

SERMON  
Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 32

November 11, 2007

Job 19:23-27a

Psalm 17:1-9

2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-38

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

There is one thing that is common among all Pastors. That is, it seems like 95% of the questions we get asked; we never learned the answers to in Seminary. That's because theology is a lot different than, let's say, science.

Science is predictable and measurable. There are calculated formulas that give you predictable outcomes. But when it comes to issues of faith, there are not always clear objective answers.

One time I was counseling a young couple that was going to be married. I had been talking with them for several weeks about all of the various issues that married people face. We talked about communication, extended families, intimacy, conflict resolution, etc.

Finally, it was our last session together before the big day. I was going over the wedding vows that they would be saying to each other. "I take you, John, to be my husband from this day forward, to join with you and share all that is to come, and I promise to be faithful to you until death parts us."

All of a sudden, the young bride got this puzzled look on her face. She said; "I don't believe that." I said; "What don't you believe?" "I don't believe that death parts us," she said. "I don't want to make that promise."

"Well", this is something new" I thought. Eventually, we reworded it so that she was happy, and I was satisfied that it didn't contradict our faith.

But it does raise an interesting point. What is it like in the so-called "next life"? For those of us who are married, will we still be married in heaven? This is the basis of the question that Jesus is addressing in our Gospel story today.

You see, there was this group of Sadducees that were trying to trick Jesus. But in order to better understand Jesus' response, we first need a little background information.

So who were these Sadducees anyway? Well, they were mainly Jewish priests, although some were laypeople. They were very wealthy and well educated. The early Jewish historian, Josephus, describes them as being rude and arrogant. Therefore, they did not have much of a following among the common people.

They were the elite of Jerusalem and sympathetic toward Rome. Their religious views were extremely conservative and literalistic. They only accepted the first five books of the Bible as sacred scripture. Therefore, any other writings apart from Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, or Numbers were irrelevant.

They rejected the doctrines of the soul and the after-life. In other words, they did not believe in any type of resurrection. They did not believe in anything supernatural such as angels and demons. The reason for this was that these things were not mentioned in what they determined was Holy Scripture. Or so they thought.

Now you all know how the Sadducees got their name, don't you? Well, they didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead, that's why they are Sad...u...see!

But then they met Jesus. They had heard of his teaching. A poor carpenter from the insignificant town of Nazareth. They decided to have a little fun with him. "We'll prove to this guy once and for all that there is no life after death," they thought.

"Hey Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother." So far so good, the Sadducees are correct. But then they take this problem to the absurd.

They ask Jesus, "Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally the woman also died." She was probably just worn out. "Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her."

Now remember, the Sadducees did not believe in a life after death, so this was their argument trying to prove their case. Their story even has a touch of humor. If I was the 7<sup>th</sup> brother about to marry this woman, I might be a little hesitant.

And then if you look at it from the woman's point of view: Can you just imagine this poor woman finding seven former husbands waiting for her on the other side of the Pearly Gates! I can't help but think she would go back and check the sign on the gate to make sure that it really did say "Heaven".

Of course this question is absurd. And it also demonstrates the Sadducees low view of women. They saw this wife as little more than family property and a potential family “baby factory.” But Jesus does not shy away.

He reminds them of the story of the burning bush in the book of Exodus where God appeared to Moses and said; “I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” Did you catch that? Not “I was”, but “I am” – present tense. Evidently God was still God to them, even though they had died.

Therefore, if there were no life after death – no resurrection, why would someone have a need for God? It would be assumed that only living people would be in need of a God.

You see, what Jesus was pointing out here is that physical death does not break the covenant relationship they had with God. To us earthlings, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob may be dead, but not to God. For God said I AM their God.

Jesus goes on to say that marriage is for this life. But those considered worthy of the next life will neither marry nor be given in marriage. “Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection.”

Jesus is telling his followers that the life to come will be nothing like the life we live now. It is not just a continuation of what we have in this life; it is glorious beyond our comprehension.

There will be no disease, no suffering, and no death. When Jesus says that there will be no marriage in eternity, he does not mean to say that marriage is bad, only unnecessary. The time and place for procreation is here on earth, not heaven.

Now, you might ask; “What is all this talk about marriage, heaven and eternal life?”  
“What does this have to do with me today, as I go about the routine of every day life?”  
Well, I believe that it has a lot to do with things we experience in the here and now. For it has to do with death and hope. Death and hope.

First, let’s talk about death. I know this is difficult. In the culture we live in, death is one of the last things that we would want to talk about. We have so shut ourselves off from death. Many, if not most people, die in hospitals. Funeral homes are in charge of the dead body. Their task is to make the dead person look as if they are still alive, but just sleeping.

Therefore, death no longer seems real, nor part of the human experience of life. Death is a subject that we reserve for funerals, but not for every day living. We try to convince

ourselves that death is something that only happens to others.

However, recently I think that many of us have been thinking a lot more about death, especially those of us who have friends and relatives serving in Iraq and Afghanistan.

But even when we have our country's young men and women dying in battle, we as a society still do not want to acknowledge the fact that our troops are coming home in body bags. In fact, our government has a policy that will not allow photographs or videos of the flag draped coffins returning home.

Indeed, it seems that we are intent on denying death. Or perhaps we are just trying to deny the ultimate cost of war.

Today is Veteran's Day. It is a day to remember all of the men and woman who have served in our military. We thank them for their courage and their willingness to serve – to put their lives on the line for their country and those they love. And we remember those especially who have lost their lives for the cause of our country's freedom.

Those who have been in war cannot deny death, for they have seen it first hand. Perhaps they have held a dying friend in their arms. Maybe they themselves have taken another human life in the heat of battle.

Perhaps they have walked through fields of rotting dead bodies following massive air strikes. Maybe they have watched wounded soldiers die on the operating table. Yes, those of you who have been in battle know death intimately.

But for those of us who have not experienced this kind of death, we still tend to want to deny it all together. And not only do we like to deny death, but we also want to avoid death.

And don't get me wrong, for I truly believe that that is how God created us. God created us for life. It is in our nature to struggle against death. It is part of who we are to want to live.

Aaron Ralston, a twenty-seven-year old adventurer, climbs Rocky Mountain peaks like most of us would walk around the block. He had summated 45 of them alone.

All of them were in the winter and most of them took place after midnight. Therefore, living life on the edge was nothing new to him.

However, one night as he was climbing in a remote canyon in Utah, an 800-pound boulder suddenly shifted, trapping his right hand against the wall of a narrow crevice. He shoved the rock with his shoulder and tried to chisel it with his knife. He even attempted to hoist the thing with his climbing rope, working it as a pulley. But the boulder didn't budge.

Five days went by, and he was losing hope that he would ever be found. His food and water were now gone. He was drifting back and forth between depression and visions of friends and margaritas. So he felt that he would have to make a decision that would make mere mortals gulp. He decided to sever his right hand to free himself.

He later said, “It occurred to me that if I could break my bones up at the wrist, where they were trapped, I could be freed.” “I was able to first snap the radius and then within another few minutes snap the ulna.” Next, with a cheap multipurpose tool, the kind that comes with a fifteen-dollar flashlight, he began sawing into his own skin.

He recalled, “The blade was so dull that it wouldn’t even cut my arm hairs.” Even so, he persisted in the amputation. He later told reporters, “It took about an hour.” Finally, Ralston broke free of the boulder.

But that was only the beginning. He now faced the challenge of finding human beings. He crawled through a 150-foot ravine, rappelled (one handed) down a 60-foot wall, and then hiked for six miles. Only then did he come across some Dutch tourists, who were able to get him to a hospital.

Downplaying his courage, Ralston explained the escape as a “matter of pragmatics.”

Pragmatics indeed. Save a hand and lose a life, or lose a hand and save a life. When faced with the choice, he chose life. You could say that he was able to avoid death. At least for the time being.

For we all know that death will eventually come our way. That is for certain.

But along with death comes hope. This hope comes to us knowing that even in death, God’s unconditional love for us will never end. After all, God didn’t create us in his image to just let us die someday and rot away into eternity.

I’ve got a question for those of you who are moms. Why do you love your newborn baby? I know that it is a rather silly question, but indulge me a bit. For months, this baby brought you pain. Because of her, you craved strange food, and then threw it up in the morning. She occupied space that wasn’t hers and ate food that she didn’t fix.

You kept her warm. You kept her safe. As soon as she was born, she cried. The room was too cold, the blanket too rough, the light too bright. She’ll wake you up at all hours of the night, and demand your attention every minute of the day. She has done nothing for you; yet you love her.

So why do you love your newborn infant? Because she is yours – your flesh and blood. She is your legacy. She is weak and helpless. She did not ask to come into this world. But now she needs you to survive.

That is how we are to God. We are his idea. We are his face – his hands – his touch – created in his image and likeness. And God loves us, unconditionally. For in baptism, God adopts us and forgives us. And he promises us that nothing can ever separate us from his love.

And to show us this love, he sent his only begotten Son, Jesus. And through his death and resurrection, we no longer need to fear death. For death has ultimately been defeated once and for all.

You see, we are children of the resurrection. We have hope. And this hope is available to us today and everyday. We don't have to wait until we die. In our Gospel story today, Jesus gave us a glimpse of what the resurrection will be like. But until we walk that road ourselves, we still will see only dimly.

For you see, death is not extinguishing the light; it is turning off the lamp, because the dawn has come. Death is not extinguishing the light; it is turning off the lamp, because the dawn has come. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting.  
Amen.

## **CHILDREN'S MESSAGE**

Do any of you know what the word "resurrection" means? (to come back alive)

Do any of you know someone who came back to life again after they died? (Jesus)

In our Bible story today, there were some people called Sadducees who didn't believe that there could be any resurrection. They thought that once you die, you'll be dead forever and ever.

But Jesus told them that that's not true. He said that those who trust in him would not stay dead after they die, but they will live forever.

Some of us have a name for the place that we will live after we die. Do any of you know what we call that place? (Heaven)

What do you think it's like in heaven? (no wars, no hatred, only love and peace, no sickness or disease, no suffering)

Jesus told those who follow him that when they are with God in heaven, they cannot die anymore, because they will be like angels and will be children of God – children of the resurrection.

So even though there is death in this world. Maybe you know someone who has died. And all of us will die someday. But even so, we can have hope because we know that we will live forever with God. We know this because Jesus gave us this promise.

Let's pray.... Holy God, you are the God who gives us life and will be with us forever and ever. Help us to place our trust in you knowing that you love us very much. Amen.