

Proper 27C, St. John's Olney, 10 November 2019

The Reverend Henry P McQueen

Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Ps 145:1-5, 18-22; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

S.D.G.

At the beginning of the week, there was a collective groan from Mother Shivaun and me when we saw the Gospel reading for today; then she started laughing because she knew that I was preaching. Perhaps you have been in a similar place, where you look at a neglected garden bed and there are so many weeds that you don't even know where to start – the same is true for this passage.

By now you are likely to have a less than flattering view of the Sadducees, and this passage only confirms that view. Let's start with the obvious pressure point and the passing of this woman from one brother to the next, like a family heirloom being passed down among the generations. This comes from a literal expression of Deuteronomy 25:5, it is also known as a levirate marriage, something only of value as a crossword puzzle clue. The hypothetical argument posed by the Sadducees is somewhat dated as this practice was no longer common during Jesus' time.

And the argument was not really about the practicality of the Mosaic law, rather it was to suggest that, as the Sadducees believed, resurrection was not justified in the written words of Moses. They were exploring a contradiction found in resurrection theology that supported their own purposes of non-belief in resurrection. They were not seeking an answer, they were seeking an argument.

And an argument they got: Jesus went to the source of their own argument – Moses. Jesus proclaims *“And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as 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.”*

The logic follows since only the living can have a God, and God is the God of the patriarchs, then God has sustained the patriarchs in life in the age to come. For Jesus, the words of Moses confirms the belief in the resurrection. We have not yet seen true resurrection as will occur three days following Jesus' death, but this provides the foundation for the events of Easter.

This chapter of Luke is full of arguments and challenges for Jesus: By what authority are you teaching? Should we be paying taxes? Is the resurrection real? The questions are not so much questions as they are traps, traps intended to expose Jesus and find a way to prosecute him. The religious leaders are being argumentative, not for knowledge sake, but to discredit and ultimately arrest Jesus. It is not unlike the argument that comes from the discussion of God as omnipotent.

The question goes like this: if God is omnipotent, something that most of us would agree is true, then can God create a stone so heavy that God can not lift it? If the answer is yes, then there is one thing that God can not do – lift the stone that God created. If the answer is no, then there is one thing that God can not do – create a stone that is too heavy for God to lift.

But really, the answer is – it's complicated. Jesus' world and the Kingdom of God can not be explained with the logic found in our earthly lives.

Most of you know that I spent the first part of my career in the corporate world. I have an MBA, a closet full of power ties, and was a card carrying avowed capitalist. My favored reading material was the Wall Street Journal and the Harvard Business Review. My father was also an avowed capitalist, much like the Sadducees who worshiped the literal words of Moses, my father worshiped the literal words of Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, and I was to follow in his footsteps.

But then it got complicated, things did not make sense with just the light of capitalism shining on them. At any holiday gathering when it was time to make a toast before dinner my father would stand up, raise his glass, and proclaim “here is to us, and the hell with the rest of them.” And at some point that toast was no longer a tradition I enjoyed, it became an expression that I dreaded to hear.

The religion of “He who dies with the most toys wins.” was being replaced with something that looked beyond myself. The Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, they believed in living life fully within the bounds of an earthly life; and that is perhaps compatible with capitalism, living life fully within the bounds of an earthly life.

Looking back I can now see that when my father died, my belief in capitalism died with him; not because I lost faith in capitalism, though that is true, but because my faith in the Resurrection became unwavering. My life, and all that was in it, was no longer

constrained by the limited time of an earthly life; my view of the world was no longer framed solely in secular, and capitalistic, terms.

It is complicated and the Sadducees could not see that, and it took me years to see that as well. But there it is before us, a more nuanced, more full, more interrelated life. A life that stands in stark contrast to a life of literal interpretation of the Law. A life in stark contrast to a life of capitalism. It is a life that looks outward, a life that looks beyond today, a life that looks towards a glimpse of heaven here on earth.

When I took my first tentative steps of serving others, and not myself, things became different. When I freely gave to God, and found joy in the giving, things became different. When Diane, Parr and I took the big step towards ordination things became different. We sold my business, we sold our home, and we moved to an apartment in Alexandria. Parr and I were students and Diane worked 2 part-time jobs; yet we always had enough. God always provided.

The concept of good stewardship has been with us since the creation story in Genesis; when God created humankind God gave humankind charge over all that is in the earth. The Ten Commandments show us that humankind and animal were to rest on the Sabbath day; and in the seventh year the fields were to lay fallow and rest. The precedence was set, there was to be no exploitation of field, fruit, or animal. When the Israelites wondered in the desert they were given enough manna for one day, they were not given to abundance but given enough.

Our understanding of stewardship begins in creation and continues through all of Scripture. What we know of the early Christians also reflects these lessons. The early Christian communities shared their property, they shared a common purse. As Jesus changed the world the worth of someone was no longer defined by land holdings. Everything was shared to reflect God's generosity.

God provides us enough, enough so that we can share with others. Before I learned this lesson my experience was that the tighter I held on to our money, the less there was to hold. When holding money and wealth tightly, there never seemed to be enough. When gently cradling what God has given us, when being willing to share, then God's abundance comes through.

I seldom share this story of selling everything to go to seminary because it is a big step that is not likely to be a part of many peoples lives. It gets dismissed as irrelevant; but it

is very relevant because it can be seen in all our lives. We do not need to take big steps to see God's abundance, it is right there when ever we share what God has given us, in every gesture large and small.

Truly, it is complicated, and it makes no sense in the light of capitalism, or the light of the secular world. But it does make sense in the light of the Kingdom of God; what God has given us is not ours to own, it is ours to share.

We are all branches on the same vine. We are all fed from the same roots. We all receive the same rain and the same sun that nourishes the vine. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches.

Through Jesus we bear good fruit. Through Jesus we share our fruits, our first fruits.

We do this throughout the year, but it is this time of year that we make explicit the gifts that we give to God through the gifts that we share with St. John's. In the next few days you will receive a mailing from the church and it is important to prayerfully reflect on how you will respond. Each and every pledge that we receive is important. Each and every pledge is a wonderful gift to God.

The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, is not the God of the dead but of the living. There is so much life to be found in sharing what God has given us; what God has given us is not our to hold, but it is ours to share freely.

The Sadducees did not see the hope of the resurrection. They did not see life beyond our earthly bounds and that shaped their thinking. The hope of the Resurrection shapes our thinking. The promises of the Kingdom of God shapes our thinking.

Living now, with the Kingdom of God present in our lives brings us life.

Amen,