy and laity that I speak with, and I confess, myself included, have often made up our minds about certain issues, and tend not to want to listen to the other conversation partner. There's no effort, it seems, to walk a mile in someone else's shoes; we just try to cram their feet, whatever size they are, into our own shoes, and then say, "ah, perfect fit, now walk!"

But, of course, this isn't only a modern trend. It was the same way in Jesus' time too. Our gospel lesson today records a conversation Jesus had with some Saducees during his last week in Jerusalem, the week leading up to his death. According to Luke, he and the disciples had meandered towards this destination for some time in Luke's gospel, and Jesus had told stories along the way, parables about the kingdom of God and about the nature of faith. Now he's in the big city, and questions are coming at him from all sides. Everybody wants a piece of Jesus, and nobody much wants to listen to him. Everybody seems to have an "agenda." The gospels usually hold up the Pharisees as Jesus' chief adversaries, but today it's the Saducees.

The Pharisees were composed primarily of laity, who centered their devotion on fulfilling the Law of Moses in every detail, and in a very public way. The Saducees, on the other hand, were the most conservative of the professional clergy; they were also the most tied in to the temple and temple politics and power. They counted as scripture only the first five books of the Old Testament, the Law of Moses. During Jesus' time the contents of what we today call the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament had not been determined. The OT canon was not established until around the year 90, in reaction to the growing popularity of Christian scriptures. So, while the Pharisees were comfortable with the authority of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings, as well as the various rabbinical commentaries on these documents; for the Saducees, if it wasn't in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers or Deuteronomy, it wasn't the Word of God. And in those books they found no reference to the resurrection of the dead. So they did not believe in it.

They believed, instead, in the importance of living on in one's children, in one's descendants. In fact, that was such a necessity that the Law of Moses had a rule that if man died without descendants, his brother must take his widow as his wife and have children for him.

Now the Saducees come to Jesus with a hypothetical story. "There were seven brothers, each of whom married, in turn, the first brother's widow, but each died, one after another without producing a child. Finally the widow herself died. So they ask, Jesus, now in the resurrection – which of course, they don't believe in – whose wife will she be? Their purpose was not to find out what Jesus really thought, or to ask for help in settling the question for themselves. Their purpose was to make Jesus look foolish, and if possible make any Pharisees who happened to be hanging around, look foolish too. Their question is meant only to display how clever and wise they are, and since it's a purely hypothetical situation, they risk nothing in asking.

Hypothetical questions are deadly to the spiritual life. What good does it do to debate how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? They are deadly because they are disconnected from reality – from the joys and sorrows, the peaks and valleys, the flesh and blood of living. They make a mockery of faith by legitimizing the idea that such trivia is actually

important or of spiritual value.¹ They're designed to keep faith at arm's length, to use argument and debate as a means of forestalling a decision or a commitment.

And Jesus won't have any part of it. If I'd been answering their question, I'd probably have said, "Those brothers must have been dumb as posts! Didn't any of them realize that marrying that woman was a death sentence? After the first couple of brothers kicked the bucket, don't you thing the surviving brothers would have caught on – hmmm, there's a pattern here -- marry her and you die!"

So, it's a good thing Jesus' answered and I didn't. His answer is not flippant; it's serious. He tells them that they're asking the wrong question because they ask with the wrong assumptions. They assume that God's future is merely more of the same – that what happened yesterday will happen tomorrow. But God's world is something that God creates anew, a place where God gets what God wants, and as Jesus says, God wants life, wants us all as God's beloved children. Resurrection does not mean a return to earthly life, but what it does mean is that the God who created us does not create us to abandon us, but to bring us finally, somehow, home to the fullness of life. Sister Joan Chittester says, "Resurrection is simply another part of the process of growing into God. "Life" as we know it, 'time' as we chart it, are temporary points to an eternal journey in a universe of unlimited mystery and endless possibility."²

Then, Jesus turns the Saducees' hypothetical question into a personal one. Forget about some made up story about seven brothers. What about Abraham? What about Isaac? What about Jacob? Jesus wants to talk about people who are real, who made a difference in their lives, whose existence forms a part of their own identity. And to prove his point, he uses a story from the part of scripture that the Saducees accept – the story from Exodus of Moses at the burning bush. Jesus recalls God saying, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." God doesn't say "I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," but "I am." And so, Jesus concludes, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob have not disappeared from God's care and presence. They are children of the resurrection, for to God all of them are alive. This is why we can claim, as we did last week in our All Saints' Day communion thanksgiving, that God is the God of Abraham and Sarah, Miriam and Moses, Joshua and Deborah, Ruth and David, the priests and the prophets, Mary and Joseph, the apostles and the martyrs, the God *of our mothers and our fathers, AND of our children to all generations.*

For those who question, who doubt, who wonder – and don't we all question and wonder? Isn't there a bit of the Saducee in all of us? – all I can say is that there are no rational explanations; some things simply have to be experienced. Sometimes we have to go on trust. And resurrection, Jesus seems to be saying, is more about God than it is about us. God is faithful, he says, eternally faithful to God's creation and to God's creatures. We can trust that the God who made us, who loves, and in whom we move and breathe and have our being is the same God in whom we now, as well as later, eternally abide.

Jesus put his trust to the test in his own life by giving it up in obedience to God; he didn't do it gladly, or without pain or suffering. He even had his own moments of questioning and doubt in the process. And yet, when the women came to the tomb to anoint his body for burial, it wasn't there. And wild, fantastic, unbelievable stories began to be circulated about sightings – he appeared in a room to the disciples; he ate with them; he disappeared just as quickly another time when he was recognized. He walked through locked doors; he looked the same, but he didn't. He was recognized sometimes and other times he wasn't. He was the same, but he was different.

Now, there's no way to convince anyone about resurrection. And Jesus didn't really try. In fact, this is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus talks about resurrection and it's not in a very clear or satisfying way. The gospel writers speak at length about Jesus' resurrection, and Paul devotes the 15th chapter of 1Corinthians to an explanation of it. But, I think Jesus knew

something we don't know; sometimes it's better just not to say anything at all, because some things are beyond explanation. Resurrection isn't reasonable; no one has ever figured it out, and every explanation comes up short and sounding kind of fantastic and crazy, like the resurrection stories in the gospel do.

But do we really have to have it all figured out, logically outlined and pinned down and clearly defined? Isn't that effort just as controlling and just as rigid as the Saducees? I think we're given an open-ended invitation by Christ to trust him, to follow him, to do as he has done. And to know in that decision all will be well. In a sense, resurrection isn't a destination; it is a journey. Every day we choose to die or we choose to live; we choose to be bound, or we choose to be free; we choose to celebrate life or we choose to fear death. To quote Sr. Joan again, "Death makes life possible, just one more season in the cycle of creation. Resurrection makes life worthwhile, the growing into God for which we were born and in which process we labor even now." Life, she says, "is a becoming into the fullness of the self that knows no boundaries, grows in form, lives in the spirit of [God's Holy] Spirit, and has no end."³ And that is no trivial pursuit. Amen.

¹ Steve Frazier, "Pastoral Implications," "Thirty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time," *Lectionary Homiletics*, XVIII, vi, 47.

² Sister Joan Chittester, *In Search of Belief*, rev. ed., Liguori, MO: Liguori/Triumph, 2006, p. 195.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 196.