

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
November 7, 2010
Luke 20:27-38

“...for to God, all of them are alive”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' critics—specifically the Sadducees—are badgering him about the meaning of resurrection. Now don't think for a moment that the Sadducees were actually interested in having a thoughtful discussion with Jesus about the reality of the resurrection of the dead. Don't be fooled! They are trying to entrap Jesus in a debate over the very controversial topic of resurrection.

Because today's reading involves the Sadducees specifically, it is a good time to remind you what the differences are between the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees were a minority group in 1st century Judaism. They were traditionalists in faith and practice. The Sadducees felt it was important to be faithful to the terms of membership in the Jewish community by observing the written Law and participating in Temple services and rituals.

The Pharisees were not leaders in the Temple as the Sadducees were; the Pharisees were government officials and teachers of the Law. Unlike the Sadducees, the Pharisees considered the oral law no less valid than the written law. And the Pharisees, unlike the Sadducees, adhered to novel beliefs like the immortality of the soul and the resurrection of the body and spirit.

And so in this story in the Book of Luke, it is the Sadducees, who did not believe in any form of resurrection—not of the body or the soul—who try to trick Jesus by having a pseudo-discussion of this concept. The Sadducees are seeking to entrap Jesus by raising a conundrum about the ultimate fate of the marriages of a poor woman who has suffered through the funerals of seven husbands. And so they needle Jesus and try to trap him:

IF there is this so-called resurrection of the dead, the Sadducees ask him, whose wife will this woman be in the resurrection?

Notice that during her life, this poor woman was passed from one husband to the next, with no thought of her grief or her wishes in the matter. The references to the woman in the story demonstrate that the Sadducees could as easily be talking about the ultimate fate of a piece of property. This woman has no identity or meaning in the story other than as the wife of seven men in succession. The story reveals the very low status of women in ancient Palestine. The question the Sadducees pose is essentially: Jesus, whose property will she be in the resurrection?

It is clear that the Sadducees, who do not believe in the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body, are assuming that resurrection must be simply an eternal extension of present arrangements. The woman in the story belonged to a series of men in this life, so—they want to know—which of the men will she belong to in eternity? A resurrected body or soul, they assume, continues as it was before. The Sadducees are assuming that after death, the spirit continues—experiencing more of what was experienced in life, more of the present but at a different level, extended into eternity—like this world, as it is, but without end.

Jesus responds that their very assumptions about a resurrected body and soul are completely wrong. Resurrection does not mean more of this world, on a different sphere, into eternity. It involves a whole new world. Everything, including all of our social arrangements, our relationships, EVERYTHING is transformed.

Jesus is saying: you cannot think about the resurrection of the body and the spirit on the basis of your old images about the world as you know it...extended after death as it was when you were living. Resurrection involves a transformation into something completely new. Jesus tells them that asking whose wife this woman will be after she dies reveals a complete lack of understanding of how everything is different after death. The woman will not be attached to one man, or to any man. Resurrection body, soul and spirit means a freeing from the patterns, arrangements, confinements of life on earth, where life is limited by a physical body and so many other social, political and economic constraints.

All that is gone after death. Resurrection of body and spirit involves a new world, a new beginning—and that life, that state, that place does not resemble life on earth. It is a state of freedom, it is a place of justice, it is time out of time.

There is much to say about resurrection and how Jesus turns the question posed by the Sadducees upside down. But on this All Saints Day, I want to focus on those who have been gathered up to God who are like Saints to us—

those names you have written on your crosses. I want to remind us that those we love are in the entirely new world, new place and new state that Jesus is referring to in this story. I want us to take comfort knowing that those we have loved who have been gathered to God are free, in a place of justice and peace, in a time out of time. And I want to remember and honor how they continue to live on in us and with us but in new ways, and in new forms.

Let's consider the final two lines of the text for today. Jesus is being taunted with a trick question and he says in effect, life after death is totally different than life on this earthly plane. We are transformed into a different state in a different sphere, where a new world exists. And he closes his argument with these two lines:

*And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.
Now God is the God not of the dead, but of the living;
for to God all of them are alive.*

I have always loved this story about Jesus being badgered by the Sadducees about who this poor widow of seven husbands will be married to for all of eternity. I love this story for the way Jesus finesses the answer and turns the question on its head by saying that these learned scholars and Temple leaders are asking the totally wrong question. But mostly I love this story because of these last two lines that Jesus speaks. I love that Jesus refers to Moses recognizing that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—Moses' ancestors in the Jewish faith—were long gone when Moses was alive BUT they were right there with Moses when he experienced the burning bush. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, those prophets and leaders, were gone and not actually present but very much present with Moses when he saw the bush that was burning but not consumed. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob although dead were present and real to Moses and they informed his life and fueled his calling.

Jesus ends the story of the wife and her many husbands by saying simply: God is not a God of the dead but of the living, for everyone who has ever lived is alive to God.

I love this. Everyone who has ever lived is alive to God.
I love this because I know that WE are made in the image of God
and in this way we are just like God.

Those whom we have known and loved are still very much alive to us.

They may be buried but they are not gone.

They may be in a new place of freedom and justice, transformed in ways we will not understand until we join them, but they are also—mystery of mysteries—very much alive and with us still.

We are made in the image of God and in this way we are just like God.

To God, everyone who has ever lived is alive!

And for us something similar is true.

Those we have known and loved are alive to us still.

The names you wrote on your wooden crosses today are people who have touched, shaped and informed your lives in some way. They are gone now from you on the physical plane. But they remain in your thoughts and in your hearts and they influence your behavior, your decisions and your feelings still.

You remember your mother or father, now dead, but alive nonetheless. And you still behave in ways that she or he imprinted on you years and years ago.

You remember a friend, now dead, but alive nonetheless. And you speak to him or her and draw comfort from feeling that he or she is still near and still loves you.

You remember a grandparent, now dead, but alive nonetheless. And you recall how you felt in his or her presence and you are reminded of the feelings of love and acceptance you experienced with him or her.

Those we love may be gone but they have not departed.

They are alive to us and with us still and we remember them.

They may have been transformed by death but they remain present in our lives still for to God AND TO US “all of them are alive,” as Jesus says in Luke.

Those we have loved who have passed on are so much with us that we sometimes hear them speak although they are no longer here on the physical plane. We also see signs and messages that seem to have been sent by them to us.

I know that one of you hears her now-dead husband call her name perfectly clearly although this is supposedly impossible. He is gone. But he is not gone.

She hears him call her name.

For to God and to us, all of them are alive.

I know that one of you has her mother's cremated remains on a high shelf in the kitchen where her mother spent so much time. And they "talk" when this woman cooks and bakes.

For to God and to us, all of them are alive.

I know that one of you saw a rainbow hours after her father died and believed it was a sign of hope and love sent by her Daddy.

For to God and to us, all of them are alive.

I know that one of you believes that every Cardinal she sees is a messenger from Grandpa and she talks to the bird as if Grandpa was right there in front of her.

For to God and to us, all of them are alive.

I know that one of you hears her Grandma laughing every time she goes to the casino because one of the last things these two did together was go to the casino and Grandma laughed all day.

For to God and to us, all of them are alive.

The Sadducees, trying to trick Jesus, asked a misguided question about resurrection and life after death. Caught in their narrow thinking that the life of the soul or the spirit is the same after death as it is before death, the Sadducees only succeeded in showing their ignorance. Don't think in those terms, Jesus said.

The resurrected spirit is in a whole new world. Everything is new, everything is changed, everything is different.

AND Jesus said, "God is God not of the dead, but of the living, for to God all of them are alive."

Our loved ones live on. They have changed. They are not in the state and in the form that they were when they existed here, on earth in this physical plane. But in their changed form, they are present to us still. We talk to them, we see them, we hear them and we receive signs and messages from them.

They are in us and we are of them.

And because of those who came before, we are who we are.

Because of their faith, we believe.

Because of their witness, we carry on.

Because of their visions, we dream.

Because of their courage, we are brave. Again and again.

For to God and to us, all of them are alive.

And so in the rising of the sun and in its going down,
we remember them.
In the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter,
we remember them.
In the opening of buds and in the rebirth of spring,
we remember them.
In the blueness of the sky and in the warmth of summer,
we remember them.
In the rustling of leaves and in the beauty of autumn,
we remember them.
In the beginning of the year and when it ends,
we remember them.
When we are weary and in need of strength,
we remember them.
When we are lost and sick at heart,
we remember them.
When we have joys we yearn to share,
we remember them.
So long as we live, they too shall live, for they are now a part of us,
as we remember them.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.