



Sermon for the Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 27
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
November 10, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A mountain man invited his city-dwelling cousin to accompany him to church one Sunday and the cousin agreed. The day came and the mountain man picked up his cousin at his downtown apartment and drove for miles and miles out into the country, well past all the four lane highways, and finally to a small wooden church perched on a hill in a remote valley.

The service had been rolling along with singing and praying for an hour when suddenly the preacher ducked into the sacristy, reemerged with a box full of rattle snakes and copperheads, and invited the congregation to prove their faith in God by holding the snakes.

At that point the cousin turned to his relative and said “where’s the exit, I’ve got to get out of here!?” The mountain man said “there’s only one door out and it’s locked.” To which the cousin replied, “okay, so where do you think they’d like me to smash open a new door?”

I’m thinking this morning of how religion can differ between people from different backgrounds – like our city boy and out country boy in the joke. Or, in the case of our gospel text today, between Jesus and the Sadducees. The Sadducees are sort of the city-folk of Jesus’ time. They were a sect of Judaism whose members were financially better off, who lived mainly in the city of Jerusalem, and who were closely connected with the ruling priesthood and the Roman authorities in Jerusalem. Jesus, in contrast, was more of a country-boy – at least from the Sadducees perspective. He was from the countryside far outside Jerusalem, in Galilee, and seems to have come from a more humble socio-economic background.

When the Sadducees pose their question to Jesus about the resurrection we should probably hear a bit of condescension in their voices – to believe in a life after death is, to them, a characteristic of those who don’t have the advantage of their education, background, and breeding. As Jim Tice pointed out in our lectionary discussion group this week, we should also notice that the Sadducees probably don’t really care what Jesus’

answer is to their question. They already don't believe in a resurrection of the dead and they are mainly interested in trying to trip Jesus up and embarrass him.

Jesus has an answer for their question, whether they like it or not, but I would say that Jesus' answer is not entirely satisfactory to them – or to us. I believe that's because, like the Sadducees, we also have trouble wrapping our minds around the concept of resurrection. Every Sunday in the Nicene Creed we say that “we look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come” but in our day to day language we most often talk about going to heaven after we die and I rarely hear many Christians talk about a “world to come.”

There's a tension in our language and in our visualization of what comes after death and that tension is also found in scripture. It's a tension between eternal life being something that we already have and will experience immediately upon death and eternal life being something that will be given to us one day, in the future, when we are resurrected. That tension is even right here in the way Jesus' speaks: in the first part of his answer he speaks of “that age” – as in the world to come, a world that has not yet arrived – but in the last part of his answer he speaks of the dead being still alive in the present tense. “All of them *are* alive” he says. And this same tension can be found elsewhere in the Bible – in Paul's first and second letters to the Corinthians, for example.

Traditionally, since at least the early medieval period, the Church has resolved this tension in the following way. Most Christian denominations have taught that at death our bodies decay into the ground while our souls go to heaven to be present with God if we are Christians or to hell to experience torment if we are not. When the life of the world to come begins, at Christ's second coming, all of the dead will be resurrected and everyone's soul and body will be reunited, with our bodies being transformed into new, resurrected bodies that are like Jesus' resurrection body. This resurrection of the dead then marks the beginning of a new age for humanity and the whole creation because not only is humanity resurrected but the whole cosmos is made new and everlasting.

As you might expect, modern theology has several critiques to offer of this traditional view. Some of them you would probably expect, such as questioning whether God's gracious love should be limited to only those who manage to become Christian in this life. Other critiques you might not expect, and it is one of those less obvious critiques that I want to focus on as I finish this morning.

Many modern theologians – and I am thinking here of people such as N.T. Wright – have questioned whether this traditional view places too much emphasis on the part about souls going to heaven and not enough emphasis on the part about resurrection. After all, the principal Creed of our faith does not say “we look for our souls to go to heaven” it says “we look for the resurrection of the dead.” The emphasis in both scripture and the tradition, as embodied in the Creed, is on our hope being placed in the promise that we will one day be resurrected like Jesus. The emphasis is on resurrection because whatever becomes of souls between death and resurrection is only temporary. It is only an intermediate state between the life of this world and the life of the world to come.

Or, to put it another way, God’s ultimate goal for humanity in Christ is not for our disembodied souls to float around heaven forever. God’s ultimate goal for us is that we would be made entirely new – with our souls and bodies resurrected and made new – forever. In addition, God’s ultimate goal for the cosmos – the earth, sun, stars, and planets – is not that it be discarded on the rubbish heap of history but rather that the whole cosmos be resurrected and made new. This is what the book of Revelation calls a “new heaven and a new earth” and it becomes a place where God and humanity can live together for eternity.

Modern theologians have pointed out that putting the emphasis on resurrection has implications for how we live today. It means that our bodies are not sources of sin that we are trying to escape but rather good and wonderful aspects of our being that God intends for us to keep forever. That would also mean that social movements such as body positivity can be right and useful from a Christian perspective. Likewise, the universe in which we live is no longer seen as merely a resource for us to exploit. Ecological awareness, environmentalism, and care for the creation are all important parts of following Jesus because they affirm that the natural world around us is good and part of God’s eternal plan for humanity.

And ultimately, resurrection points us to hope beyond the suffering, struggle, and death of this world. Because Jesus has been raised from the dead we know that we will be as well. This gives us hope to look beyond our present struggle and believe that our ultimate destiny is to be made whole, vibrant, and eternal, as God’s children, united to him in Christ and forever uniquely ourselves as God has created us to be.

Amen.