

“Love Endures” A sermon by Lee Ireland
Cathedral City Community Presbyterian Church
November 10, 2019, Thirty-second Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 20: 27- 38

Prayer: Open our eyes to see your Spirit in our life. Open our hearts to receive the blessings you send each day. Guide us with your wisdom so that through us Christ may walk on the earth once again. Amen.

Have you ever really wanted to win an argument? Have you ever tried to point out to someone what you believed to be the truth? Perhaps to do this you posed some questions to the person you were talking with. Your questioning was to get the other person to see the error of his or her way and to see things your way. Or perhaps you've asked questions to get a debate going, not just to make your point. Well, I know I have done all of the above! I can certainly relate to the Sadducees' behavior in today's Gospel. What about you?

In today's scripture, the Sadducees want to trap Jesus with a difficult question. But as so often happens when someone tries to stump Jesus, he turns the tables on them. He reframes the inquiry and answers in a way not at all expected.

An example of Jesus' reframing was the conversation that Jesus had with Nicodemus recorded in John's biography of Jesus' life. Nicodemus stated: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus replied, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." What? Where did that reply come from? Nicodemus came to have an intellectual discussion and Jesus turned it into a spiritual discussion. Not at all what Nicodemus had in mind! Jesus turned the tables on Nicodemus giving him a spiritual answer to an intellectual statement by Nicodemus.

In today's gospel lesson, the Sadducees asked a question to make their point about life after death. Jesus reframes the question and gives an unexpected answer. You know, I would think the Sadducees would have been faster learners! In this same chapter in Luke, we know that the Pharisees had questioned Jesus about paying taxes. Jesus gives the well-known answer: **"Then give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."** Luke then states, **And they were not able in the presence of the people to trap him by what he said; and being amazed by his answer, they became silent.** For you Bible scholars, Luke doesn't name the people asking the tax question of Jesus, but Matthew's Gospel does. Matthew tells us the Pharisees asked the question.

After Jesus' response had silenced the Pharisees, the Sadducees decided to try their hand at tricking Jesus. I'm sure there was a bit of one-ups-man-ship going on here. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were competing groups in the religious elite. The Pharisees believed in life after death and the Sadducees did not. The Sadducees believed that this life on earth was all there was. They believed we served God while here on earth, and after that, we ceased to exist in any form. To give us a bit of history, the Sadducees lost their power when the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD. You see, the

Sadducees were the priests in the Temple. After the Temple was destroyed, there was little left for the group.

When this questioning of Jesus took place, the Temple was still in existence and there was a battle between these two groups of the Jewish religious elite. The Sadducees believed only in the validity of Torah which has become the first five books of the Christian Old Testament. These five books, believed to have been written by Moses, were the only books the Sadducees used to guide their lives and thoughts. The Pharisees based their life after death beliefs specifically on the book of Daniel that clearly presents the view of life after death or the resurrection of the dead.

But back to the story. The Pharisees had struck out. The Sadducees thought they could do better. But did they? The Sadducees question sounds ridiculous. Well, it was! Their question is a case of carrying to the extreme Moses teaching in Deuteronomy that says a brother must marry his brother's widow. Seven brothers dying and leaving the first brother's wife to the next brother and the next and the next. Their question was intended to trip up Jesus and embarrass him in public since the Sadducees believed Jesus could not find a verse that would support the concept of life after death in the Torah, those five books of the Hebrew Bible that were important to them.

Jesus gives them an unexpected interpretation of the Torah. His answer: **“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; ³⁵ 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. ³⁶ Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. ³⁷ 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. ³⁸ Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”**

What Jesus points out to the Sadducees is that we humans, each of us, are not eternal as we exist today. Our life as we know it ends when we die. We will not be deciding whose spouse we are in the age to come. We will be new creatures who will live forever. Jesus says, we **“cannot die anymore, because we are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”** Jesus' answer seems to tell us that humans who are in heaven with God will be like eternal angelic beings. We could have this nature only if each of us were raised from the dead as Jesus points out in verse 37 **“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.”** The story of the burning bush is from the Torah, Exodus 3:6. Thus, Jesus points out to the Sadducees that the Torah contains a basis for belief in the resurrection and eternal life.

Jesus goes on to say in verse 38, **“now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”** This was another pointed response to the Sadducees' question. Remember, the Sadducees believed that this life on earth was all there was. Jesus was pointing out that God does not abandon us when we die.

Jesus is saying that the God we serve here on earth now is also the God we serve in our new life. God relates to us now, on earth, and we relate to God as we live on this earth. Our death does not stop this relationship. Our death is not the end of our relationship with God. After we die, God will continue to be with us.

When I think about this wonderful gift of eternal life that God gives us, I am thankful. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, we don't have to wonder if there is life after death. We can know for sure. We will all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye as it says in First Corinthians.

But what amazes me is this God who gives us eternal life. Why would God do this? As a human, the only understanding I can grasp is that God is motivated by love for us. God gives us eternal life out of love for each of us as God's creatures created and sustained by God.

This story about Jesus' encounter with the Sadducees gives us hope to live and face death. The Sadducees got an answer to their question. Jesus' answer shut them up just as he had earlier silenced the Pharisees. But Jesus' answer to the Sadducees doesn't answer all our questions. It only hints at what life after death may be like.

Many of us have questions about life after death. A small child asks about the death of a beloved kitty. Does the kitty go to heaven? Parents who tragically lose a newborn want to know if they will see their baby in heaven. Or maybe more applicable for today's Gospel, people who have remarried after the death of a spouse may wonder about whose spouse they will be in heaven.

How does God answer our questions? I believe the answer is God's love. I'm reminded of the apostle Paul's famous 'love chapter,' chapter 13 of First Corinthians. Paul says, 'love never dies.' Many of us who have lost loved ones know this. We are acquainted with the tenderness of love that lives on after the loved one dies. This is one simple example that hints at God's love for us. A simple example we can grasp. Whatever else dies, love does not die. God's love for us does not die when we leave our earthly life.

God loves us dearly. That love does not die or end when we die here on earth. God has proven that in the death and resurrection of God's son, Jesus Christ. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus points us to a God whose faithfulness to his creation is immeasurable and inexhaustible. For that we are thankful. For in that faithfulness we find enough love to endure all that life and death will ask of us.