

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost • November 10, 2019

Job 19:23-27a • Psalm 17:1-9 • 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17 • Luke 20:27-38

In today's gospel reading, Jesus has a conversation with a group of Sadducees. That seems fairly ordinary, but it's actually pretty unusual. In the gospels, Jesus spends lots of time arguing with Pharisees, another group of first century Jews, but he rarely interacts with Sadducees. There are a couple of reasons for that.

The first is that the Sadducees were the religious elite who ran the Temple in Jerusalem. In the world of first century Judaism, they were the Beltway insiders. And because Jesus spent most of his life out in the countryside, they never interacted until Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem. The second reason the Sadducees don't play a big role in the gospels is that the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed around the year 70. Without the Temple, the Sadducees became largely irrelevant. Notice that Luke, writing after the Temple was destroyed, has to explain to his readers who Sadducees were.

So the Sadducees might seem like an odd group for Luke to write about because there weren't any around. But they were a useful foil for the early church because they didn't believe in resurrection. Sadducees held that the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, were fully authoritative. And since resurrection is never mentioned in them, it must not exist.¹ On the other hand, St. Luke and his community did believe in resurrection. So when Luke wants to make a point about what the resurrection is, the Sadducees are the logical group to invoke.

So here's the question the Sadducees ask Jesus. If a woman was married to different men during her lifetime, if she was passed from brother to brother after they died as was the custom, which brother will be her husband after the resurrection?

Jesus, as ever, doesn't really give them a straightforward answer. Instead, Jesus says they have to get their terms right. Because it turns out the resurrection the Sadducees don't believe in is very different than the one St. Luke does believe in. When the Sadducees imagine resurrection, they think of it as the best things about life repeated ad infinitum. It's more of what you know and love. *Do you like chocolate, Seinfeld, and estate sales? Well, you're in luck. Because that's what the resurrection is like.*

Luke's Jesus thinks of resurrection as something completely new and different. Those who live in the resurrection, Jesus says, "don't marry. They are like angels. They cannot die anymore." So resurrection is not just more of the same. When the Sadducees talk about resurrection, they're not really talking about resurrection. They're thinking about resuscitation. But resurrection involves change. It's not just more of the same. So when you think about the resurrection, Jesus says, think about transformation.

If there is a place where we need to be open to transformation, it is stewardship. I know. You thought this sermon was going to be on divorce, but it's actually my annual stewardship sermon. Surprise. If we are a resurrection people, if we are a transformation people, then the way we talk about stewardship should change too. Too often, our thinking about stewardship is driven by guilt, overly focused on money, and seen as a necessary evil. And we have wrongheaded ideas about stewardship because we have a backwards view of what church is.

Let me try to show you what I mean by this. If someone asked you to draw a diagram of how the church is organized, what would you draw? There's a good chance that you would draw a pyramid. You'd say, "We have lay people here on the bottom (that's you), we have garden variety clergy above them (that's me), we have bishops above the clergy (that's Bishop Bartholomew), and

¹ For a good, brief overview of the Sadducees and their beliefs see Mark Finney, *Resurrection, Hell and the Afterlife: Body and Soul in Antiquity, Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 85.

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we have the presiding bishop (that's Bishop Eaton) up top." As you go up, there are fewer people, but they have more power and influence they are better representatives of the church.

That's a really backwards way to think about what we do as church. In fact, you can take that model, that pyramid, and just flip it upside down. Who are the people who make up the heart of the church? It's you. It's not me. It's not the bishop. It's certainly not the presiding bishop. It's you.

Once you get that way of thinking about church right, you can start to think about stewardship in a way that's actually helpful. To start, that new perspective changes how we think about money. If you are the church, your giving is not giving money "away." You're investing it in the mission of the church. Who determines how it gets spent to pursue the church's mission? A group of people just like you that you elect every year to be responsible for those decisions. That new perspective changes how we think about service. If you are the church, then you can't volunteer at church. Because the church is you. Saying you volunteer at church is like saying you volunteer as your child's parent. It's not volunteering if it's yours.

Hopefully you hear this as an empowering message. Because it means that you can make the church whatever you want it to be. Do you want the church to be more welcoming to newcomers? Then introduce yourself to people you don't know. Do you want the church to be more involved in the community? Then go to events we organize in the community. Do you want the church to do a better job of caring for the sick? Then give someone a call or write someone a card if you know they're sick. The church will be exactly as welcoming, engaged, caring, involved, and fun as you are. There is no church besides you. You are the church, so be the church you want to be. You have the power.

So often we think of stewardship not from a posture of empowerment but from a posture of scarcity. We don't have enough. We don't have enough money. We don't have enough staff. We don't have enough people. So let me ask you another question. This question came up in our Mission/Vision/Welcome conversation a couple of weeks ago and it created some good discussion. Imagine that, as a church, we had all the resources we needed. If you had an unlimited supply of money, if you could get a staff that was perfect in every way, if you had all the resources you could want, what would you do?

It was quiet for a bit. And then people started chiming in ideas. I'd have CPR trainings in the fellowship hall. I'd have an off-site retreat where people could get to know one another outside of church. I'd have a pick-up choir where people could rehearse a song right before worship. I'd have a block party where the neighborhood could come and hang out some afternoon. I'd run food collections at the YMCA.

Were all of them good ideas? No. But that's not the point. The point is to see that transformation is possible. Transformation means we don't have to operate out of this mindset of scarcity. So often, we think we have a financial deficit when we really have a deficit of imagination. Maybe you noticed that when I asked you what you would do if you had more resources, people came up with ideas for stuff that we already have the resources to do. We could do them tomorrow. Once you reframe stewardship around the power you have, suddenly we're thinking about possibilities instead of limitations.

I've said this to our executive committee and our council, and I'll say it to you again today. Advent has problems we need to solve. Who doesn't? All churches have their problems. But your problem is not closing a budget deficit of tens of thousands of dollars. Your problem is not filling multiple staff vacancies at once. Your problem is not, thank God, dealing with a lawsuit.

We have a fun problem to solve. Your problem, our problem, is how to be a church that is useful to, transparent to, and in the service of its community. Think about the people you interact

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with every day. What are the things that keep them up at night? What is the story they've built to understand their place in the world? What is the thing they most want to be recognized for? How do they want to be known? What would it mean for them to live authentically?

Those are all theological questions. See, we may live in a culture that is post-Christian. We may live in a society that is post-church. But we don't live in a world that is post-gospel. Our community needs people like you and people need communities like us. Because people are saying, "I want to learn about God, but I don't want to have be an idiot." "I want to follow Jesus, but I don't want to be a bigot." "I want to be a part of something bigger than myself, but I don't want to have to hate my neighbor." Well, we have some good news for you. Because that's what we're all about.

So the question for us is how can we take our message and mission into the world in a way that shapes people's lives around the mercy and compassion of God? And can we let the needs and hungers of our community shape the things we are spending our time and resources on? That's the question. That's the problem. That's the fun part.

So when you think about stewardship, don't think about money. Don't think about time and talents. Don't think about pledging. Think about the kind of church you want to be. Think witness. Think transformation. Think resurrection.

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