

Year C Proper 32 Shake the Tree Luke 20 vv27 to 38

Over the past month or so, we have journeyed with Jesus to Jerusalem and watched as he healed, listened as he taught. He has now arrived in Jerusalem and is, therefore, that much closer to his death and resurrection. The Jewish authorities have become increasingly hostile toward Jesus and are jealously worried that his popularity is going to topple them from their positions of power.

They have been trying to trip him up, to embarrass him in front of his adoring crowd. It hasn't worked yet and, today, the Sadducees are taking a turn. The Sadducees are introduced to us as those Jewish religious leaders who do not believe in the resurrection of the dead. They only held as authoritative scripture the books that involved Moses – Genesis through to Deuteronomy – which do not mention anything about resurrection. That's the part we need to know in order to better understand the motive behind asking Jesus a question about the resurrection of the dead as if they believed in it. The pharisees *did* believe in resurrection and so the Sadducees are getting in a knock on them as well as on Jesus. The pharisees actually aligned with much of Jesus' teachings because Jesus was, in fact, basing all of his teachings on well established Jewish teachings. It is worth noting, too, that the majority of the Jewish people were with Jesus and the pharisees on this issue – they believed in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees were about to fight a losing battle but they were giving it a go because they really wanted to knock Jesus down.

The fact that Jesus was in the Temple teaching large crowds of people and debating with the Jewish religious leaders is precisely why they felt they needed to take the wind out of his sails. Jesus' presence in the Temple in the authoritative position of teacher without being one of recognized leaders of the Temple – he

was not a scribe...he was not a pharisee...he was not a Sadducee – is a problem for the other leaders. His presence without any official title meant he had a vast amount of respect and authority in the eyes of the general population. In fact, in case we don't clue in, Jesus' presence in the Temple in Jerusalem in this story today means that he has already ridden into the city in triumph on a donkey – ridiculing the Roman rulers and being lavished with praise by the hordes of people loudly proclaiming him as king and messiah. In the eyes of the Jewish leaders, he is a very large, very real threat who must be removed.

And so the Sadducees try to corner him with what they believe is an airtight, no win question about marriage in the time of the great resurrection. They have based their question solidly on a well-known law found in the scroll of Leviticus and they think, in trying to answer it, Jesus is going to prove for them that there can't possibly be any such thing as a general resurrection of the dead and, in the process of trying to answer, they believe Jesus is going to look silly.

To their dismayed surprise and to the delight of the crowd, Jesus, instead, pops a hole in their balloon. Jesus reveals to the crowd – and to the Sadducees themselves – the narrow thinking and the lack of vision that has led to their question. Their question shines a light on their entrapment within the world's power structures – particularly in this case, the structure that says men are more important in society than women and that women can be passed along as property to be a child-bearing machine for the men who must carry on the family line and have sons to whom all their goods will be passed on to. Jesus argues against the inequality, oppression, and injustice contained within the patriarchal thinking on display in the Sadducees' question and, in fact, Scripture argues

against it as well – from Abraham and Sarah (it is Sarah who “wears the pants” in that family, so to speak) to Jesus’ family tree itself which contains the names of several pivotal women when the norm was to only mention men in a family’s succession. Despite the message of equality found in scripture, despite the work of God to dismantle worldly power structures that propagate injustice and oppression, these things are still very much entrenched in our societies around the globe because there are still people in power – like those in this story today – who know that if they embrace God’s purpose, their power will disappear.

People across the centuries and in our time, like the Sadducees confronting Jesus, still select scripture to support their views and their attitudes and neglect the message lying outside of their boundary limits. They base their question on scripture but Jesus shows them their limited view by answering with more scripture, a story involving Moses. “The resurrection is one of those areas where our limited capabilities make it impossible to speak with authority about the shape of things to come. As Christians, we believe in the resurrected Christ, and we confess that we believe in the resurrection of the dead, but to define what that means or looks like is far beyond the realm of human possibility.” We simply do not know the details. But, we do know “Resurrection life is transformed life. We are not to impose our ideas, based on the limitations of this world, on the future God has in store for us.” Yet that is exactly what the Sadducees have done. “We are to be open to the unexpected and creative acts of God, which are done out of God’s desire to redeem creation. We are to beware of attempting to limit

the range and possibilities of God's [gift of love and redemption to us and to the world]."¹ Yet this is exactly what the Sadducees have done.

Luke doesn't share this story with us so that we can look at the Sadducees only as being opposed to Jesus and the pharisees on the issue of resurrection. They are there for all of us who get so bogged down in the world's problems and perspectives that we forget, like them, what Jesus tells us is key. Marriage in the time of the resurrection is not the issue – it is simply the indicator that the Sadducees are thinking in limited human terms...limited in vision, limited by time, limited by human customs and traditions. Jesus calls on them and us to remember who we are and what that means for our lives now and in the time of the general resurrection of the dead.

Jesus tells us we are "children of the resurrection." Through the mystery of baptism, we have died with Christ and have been raised with Christ. As Paul tells us, we "carry the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our bodies" (2 Cor.4:10). Carrying Christ, we also carry the presence of the kingdom. Carrying Christ, we already have access to perfect relationship with God. The God who draws all things toward their intended perfection, is our God – the God of the living – dwelling within us, drawing us toward our intended perfection...now. Our present is to be shaped by God's future.

As Walter Brueggemann is so very fond of saying, we must talk the talk and walk the walk of the Gospel now. The talk of the Gospel is the announcement of a new governance – God's reign is here, the kingdom is arriving. The walk of the Gospel is to act as though the new rule was already in effect in its fulness despite the

¹ Quotations are from p.230 of *Augsberg Sermons 3*

evidence to the contrary in the world around us. Talking the talk and walking the walk of the Gospel is our act of resistance to the world's broken ways. It is our way of saying, we do not like what's going on in our world and we are not going to accept it. Talking the talk and walking the walk is our embracing of God's alternative to brokenness – it is an alternative reality that is not obvious in our society but we trust that it is coming just as Jesus tells us today. It will be our reality and we must live that reality. (paraphrased from p.110-111 of Brueggemann's *The Word that Redescribes the World*).

We are children of the resurrection, children of the God of the living. As we live into the perfection of God's kingdom through our practices of abundant generosity, compassion, and forgiveness, God talks the talk and walks the walk with us. When we feel overwhelmed by the sheer need of the marginalized in our society, when we feel despair at our own human limitations of time, energy, and money, we must remember that our human limitations will never get in the way of God's fulfillment of God's purpose. The needs of the world will never surpass the response of God's abundant love. We must prayerfully discern how we can fruitfully be a part of God's purpose, remembering that we are but a part of Christ's body working with God.

“Said a disappointed visitor on retreat at a monastery, ‘Why has my stay here yielded no fruit?’ ‘Could it be because you lacked the courage to shake the tree?’ said the Master” (*One Minute Wisdom*, Anthony de Mello, p.196).

Mother Theresa shares her wisdom with us as we work with God: “Don't allow anything to interfere with your love for Jesus,” she says. “You belong to him. Nothing can separate you from him. That one sentence is important to

remember. He will be your joy, your strength. If you hold onto that sentence,” she continues, “temptations and difficulties will come, but nothing will break you. Remember, you have been created for [amazing] things” (p.12 of *Mother Theresa Her Essential Wisdom*).

She is there using a quotation from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians: Paul writes, “God created you to do amazing things” (Eph.2:10). It is the quotation I carry with me wherever I carry my BAS.

God created us to do amazing things. We are children of the resurrection, children of the God of the living and, together, we can shake a few trees.