

Proper 27c
St. Timothy's

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Luke 20.27-38

So those old Sadducees try to trip Jesus up with a snarky question about the resurrection. Politically, the Sadducees were aligned with the priestly aristocracy of Israel. They were conservative.

--They recognized only the authority of the written scriptures.

--And they rejected the oral tradition, which was so prized by the Pharisees and the later rabbis.

The idea of resurrection arose late in Judaism, after the time most of its scriptures were written down, so of course the Sadducees didn't buy into it.

They point out to Jesus that Moses commanded a man to marry his sister-in-law if his brother dies childless, because he has to "raise up children for his brother." But if seven brothers were all married one-after-another to one woman, and she never bore children, then in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?

Snarky question. The Sadducees were trying to trip Jesus up.

The thrust of Jesus answer is that resurrected life is completely different from life as we know it. For one thing, children of the resurrection do not marry.

Jesus then addresses the Sadducees' "question underneath the question" whether or not there is a resurrection at all. He invokes Moses in turn, pointing out that when the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush, the Lord said "I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

The Almighty did not say "I was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" because, in Jesus words: *he is not God of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.* The ancestors are not dead forever. In some sense, they are still alive to God.

So, if you're like me, you've still got a lot of questions for Jesus about all this.

First of all, if we do not marry in the future age, does that mean we'll not have any relationships? Does it mean we won't even know or recognize our family members or friends?

Jesus doesn't say that resurrection obliterates relationships. He only says we won't be married. I believe that the love that people share is the thing in this world that most endures. So relations of love will be foundational to resurrection life. In fact, Jesus implies as much when he asserts that God's relation to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob must endure.

Ok—here's the Second Big Question: Given that the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of the bodies, doesn't occur until the last day, then what is the state of the departed in the meantime? Do they go to heaven, or to hell? Or to purgatory?

Jesus is also pretty closed mouthed on this question. Most Christian churches believe in a so-called "intermediate state." Some believe this state is conscious and they might call it paradise. Others believe it's unconscious and might call it "sleep." Regardless, we know in the meantime the departed lie in the arms of God as they await the fullness of resurrection.

Last weekend, at St. Timothy's poetry retreat, the final assignment the leader gave us was to write a poem on the soul—a dastardly assignment if there ever was one because the nature of the soul is unsayable.

But I'd been reflecting that weekend on St. Paul's statement in I Corinthians that "it's not the spiritual that is first, but the physical." So, after a lot of hard thinking and gnashing of teeth, these lines came forth for me:

Though the poet may hold the soul separate,
a spark imprisoned in the body, liberated at death,
 the scientist knows the soul cannot survive
 without the body which shaped and nourished it
 or left it starved and stunted.

The disembodied soul can never rejoin
 a parent body consumed by earth or fire.

Rather, as an equation encoded immaterially
 in the mind of God, a genetic sequence
 so to speak, it either resolves toward zero
 or awaits the eighth day when its potential body
 might burst forth, buoyant, juicy, spiritually brilliant—
 a day without evening,
 a body that forgets to die.

I want to honor the traditional Jewish belief that human person is not a soul imprisoned in the body, but a psychosomatic unity. And I think this belief accords with our contemporary scientific understanding that the human mind is lodged in and dependent upon the human body and brain.

I also want to face the reality of death. I would never say that death doesn't really matter. That sounds like a denial, as well as wishful thinking. Death does matter. But I also believe that the grief and separation occasioned by death is temporary.

The poem I wrote last weekend imagines the "intermediate" state as "equation... or genetic sequence in the mind of God," a sequence shaped by your life and which, by God's grace, will give rise to an incorruptible resurrection body on the last day.

But here's my disclaimer: that "equation in the mind of God" is simply an image that came to me in a flash. I can't claim any external authority for it. Just that it works for me, so I offer it to you.

In the past two days, I've given Last Rites to two of the members of our common Body—Annemarie Yaskanich and Jack Thomson. As I prayed with their families by their bedsides, I both remembered the beauty and joy of their lives, and I was sobered by the final condition of their physical bodies.

So I thank God that our hope for eternity, my hope for them, is not some wispy, rootless soul, but a resurrection body, alive and restored--*buoyant, juicy, spiritually brilliant*, fully engaged and celebrating the "joy and gladness of God's kingdom with the saints in light."

Amen.