

THE THREAT OF LIFE

© Dr. Gary Blaine

University Congregational Church

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Reading: Luke 20:27-38 (NIV)

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. “Teacher,” they said, “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?”

Jesus replied, “The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls to the Lord, ‘the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive.”

I beg your indulgence for the next few moments to offer some explanation of the characters and the theme that runs throughout the twentieth chapter of Luke’s gospel. The entire chapter is about the authority of Jesus, and the verses that I have read to you represent a challenge from the Sadducees. The Sadducee was a priestly sect that flourished for about two centuries before the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 of the Common Era. They were of Jewish aristocracy and they

were in constant conflict with the Pharisees. This conflict was focused on the content and the extent of God's revelation to the Jewish people. As far as the Pharisees were concerned, God was revealed in the written Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, as well as oral traditions that had been passed down for several generations. The Sadducees refused to consider the possibility that God was revealed outside the written Torah. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees denied the immortality of the soul, bodily resurrection after death, and the existence of angelic spirits.

Sadducees were religious conservatives, to say the least. They were the bourgeoisies of first century Palestine, willing to compromise with Roman authorities in order to maintain the status quo and keep their wealth intact. They were power brokers, the movers and shakers of Jerusalem that knew how to get things done. As Walter Brueggemann has written about the Sadducees, "They were the big downtown priests who are cozy with the governors and emperors and bankers...They realistically live in this world, as this is the only world there is or will be. It is as good as it can ever be, and we must keep it and maintain it. They do not want change..."¹ In the minds of the Sadducees, Jesus represented a threat to the comfortable

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *The Threat of Life*; Fortress Press, Minneapolis: 1996, p. 145.

arrangements they had made with the Roman occupation. He was a potential troublemaker, a spoiler of the status quo.

The Sadducees approach Jesus with a question about the law. They are hoping to get him into trouble with the religious authorities and have him discredited. They want to trap him in issues about marriage and resurrection. This was a similar trap set earlier in the chapter about giving tribute to Caesar. Jesus' response to the Sadducees basically ignores their question, and asserts that the idea of the resurrection is far beyond their wildest imagination. Indeed, the meaning of the resurrection is so incomprehensible that it is a silly question in terms of marriage and numbers of marriages in the after life. To put it another way, Jesus claims that the kingdom of God is so radical that all of our preconceived ideas or explanations of both faith and logic are inadequate and meaningless. Dickering about who goes to heaven or who is married to whom in the afterlife are absurd efforts to control and manipulate our understanding of the resurrection, whether we believe in it or not.

And if that was not enough, Jesus concludes his argument by saying, "For God is not a God of the dead, but of the living; for all live unto him." To put it in modern terms, God is the power of life in the midst of a world hell bent on death.

Soon after the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, the Sadducees disappeared from history. Without the temple, there was no station for them to control and maintain. Yet, I think they still live on as a metaphor for all of those persons and institutions whose major preoccupation is the preservation of the status quo. In their minds, life just does not get any better than this, to quote an old beer commercial. These are the forces and powers that keep a firm grip on the helm, steer the straight and narrow, and resist every effort to sail new seas.

Sadducees are found in every institution – government, business, education, social services, and the church. I never served a church that did not have a Board of Sadducees. I don't know why we don't just go ahead and give them office space, you know, "Department of Sadducees." The mind of the Sadducee is coloring inside the lines, protocol, precedent, and "the way we have always done things around here". Now I certainly think that we need a solid foundation of history. I respect the fact that we are a nation whose freedom is secured through law. But Sadducees make rules and regulations the ultimate value of their lives and the lives of their institutions. They are constantly manipulating power to keep their own vested interests secure. Sadducees will stop at nothing to prevent change in

the social order. That is why people like Jesus, the Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr. get assassinated.

Change agents always represent a shift in power, or a new arrangement of power sharing. No one gives away power, and no one is too eager to share it. Messiahs, prophets, and preachers are dangerous people because they have the idea that the distribution of wealth is not just, that the political process ought to include everybody – even women, people of color, untouchables, gays and lesbians. Messiahs, prophets, and preachers create problems for institutions because they expose and oppose paternalism, cronyism, nepotism, and corruption. Messiahs, prophets, and preachers are a menace to corporate interests when they advocate universal health care, a living wage instead of a minimum wage, and reparations for racial injustice. Messiahs, prophets, and preachers get nailed to the cross when they challenge the church to mission instead of institutional survival, to the freedom of the spirit instead of dogma, to a reflective and critical understanding of the Biblical tradition in modern circumstances.

Indeed, the church is often the greatest den of Sadducees. The Church of the Sadducees turned its head away from the slave trade for centuries before a few courageous men and women said that slavery was wrong. The Church of the Sadducees sat silent while Adolf Hitler sent millions of Jews

to the gas chamber. The Church of the Sadducees wrote a letter to Dr. King in the Birmingham jail and told him to go back to Atlanta and mind his own business. By its silence the church was complicit in these and many other social injustices. And by its complicity, the church became an instrument of death.

Death is the playing field of those whose purpose is to preserve the current arrangement of power. The current welfare system is an example. Now, if you work for the Department of Human Services, please know that I do not mean to offend you. I know that there are many dedicated people who try to make their work as helpful as possible. Understand that I am talking about a system that can never fully represent the best ideals of many of you. But it is increasingly clear to me that the recipients of the welfare system – those who receive the greatest monetary benefits – are those who work for the system. It is clear to me that poor and working poor families are subjected to a quagmire of forms and documents that are required for the payment of benefits, and the process of welfare qualification is meant not to help but to hinder.

Let me tell you one story, Amy's story. Amy lived with us for several months in Tulsa. She came to us as a 19-year-old mother with a two-year-old son. Amy is a bright young woman who wanted to be a veterinarian.

(Today she is a registered nurse in Texas.) She was working 30 hours a week in a department store. Amy's mother had ordered her and her son out of her home. She spent the night with us, and the next morning I took her out to help her secure public housing assistance, child care assistance, Medicaid for her baby, and food stamps.

Please understand that these services are located in different buildings throughout the city. There is no one place that you can go to apply for these services. Each agency requires you to set an appointment during their hours, which were generally eight to five – the same hours that Amy would be working. You are required to make an appointment, and if you are late, you lose your appointment. Of course, there is no guarantee that the agency will see you at the appointed time, and it is not unusual for a person to sit several hours before they are interviewed. Amy had the benefit of Mimi's willingness to watch her son while she went to these appointments. Many other parents did not have such a friend, and you can imagine what it is like to sit in a waiting room with no toys for toddlers and small children. Amy was also fortunate to work for a company that was willing to give her the time off to apply for these benefits.

Amy was given a list of childcare agencies that would take her son at the rate the state pays for subsidized childcare. The intake worker told her

that it would take a month for the paperwork to get processed. Amy said, “Okay,” and got up to leave. Mimi interrupted and said, “If she has to wait for thirty days she won’t need childcare because she won’t have a job.” The intake worker replied, “Oh, I can give her a letter that will work until the forms are filled out and payments start. Note that she did not volunteer that information up front.

The challenge was finding a childcare agency that is near work and has available space. Amy was lucky to find such a place, and they agreed to take her son while the paper work was being processed. As I said, this was not supposed to take more than thirty days. You can imagine that the childcare manager was less than happy when the thirty days had passed and she had not received the appropriate paper work or money from the state. This finally came through during the second month. That was about the time that Amy learned the childcare facility was sold to an individual who would not work with the state. Amy had to begin her search all over again.

Public housing was equally frustrating. There are different kinds of public housing assistance. Public housing may subsidize single-family residencies; some are subsidized public housing such as apartment complexes. Amy was told that the waiting list for both of these was six months to a year. By accident, we learned that there are also some privately

owned apartment complexes that will lease to people who are on subsidized housing. We did not learn this from the Tulsa Public Housing Authority, but from a contact I had in the Urban League. We found the manager of the apartment complex more than willing to work with Amy, including the application process.

The Housing Authority notified Amy some weeks later that she had been approved for housing assistance, and her share of the monthly rent would be \$465. We all knew that she could not afford that much money, and after a review of the formula that the Housing Authority had provided we realized that they had made a mathematical error. Amy, Mimi and I placed several phone calls to the caseworker and her supervisor that were never returned. Finally, I put on my clerical collar, and drove Amy to the Housing Authority. (Now you might call that “papist” on my part. I call it “Sacred Theatre.” I asked to see the director of the Public Housing Authority. In about fifteen minutes I was speaking with his assistant, who looked at the math and agreed that a mistake had been made. The problem was solved and after two months Amy was able to move into her own apartment.

While sitting in the lobby of the Housing Authority I watched a number of people come in to apply for housing assistance. Every one of

them was told that the waiting list was a year, and every one turned around and walked out of the office. Not a single word was mentioned about the types of housing available, including the private companies that were willing to work with the state. Not one of them was encouraged to fill out an application.

Mimi and I watched Amy stagger at every obstacle and barrier that was thrown up against her. As a nineteen year old she did not have the experience or skills that would equip her to deal with state bureaucracies. It was clear that she required mentors who would help her walk through the system; support that provided child care while she took the time to apply and interview; encouragement and guidance in developing a budget that would allow her to live within her means. At no point did any social service agency give her this support.

My observation is that the bureaucracy is not designed to serve people. It operates by intimidation and places clients in roles of subservience. And if you think this story is sad, just imagine how the criminal justice and penal systems work. It is increasingly clear to me that that is how our health care delivery and education systems are working. The very institutions that are meant to serve human beings and their communities are fatal instruments of power and control.

This is how the mind of the Sadducee works. The result is broken men and women. Their spirits are crushed and they see no reason to hope or even believe that they are worthy of a better life. It is nothing less than death. And it is just like Sadducees to talk about theories of welfare reform or theories of the resurrection to keep us from creating authentic communities where the women, men, and children are nurtured and cared for.

That is the challenge of the gospel. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus declared that his whole purpose was to “preach the gospel to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.” (Luke 4:18) Such a purpose is on a collision course with every institution, bureaucracy, organization, and agency that perpetuates poverty and oppression. Power will have to be accessed if there is to be any substantive recourse to poverty. Power will have to be shared if there is to be freedom. Power will have to be enlarged if the people are going to see clearly. Power will have to be democratized if the broken and bruised are to be set at liberty.

This is what Jesus meant by the resurrection. The resurrection is that power which breaks the manacles of death. It is the power of resurrection

that works against the madness of nuclear stock piling. It is the power of resurrection that sends Doctors Without Borders into nations ravaged by war or natural disaster to bring medical care and healing. It is the power of resurrection that creates micro lending institutions in countries like India where impoverished women can start their own small business and create a sustainable life for themselves. It is the power of resurrection that propels Desmond Tutu to travel from village to village and city to city in South Africa to generate reconciliation between black and white South Africans.

Resurrection is nothing less than the power of life intruding itself in a world of death. I know of a nurse who works in the maternity ward of a local hospital. She is a licensed nurse but she is not ordained for the ministry of any religious denomination that I am aware of. Not only that, she is a Unitarian! Yet on occasion she has been known to baptize infants that are still born or who die soon after their birth.

Why would she do such a thing? Because from time to time a child is born to a woman who is not married. The child is considered a bastard and the priests and chaplains of that Catholic hospital will not baptize a bastard child. You see, some Sadducee wrote a piece of canon law that says a child born out of wedlock is not legitimate in the eyes of God. But this nurse believes in the power of resurrection. She believes that a mother ought to be

given grace and love in the midst in death and grief. And if a ritual like baptism can bring a moment of solace and comfort to a grieving mother this nurse feels compelled to offer the sacrament.

If you thought that resurrection was a theological doctrine that you are either required to believe in or not; or if you believed that resurrection was about getting married in heaven, then like the Sadducees you have not understood the depth of its power. I know lots of people, who, if you asked them if they believe in the resurrection would say “NO!” But they are out there in the world, intruding life into systems of death – baptizing babies, healing the wounded, feeding the hungry, resisting systems of oppression, comforting the brokenhearted.

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