

The Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost C 2025
November 9, 2025
Luke 20:27-38
(Sermon by the Reverend Michelle Manicke)

Many years ago, when I was a young associate pastor at St. James Lutheran Church in downtown Portland, I led a weekly catechumenate class. The catechumenate is kind of like confirmation for adults who are new to the Christian faith, and it's also for those who wish to take a deeper dive into exploring and renewing their faith. There were fourteen of us in the class, which ran from September through May, and although we came from very different backgrounds, as we got to know each other, we developed a bond of trust. This enabled us to talk honestly about some challenging subjects – kind of like our Thursday morning Bible Study group here at Zoar does! Anyway, I remember that one day in the spring – sometime around Easter – our topic was resurrection. We talked about how the Bible doesn't give us a clear picture of what the next life will be like; in fact, sometimes, the little glimpses we find in Scripture can even seem contradictory.

So, after we'd studied the Scriptures and talked for a while, toward the end of our class time, I asked each person in the group to share what they imagined resurrection life would be like. And I kid you not, friends: I was blown away by their answers!... I was blown away because the fourteen people in our group were all self-identified Christians, who were regular attendees in worship, and yet several of them gave very non-Christian answers to the question of what they imagined resurrection life would be like. Just to lay it out for you: While most of their answers were somewhere in the middle, the responses ran the gamut from, "I think we're reincarnated" to "I don't think there's anything after this life; I think we live on through our children..." After a long pause, I managed to say, "Wow. That's quite a range of views!..." Then I said, "Um, you do realize, don't you, that some of the ways our group is imagining the resurrection don't really fit with the official teaching of the church?..." We then went on to talk about how even though Scripture is sometimes vague when it comes to the details surrounding the resurrection of the dead, the church is faithful in proclaiming the Bible's good news about the resurrection: namely, the good news that in the resurrection people of faith will dwell in the light-filled presence of God, whose essence is love.

As I look back on that conversation with my catechumenate group, I recall that we also spent some time speculating -- and in some instances, joking -- about the usual subtopics that come up when human beings wonder what heaven might be like. For example, some in the group said things like, "I want to be 30 years old

and healthy again!,” or “I wonder if X will be there.... I’m not really sure I want to hang out with them!...” or “I can’t wait to see my loved ones again in heaven!...”

Now, I think it’s safe to say that this last expression is one we can all relate to. I mean, when dear ones pass from this life into the next, you and I miss them so much, and in our grief, we fiercely hold onto God’s promise that we’ll someday be reunited with them.... This promise is true; indeed, in John 14, Jesus himself declares that he’s going ahead of us to prepare a special place for each and every beloved child of God.... But here’s the thing, friends: Even though you and I know that life in the presence of God will be wonderful beyond our wildest dreams, I think it’s also important for us to take a step back and realize that resurrection life will almost certainly be very different from anything our finite human brains can imagine!...

In today’s story from Luke 20, we meet up with Jesus as he’s teaching and proclaiming the good news of God in the temple. Great crowds have been listening intently to Jesus’ teachings, and the growing popularity of his message has the religious leaders in Jerusalem worried about their own positions of power and prestige. By the time we get to Luke 20:27, several groups have already tried to publicly discredit the Teacher with trick questions, but all have failed. And now it’s the aristocratic Sadducees who try to stump Jesus by posing an absurd hypothetical situation related to resurrection. Drawing from a passage on levirate marriage in the book of Deuteronomy, they present Jesus with this contrived scenario, saying:

Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman and died childless; then the second and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. Finally, the woman also died.¹

Then they pose the terrible question they hope will trip Jesus up: “Since this woman has had seven husbands, whose wife will she be in the resurrection?”²

Ugh! That is such a terrible question...on so many levels! First of all, it’s an absurd scenario which will never happen. Secondly, it’s not a sincere inquiry because the Sadducees don’t believe in resurrection. Period. They don’t believe in resurrection because it’s not specifically mentioned in the Torah –that is, in the first

¹ Luke 20:28-32.

² Luke 20:33.

five books of the Bible, which they hold to be the only authoritative Scriptures. So, the Sadducees' question is actually a trap in which they hope to ensnare Jesus by luring him into giving an answer that contradicts Torah and will, therefore, be deemed false teaching. Last, but by no means least, their question is disturbing because it treats the woman as a piece of property, asking, "Whose wife will she be in the resurrection?..." Now, I know this isn't a real situation that's being depicted here, but somehow I can't help feeling sorry for that poor woman! I mean, not only does she have to marry seven brothers in succession, but according to this convoluted scenario, she's going to have to spend eternity with at least one of them! Yikes!...

Thankfully, Jesus doesn't answer the Sadducees' terrible question. Instead, he does what he so often does when debating his opponents: Jesus lets his interrogators know they're asking the wrong question! In a nutshell, Jesus makes it clear that in posing such a ridiculous question, the Sadducees are doing what we humans so often do when it comes to the things of God: They're thinking too small!... Here Jesus is quite clear in saying that resurrection life will be wonderful beyond imagining, but our earthly relationships won't exist in the same way. According to Jesus, marriage as human beings know and experience it here on earth won't be "a thing" in the resurrection because the children of God will become Immortal, like the angels.... Then Jesus references Exodus 3, where Moses speaks about encountering the Divine in his vision of the burning bush. Moses says that the God who has appeared to him in the bush is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and Jesus interprets Moses' words to mean that those who've died have already been raised to live in the presence of God. The Teacher concludes his response to the Sadducees with these words: "Now [God] is God not of the dead but of the living, for to [God] all of them are alive."³

According to Jesus, the true question about resurrection – that is, the question human beings should be focused on -- is this: "What will our relationship with God be like in the resurrection?" In his answer, Jesus strongly suggests that our loving Creator God, who knit us together in our mother's womb and made us in God's own image and likeness, is first and foremost a God of relationship.... At age 86, one of my favorite spiritual teachers, Quaker sage Parker J. Palmer, is often asked how he views life and death and resurrection. His response tends to be something along these lines: "I don't remember anything about where I was before I was born, and yet I was okay. So, I trust that this will also be true when I pass through the veil of death: I will be okay because the same God who has been holding me all along the way of life will still be holding me...." Now, I can't speak for you, but something in me resonates with Parker Palmer's simple, yet profound sense of peace and trust.

³ Luke 20:38.

Here I should also mention that like every one of us, Palmer has also had his ups and downs in life, including three deep dives into clinical depression, and there've certainly been times when his faith was shaken. Yet with the help of family and friends, he was able to find his way back into an abiding relationship with God.

Friends, the good news for today is this: No matter what life throws at us, and no matter how far we stray from God's way, throughout our lifetime here on earth, you and I have a standing invitation to come home and enter into a loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with the God revealed through Jesus Christ. This is a relationship that begins here and now and continues in the age to come. The words the apostle Paul wrote long ago to the fledging church in Rome still ring true, and they will continue to resound in, through, and beyond all time: "Nothing" – not even death – "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."⁴

Several hundred of us received a powerful reminder of this promise yesterday afternoon, when we attended the memorial service for Bishop Emeritus Paul Swanson, the first bishop of the Oregon Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, who served from 1988-2001. Although there were many tears during the service, there were also many smiles, as we remembered this kind and faithful servant of God. But best of all, there was great joy in gathering together as God's people to claim and proclaim the unquenchable hope that is ours even now through the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ.... In closing, I want to share the sending blessing Paul Swanson chose for his own memorial service...because it's a promise of resurrection blessing for all of us who are alive in Christ – both now and in the age to come:

May the burdens of the day rest lightly upon you. May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind always be at your back. May the sunshine warm your face, and the rain fall soft upon your brow. And until we meet again, my friends – may God hold you in the hollow of God's hand. Amen.

⁴ Romans 8:33.