

Luke 20:27-38

The 22nd Sunday After Pentecost / Remembrance Sunday

November 6, 2022

"Daddy, will I see Grandma Betty again?"

Grandma Betty died seven years ago, so this is clearly a question for a minister.

But when my daughter asked me this question a few years earlier, she wasn't asking for a theological essay. Theology leaves the realm of the academy and becomes deeply relevant when it engages our personal convictions and our experiences of life and death. She wanted me to make the theological, personal. She wanted to know where her Grandma was, how she was, what her continuing relationship to Grandma was.

In our Gospel reading, the Sadducees are not asking Jesus about their seven-times-widowed grandmother. She is theoretical to them, an abstraction. Neither do they care about resurrection, particularly. But they do have some skin in the game. The Sadducees are devoted to the written Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These five books are also known as the Pentateuch, which means simply "five books" in Greek. This is their inheritance from their ancestor, Moses. Adherence to this Torah—and only this Torah—means that they are faithful Jews. Any new innovations are to be rejected.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, thought that it was important to continue to interpret and reinterpret the written Torah in light of experience and reflection upon that experience. They referred to this tradition of the interpretation of Torah as the written Torah. It has come down to us in the form of the Prophets and the Psalms: in other words, everything beyond Deuteronomy in the Old Testament.

Deuteronomy ends with the Israelites about to enter the Promised Land; it knows nothing of the rise of King David and his death, the rise and fall of his kingdom, its division into northern and southern halves and the eventual conquest and subjugation of both by foreign powers, including eventually the Romans, who destroyed the Temple in 70 AD. All of this needed to be interpreted by Jewish thinkers who asked what the Torah and the will of God had to do with it.

The Sadducees denied that human life continued in any manner after death, because this idea was not included in the written Torah. But as generation after generation of Jews perished as martyrs to their faith in defiance of generation after generation of persecution by foreign rulers, Jewish thinkers began to see that the justice of God demanded some sort of reward beyond the horizon of death—because the oppressive Roman empire showed no sign of crumbling in a single human lifetime. The idea of a resurrection of the dead is found only in the most recent books of the Old Testament, such as Daniel, written only two hundred years before Christ.

So the widowed woman in the Sadducees' question is a tool in an argument that is very personal for the Sadducees and the Pharisees: can the word of God be trusted, and who can be trusted to interpret it? Resurrection, absent from the written Torah but featured in the newest parts of the oral Torah, is the perfect test case. Jesus is known to agree with the Pharisees' position on this question, so the Sadducees try to embarrass him by demonstrating the absurdity of the resurrection.

Remembrance Day is on Friday. I tend to agree with my colleague who wrote recently that there is nothing noble about war, that we should not speak of noble sacrifice in war, but only of meaningless suffering. I agree that war is a failure of imagination, of the courage to trust the other and work out difficulties in dialogue. I believe that it is a sin. I know for a fact that religious faith has too often been used as an excuse for war and as a tool for recruitment. I know that history has demonstrated again and again the dangers of the Church giving religious blessing to the affairs of a nation-state.

But I also know that, as many people responded to my colleague, wars are fought by human beings. I might get you to agree with me that wars are basically meaningless suffering, but if you or a relative served in war, especially if you or they put life, health, or sanity on the line, it quickly becomes difficult to speak of that as meaningless. Uncle Jack did not die a meaningless death. He sacrificed himself nobly for a cause.

My point is this: that ours is an embodied faith, that it inevitably applies to real people. When it does so, the theological becomes personal.

Jesus makes several points in response to the Sadducees. First, the marriage custom that the Sadducees describe, assumes the reality of death: that the death of a man without children means he vanishes forever, and that a woman - a widow - needs to be attached to a man for her own well-being. So it is the duty of his brother to marry the woman and have children with her, who will be considered his brother's children - thus assuring his posterity. The reality of death also entails some problematic assumptions about gender relationships.

But, says Jesus, the resurrection is not simply the continuation of life as usual. The resurrection is God's redemption of Creation, in which people will have ageless bodies, like angels. They will not die any more, and so the assumptions that lie behind the Sadducees' question will no longer be relevant.

But his second point makes this more personal. The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are heroes of our people, he says: figures from whom we trace our descent and our identity. In Exodus—in one of the stories that the Sadducees treasure—God speaks of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the present tense. In God, these people who have died are alive again.

*This* is one of our fundamental religious intuitions: that in some way, those we love are still alive. This is where the theological becomes personal.

On Remembrance Day we remember those who have died: in our Communion liturgy we remember Jesus. If to dismember someone is to take them apart, to remember someone is to put them back together. In Communion, through the participation of the Holy Spirit, our ritual makes Jesus present to us again.

How do we do so? We recite our salvation history: we describe the history of God with Creation and with humanity. At every stage things come into being and pass away again, but God is always present. In reciting this cycle of life and death we affirm that all things pass away except God. And in God, all of these things culminate in the present moment. In God, Jesus and Moses and Sarah and Isaac and Abraham and Grandma Betty are present with us as we lift the cup and are present in the cup.

Jesus' statements to the Sadducees are theology and poetry, not science. I do not know exactly how the resurrection that he envisions at the end of time will work. But I do know this: in the messy in-between time, in our wars and our festivals, our laughter and our tears, God is with us. And in God, all are alive.