

Sermon
McCarter Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
November 10, 2019

Old Testament Lesson

Malachi 2:10-17

NT Lesson and Subject of Sermon

Luke 20:27-40 NRSV

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question, “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, 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. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. 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 he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.” Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.” For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

Truth Be Told

If you pay close attention to these verses in *Luke* that we are considering this morning, you can tell that Jesus was familiar with these verses we read from the prophet Malachi. Likely, the Sadducees, his opponents in our scripture lesson, knew these words from this somewhat obscure prophet of Judah just as well as Jesus did. And, Malachi was pretty clear about God’s view of divorce.

Today, we know that Jesus utilized portions of these Hebrew scriptures throughout his speeches and prayers in the Gospels. And, as he is teaching we have another group confronting Jesus, just as they have throughout the *Gospel of Luke*. The more obvious intent of the **Sadducees** was to catch Jesus making a mistake theologically. But, if they believed that he was a country bumpkin from the insignificant village of Nazareth in Galilee, then they got some bad information; or, they had failed to listen seriously to what had been going on over the past days, weeks, and years concerning his life and ministry.

At this time, Jesus is in the city proper of **Jerusalem**. He and his followers completed a long journey, likely over many weeks, **from Galilee** to just outside Jerusalem. Jesus had made his **triumphal entry** through the gates and onto the temple mount just days before, as described in *Luke* 19. This is the same procession that we celebrate in the last Sunday of Lent, which we call Palm Sunday. A day or so after that remarkable entry, Jesus made another public display when he “cleansed” **the temple**, sending the money lenders scurrying out of the temple porch areas and creating quite a stir.

So, now a day or two later he no longer was a stranger in Jerusalem. And, there is trouble afoot: The powers that be want to **get rid** of him. We gather that Jesus and his followers were spending a significant amount of time still **teaching** and engaging the people. Looking forward to Chapter 22, the story of the Passover and the Last Supper take place. I give you this background, because most of us know the story of **Holy Week**, but likely we will forget that these verses today are plucked out of that timeline. This happens because Lent or Holy Week are months away. In fact, we are very close to **Advent**, the preparation for the **birth of Jesus**, God in human form entering life among human kind.

With that long lead-in, it is time to ask a relevant question: What is really **going on** here? The **Sadducees** have been silent throughout the *Gospel of Luke*, until this event. Likely, they were busy catering to the interests of Roman officials, as they were well connected politically. Or, they may have spent considerable time arguing with Jewish reformers, such as the **Pharisees**, over whether or not there was an **afterlife**. The Sadducees would have said, “No!” and, the Pharisees, similar to Reformed Judaism today, held that **there was a heaven** and an afterlife to go with it.

You and I, as inheritors of these traditions and as modern Christian believers, get it pretty confused; because, at the time of Jesus the pagans, consisting of the Greeks and educated Hellenists, believed in the existence of an **immortal soul**, which was separate from the Jewish and Christian concept of a **resurrected body**. And, in the early church that all got mixed together. Are you feeling confused yet? Well, you should be. Classes in seminary rarely settle any of this, but it makes great fun in evening discussions, and it produces some really interesting papers and essays.

So, for whatever reason, the Sadducees intentionally **confront Jesus**. Maybe they had heard that Jesus had humiliated the **chief priests** and the **scribes** just a bit earlier: That is recorded in the first few verses of this same chapter (*Luke* 20:1-8). These were important persons who **conducted worship** at the temple. In their encounter with Jesus, they wanted to know the **authority** that allowed Jesus to do “these things.” they were trying to trap him for blasphemy against God. They were not concerned with the ministry of **healing and miracles** which was important to Jesus and his followers. Quickly, Jesus answered them with **a question** of his own, and it made them look bad no matter what they thought up in order to answer him. So, they chose not to state an answer, and Jesus said, “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” (*Luke* 20:8b) The authorities were trying to trap him with his own words, but Jesus moved the conversation up to **another level**. He was pretty good at this, wasn’t he? But, after all he is the Son of God.

Now, here come the **Sadducees**. They jump in as if they want a debate or a deep discussion. But, like the chief priests and scribes just before, they want to **trap Jesus**. What they do is this: They create a silly riddle about the **Law of Moses**, involving multiple deaths and a sequence of marriages to the brothers of each husband within the same family. By Jewish law, each brother must marry her, because there are no children. So, at the end of the story this widow arrived in heaven with seven husbands. This could be in a **confusing** situation, if we stuck with our typical concept of heaven: a continuation of life as we know it in this experience of our lives. But, Jesus **turned the question** on its head and showed the Sadducees that this is not an ordinary topic that they have taken up.

Jesus knew that the whole encounter was an attempt to **promote themselves** while **demeaning Jesus** in front of his followers. Likely, Jesus saw this as a false pretense on their part, and that they were presenting a false doctrine, even though the Sadducees considered themselves authorities on the Law of Moses. Now, we can better understand why Jesus dipped into his knowledge of the prophet Malachi. That prophet of old had been dealing with something similar and pronounced God's Word on the matter: The **priests** of the temple and the **prophets** of the king's court were aiding and abetting the **sins** of the kings of Judah by telling them what they wanted to hear. As a result, they did not like the words that Malachi delivered to them.

In a similar way, the **Sadduces** expected that they could push Jesus aside and **shame him**. After all, unpopular prophets were jailed, exiled, or murdered, typically because the Word of God, which they brought, placed those in charge of government and religion in a particularly bad light. Unfortunately, this was a long tradition in Jerusalem. In Jerusalem after his triumphant entry into that famous city, home to the Roman government and home to worship for all the Jewish faithful at that time: the temple of God. But, like the prophet **Malachi**, Jesus did not hesitate to offer an unpopular and **unanticipated reply** to his opponents.

We now know that Jesus had come to Jerusalem for a **specific purpose**. He was demanding **reform**, but everyone of significance was pushing back, including the Sadducees. Instead of being embarrassed by these opponents, Jesus brought shame to the Sadducees for their shallow approach and narrow interpretation of **God's law**. We can only imagine that they were hugely **embarrassed** in front of the crowd around Jesus. They would have looked foolish because of their greed, self-promotion, and self-centered agenda.

Since he is in the final week of his life, the **resurrection** is the subject at hand for Jesus, having it thrust upon him as part of God's plan for **salvation**. Despite this, Jesus gave us all a perspective on his **mission and ministry** and began a logical argument with scripture that opposed the Sadducees' main belief: That there is no resurrection, as it is not fully described in the **Torah**, which includes the first five books of our protestant *Bible*. Jesus wanted all to know that the Law of Moses was important. But, far more importantly, Jesus offered the overarching basis for **God's sovereignty**. God is not concerned with earthly arrangements, compared to the glory and wonder of heaven and **God's power** and might!

So, what can **we learn** from this encounter?

- Jesus is pretty **smart**. Doubtless, he is the **Son of God**, In a few words, He gets it!
- Jesus **cannot** be **ambushed**. It is not as if he has magical powers, which we should avoid in our approach to his ministry, taking away from his divine nature of Jesus as

Son of God. Instead, I propose to you that Jesus had an amazing **insight** into human nature, and he used it to outwit the Sadducees at their own game.

- Jesus is a **truth-teller**. He pulls no punches, but tells the Sadducees to “stuff it” and to get prepared for big changes, because it is going to get rough for all concerned pretty soon.
- Jesus is a **reformer**. He is not tearing down **the temple**, and he is not overthrowing the chief priests, the scribes, or the Pharisees. And, he would have little effect on the Sadducees, who were well connected with the ruling **Roman authorities**. Instead, he pointed out their **deficiencies** and managed to humiliate them.

At the conclusion of the interchange, the Sadducees are **silent**, finally. So, we can see that unlike most of us Jesus is **not taking sides** politically. Jesus is **God on earth**, and God the Father was sovereign, that is ruling, over Romans ruling Palestine and all points west. As Jesus pointed out, God remains sovereign over all.

Like the Sadducees, you and I want a lot of **power and resources** on our side. That is truly a post-modern and secular view of life that is totally contrary to our Presbyterian and Reformed tradition: We know this, because God is sovereign, Ruler over all. And, that includes minority and majority political parties, the prime minister in Britain, oligarchs in Russia, and Communist leaders in the Peoples Republic of China.

Because Jesus was a truth-teller. He placed his life on the line that day in confronting the Sadducees. And, **truth be told**, in doing this he was focusing on the long view and the **plight** of all humankind. Like those **Sadducees** in Jerusalem that day, if you and I embrace the love and **mercy of God** we too should change our perspective from **rules and personal judgement** to the example of Christ: exhibiting love, **mercy**, forgiveness, and **acceptance** of others. If we get that right, then our faith and our **ministry** should be **independent** of any political view or sentiment. We all should understand that we are **apart from the crowd** in nearly every aspect of our **faith** and our lives as **disciples of Christ**. This willingness to place the **good of others** foremost in our witness has long been a part of the what we call our **Reformed tradition**, which is upheld by the **tenets of faith** we hold in the Presbyterian Church (USA).

On the week of his **death and resurrection**, Jesus confronted those who would ridicule him. He **did not strike** out at them. He did not bully or shout at them. Instead, he called their **traditions** into question and left open the door to insight, **faith**, and the **power of God**. Jesus showed them that the **real topic** at hand was not a law on divorce. Instead, he pointed everyone to the power of the **Living God**, who **conquered death** and **resurrected Jesus**, an astounding and startling event which has led millions upon millions to God.

We know from scripture that the **Risen Christ** ascended to God and **remains** with God. Because of **God’s power** and love and **mercy**, Jesus Christ continually holds before us this call to a **new life** as stewards and **disciples**. This is the body of the church. And, through the **power of God** made known to us in God’s **Word**, you and I are the **hands and feet** of Christ.