

SERMON for November 11, 2007
Luke 20:27-38

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What's Next?

Jealousy is not supposed to be a part of the Christian life, but I have always harbored a bit of jealousy for those who have the ability to focus in on a task, an issue, a goal, a path in life, and then just plow right ahead and do it, keeping their eyes on the end result and heading in that direction. Not me. It takes me forever to do the laundry because while waiting for the washing machine to finish its cycle and the clothes to dry, I go on to another task. Find something for dinner in the freezer, begin a grocery list, check my e-mail, balance the checkbook, and before you know it a whole day might have passed and the clothes are still in the dryer, wrinkled beyond all hope. On projects large or small, on life's goals I want to achieve, on plans for vacations or retirement, on organizing the closets and cleaning out the garage, on looking up a word in the dictionary, I can be easily distracted. There are just too many interesting things along the way in this life's journey.

It is so easy to get off-track, to lose our way. Even here, in the church, even here, where we are reminded each Sunday of our baptism, of the cross, of the presence of Christ at the table. We get caught up in the activities, the need for leaders and teachers, the current pledges and the future budget, the daily life. We sometimes forget to take a look at the big picture, to ask the big questions. What is our focus? Where are we headed? Are we distracted from our sense of call, our mission?

That is what the Sadducees tried to do to Jesus. Get him off track. With spurious questions of a hypothetical future that in reality had little or nothing to do with the important issues of the day, questions which had nothing to do with faith and faithful living, which had nothing to do with the hurts and healings of people. These Sadducees were clever. Jesus was a popular preacher, a compassionate pastor, a challenging teacher. During his short ministry he attracted crowds of the curious and the loyalty of disciples. For the established religious leaders Jesus had far too much, too much popularity and power, too much truth. And so they set out to discredit and destroy by a devious game of doctrinal questioning. Theologian Dean Leuking calls it a game of *gotcha*. The Sadducees asked Jesus about a fictitious widow of a man with seven brothers. When he dies she marries a brother, according to ancient custom. When he dies, she marries another brother, and another brother, and another right on down the line. Here's the word problem: Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?

I like Leuking's words on what happened next: *That clincher question was asked with a deliberate slowing of the words, each one poison-tipped. It was spoken with eyes narrowed, arms folded in an accusatory pose and an unmistakable sneer across the face. Gotcha is not a game; it's a weapon. Jesus answered evenly, speaking important truth about the earthbound nature of marriage which will give way to the greater life promised to the children of the resurrection.* In other words, the social structures of us human beings, the definitions of relationships that we have set up and by which we live, are for this life only. The promised resurrection life will be wonderful, but wonderfully different. The sure truth for those who believe, who are called by God as God's children, is not in the details, but in the promise. Questions that lead us off into something we cannot possibly know for sure, that lead us off in

pure speculation, serve no valuable purpose other than to distract us, divert our attention from what is truly important.

But wait a minute, you might well ask. These are real questions, more than idle curiosity. *What's next?* I have had the privilege of being a guest in a few health classes at East High School over the years, when students have the opportunity to ask me any questions about death and dying. We always seem to cover a wide range of topics, from suicide and how to help someone who is thinking about it, to thoughts and convictions on the death penalty, to the practicalities of funeral planning, to the ways to comfort and listen to the pain of someone who has lost a friend or relative, sometimes to a violent and all-too-young death. The question, though, that invariably is at the top of the list, is *What's next? What happens when you die? Where does your spirit go? Is there life after death? Is there reincarnation? Does it hurt? Is this life all there is?* I can answer all the other questions, about funeral practices and helping one another out by listening and comforting and suicide, but when it comes to the next life, I am stumped. I have no facts to offer. In the thank you notes I received in the week following my participation in classes earlier this October, some lingering questions were included: *I wanted to know where is heaven? Do you believe someone can talk to the dead? Do you think when you die you will be able to see you loved one that has passed and is also helping you to the other side? Do you think that's true, or can that really happen?* How would you answer? Aren't our doubts and fears echoed in these young voices? I was moved by this reflection from one boy, *I thought about it last night, and the only thing that scares me, is that when I die, I'll never come back. But you made me a little less scared.* And by the practical advice of another, in speaking of his grandmother...*I had to admit to myself that she was really dead. I think it's better if you admit that to yourself, and that is why it is good for you to talk to people.* And the wisdom of a youthful sage, *Hope for the best...*

These are not diversionary questions. These are the real questions not only of the young but of us all. Last week on All Saints' Day, when we remembered those of our fellowship who have died, and as we spoke aloud or thought in silence of the ones we have loved, these questions are sure to have crossed our minds. And while we know by God's promise that there is a resurrection life, we still wonder *what's next?*

We have a weekly text study group of a few eastside Lutheran pastors. This past Tuesday as three of us met, we agreed that although we had each read the gospel for today about these questioning and questionable Sadducees, done a cursory study, had preached on it in the past, we were basically meeting to share our ignorance, or our questions, or our inquiries, and in so doing find collective wisdom, insight, and wit. Concerning the Sadducees, and the relevance and immediacy of asking Jesus about the seven brothers and the widow and marriage in heaven, one of us remembered a quote from the great baseball player Reggie Jackson, *Every time I strike out, 10 billion people in China don't care.* To the Sadducees among us, *Who cares?* And then we tried to puzzle out the biblical puzzle of the seven husbands. It was my Lake Edge colleague, who shall remain nameless, who tried to put a different spin on it, throwing out the idea that perhaps in heaven the woman would have all seven husbands, to which I replied, *And you think that would be heaven?*

So for us, *what's next?* The Sadducees asked about husbands in heaven. How many angels can dance on the head of a pin? That was what I think of as a not-so-profound question of a former generation. Those are the questions of diversion, of entrapment. They are sometimes the questions that we focus on today. Do you know

what the Bible says about abortion and homosexuality? Should we or should we not alter our church structures, worship with the Catholics, pray with the Muslims? Which congregation can take in the most new members or has the snazziest programs? What are the best new techniques for appealing to modern, busy, stretched-to-the-limit in time families? How do we join in the competition to be first in line for your time and talent? Are we being too casual about adherence to rules for moral behavior? We can so easily get caught up with these questions that we forget God's call to us to be bringers of peace and justice now, and God's gracious promise of future glory.

I wish that in our Tuesday text study we would have had with us two Roman Catholic women, who perfectly illuminated the gospel. For the present time: Megan McKenna, teacher and writer, was asked, *Have you ever brought some one back from the dead?* And she replied, *Yes. Every time I bring hope into a situation, every time I bring joy that shatters despair, every time I forgive others and give them back dignity and the possibility of a future with me and others in the community, every time I listen to others and affirm them and their life, every time I speak the truth in public, every time I confront injustice – yes – I bring people back from the dead.* And as for the future: medieval mystic Julian of Norwich would assure us, *...how should anything be amiss? Yes, all shall be well, and all will be well, and thou shall see thyself that all manner of things shall be well.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.