

REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM

Luke 20:27-38 -- 11.09.25

Dean Feldmeyer

The best way to not lose an argument is to not argue at all.

YOU MAY BE RIGHT

H.L. Mencken was (1880-1956) was a towering figure in American journalism and cultural criticism, renowned for his sharp wit and unapologetic opinions. As editor of *The American Mercury* and a columnist for the *Baltimore Sun*, he received hundreds of angry, argumentative letters in response to his editorials and columns. Rather than engage in lengthy rebuttals, Mencken developed a disarming and efficient response: a pre-printed postcard that simply said, "Dear Sir (or Madam): You may be right."

This brief and philosophically elegant phrase allowed Mencken to acknowledge dissent without conceding or escalating, and it reflected his belief in the futility of arguing with certain kinds of criticism. I think Jesus would have liked that.

In today's gospel lesson, Jesus refuses to respond to the argument placed before him by the Sadducees and reframes the entire discussion, never surrendering his own convictions.

THOSE SNEAKY SADDUCEES

So, who are these Sadducees guys, anyway? We often hear them lumped in with the Pharisees – "The Sadducees and the Pharisees." Like they were pretty much the same. In fact, they couldn't have been more different. In fact, they despised each other.

Some Sadducees, those say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question.

The Sadducees were a conservative Jewish political party that dominated the priestly control of the Jerusalem temple for roughly 200 years until the destruction of the temple in the revolution that ended in 70 CE. Unlike their rivals, the Pharisees, they held that personal piety was not based on correct theology and pious living but passed down through family lineage. They did not believe in resurrection after death, the immortality of the soul, or the existences of angelic spirits.

The Sadducees rejected any oral traditions and believed that the will of God could be found only in the words of the Torah. They were the Jewish fundamentalists of their time. They were strict adherents of the "eye-for-an-eye" form of justice and liberal application of the death penalty.

"Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies..."

So, they come to him, presumably, with a question about a legal tradition called "Levirate marriage" which they describe accurately: If a man marries and dies before his wife gives birth to an heir, it is the duty and responsibility of his brother to marry her (they believed in

polygamy back then) bring her into his family and have a son with her who he will raise as his own but will, legally, be the son and heir of the dead brother.

(Yes, this leads to all kinds of complications in family legal practice having to do with inheritance and what not but that is a discussion for another time. Today, we're here to attend to the question of the Sadducees.)

The question is about how Levirate marriage should be practiced in the afterlife, a concept in which they do not believe. So why ask the question at all except to trap Jesus in a theological error for which they could charge him with blasphemy which was, according to them, punishable by death? If he answers their question, at all, he is admitting to the existence of an afterlife, a dangerous admission.

To accomplish their goal, the Sadducees employ the ancient rhetorical technique called *reductio ad absurdum* first demonstrated by Xenophanes of Colophon (c. 570 – c. 475 BCE) and refined by Aristotle in his *Analytics*. This form of argumentation (which means reduced to absurdity) disproves a proposition by extending it to its absurd logical conclusion.

Example:

Proposition – All undocumented residents are committing a crime by being here and must be arrested, jailed, and/or deported.

“**All** undocumented residents” include people performing labor Americans don't want to do. Especially construction labor, farm labor, and domestic labor.

“**All** undocumented residents” include children and aged persons in nursing homes.

And, in order to sort the undocumented residents from legal residents every person living in the USA must be able to provide provably authentic documentation of their citizenship on demand by law enforcement.

So, as a result of this law, farm and domestic labor will not get done, table crops will not be harvested and rot in the fields causing the prices to increase as much as 10-fold, dishes will not be washed in restaurants, hotel rooms will not get cleaned, and homes damaged in storms will not be repaired. Also, children and old people will be removed from schools, day care, and nursing homes and put in jails that are staffed by qualified care givers. Also, some legitimate citizens who can't immediately prove their citizenship will be jailed until they can.

So, the cost of menial labor will have to increase so native born people will do it causing prices to increase and placing a burden on the economy.

Special jails will have to be built and staffed at high expense to humanely house undocumented children and undocumented nursing home patients.

There will be thousands of lawsuits brought by legal residents who were arrested and held because they couldn't produce proof of citizenship.

So...Maybe arresting, jailing, and deporting ALL undocumented residents without a trial is not the best way to handle the immigration problem.

That's argumentum *reductio ad absurdum*, an argument reduced to its absurd extreme and that's the kind of argument the Sadducees tried to use on Jesus to prove that there is no life after death because, if there was, the law of Moses would not apply in that realm and the law of Moses was divinely given and eternal.

Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age...”

Jesus realizes that they are starting with a premise that they, themselves do not believe in. This is an empty and useless argument meant only to entangle him in an ever more complicated *reductio ad absurdum*. So, instead of answering their question, he changes the subject.

Since they have already allowed (cynically, and hypothetically to be sure) that there is a resurrection of the dead he turns their argument around and against them: He speaks of life after the resurrection and compares those who live in that dimension to angels, again, something the Sadducees don't believe in.

In the end, Jesus holds to his convictions, without arguing for or against or even trying to answer the absurd marriage puzzle of the Sadducees.

The question this story raises for us, Christian men and women living in perhaps the most politically contentious years of our lifetimes, is how do we react when the point of the debate is not to gain knowledge or insight but to ambush and wound the opponent?

MODERN DAY SADDUCEES

Nowhere is this the case more than in social media.

Clinical psychologists have documented to the point of exhaustion that the result of interaction on social media, especially for children and teenagers is often victimization from bullying – depression – isolation – body shaming – broken relationships (even divorce) – addiction to social media due to *fomo* (fear of missing out).

Years ago, when I was a graduate student in the field of rhetoric and communications I coached the University of Cincinnati undergraduate debate team. The purpose of authentic debate is to shed light on the topic at hand by presenting arguments from all points of view. That takes time and research and work to build an argument step by careful step.

The internet offers none of this. Arguments must come immediately with little time to think or develop a point of view. So, often they arguers (I will not dignify what goes on in social media as “debate”) simply stoop to what the *argumentum ad hominem* – argument against the person – insults, name calling, invective, abuse, and aspersion. Instead of weighing the merits of the argument we deride and debase the person making it.

Not surprising, I guess. The fact is, we rarely argue with another person to convince or change them. We argue with them to convince or persuade the audience who is watching us argue. Even if there isn't an audience, we create one in our mind. The shouting matches we see on social media and television are focused not on the person we're arguing with, but on what we imagine are the millions of people reading the argument.

Even as I write these words, politicians are on social media and television blaming each other for the government shut down that is hurting millions of the people they claim to be protecting and serving. And all those soundbites are aimed not at convincing each other to soften their

stance. They are aimed at you and me so we will decide who the good guys and the bad guys were when the government shut down and remember that at election time.

Conservative activist and provocateur, Charlie Kirk is usually spoken of as a faithful Christian and family man, which is all well and good. But he is also being touted as a popular speaker with a passion and commitment to debate and spirited engagement, a reference to his appearances on college campuses where he reportedly took on anyone who disagreed with him.

A banner near the speaker's dais said, "Prove me wrong." But, of course, it is impossible to prove something to someone who is not willing to be convinced. This provocative phrase was there not for the speakers who came forward to debate him but for the wider audience.

Charlie touted some well documented disagreeable and even hateful beliefs – Muslims were planning to take over the United States government, Haitians were "coming for our daughters," Jews were financing all of the protests that happen in the United States. He didn't believe in the separation of church and state, or birthright citizenship. He referred to lesbian and gay people as "freaks," said that Kamala Harris would turn transsexual people "loose on children," and he believed in public executions including executing Joe Biden for "his crimes against the American people."

Kirk would bring out and show off these ideas at gatherings on college campuses and then invite anyone in the audience to take the proffered microphone and "prove me wrong," an obviously futile task and a waste of time. If someone brought out evidence that proved him wrong, he would simply dismiss it as "leftist lies" or propaganda. Yet, some students inevitably approached the microphone boldly attempting to enter a debate with him and, in doing so, gave him a podium from which he could spew what was often little more than hate and bigotry even further.

The better path, indeed, the more effective and more ethical way would have been to simply not give him that pulpit, to not take the bait, to not try to prove him wrong, not debate him. Indeed, let him speak himself hoarse to those who already agree with him. Better yet, don't even go to the event. If they really disagreed with him, their time would be better spent on the study of the classical philosophers and theologians whom Charlie derided because they couldn't guarantee you a job after you graduated.

DECENCY AND DEBATE

In his *Analysis of the Evolution of Rhetoric in American Political Debate*, Miles Gendebien tells of how in the early 1950's widespread and rabid Anti-Communist sentiments allowed and even encouraged right-wing politicians to slander opponents in a sort of watchdog politics, to the point that "No one dared tangle with McCarthy for fear of being labeled disloyal". The persecutorial fervor of McCarthyism finally began to break, however in the same way that it had reached its peak: on TV. At the 1954 televised Army-McCarthy Hearings, attorney Joseph Welch shocked America's conscience when he confronted the senator with the question, "have you no sense of decency?"

With those six words the entire mood of the country began to shift. Welch changed the question from one of loyalty vs disloyalty to decency vs. indecency. A few weeks later journalist Edward R. Murrow entered the fray with an expose on McCarthy and his unethical, often illegal tactics. In December, the Senate voted overwhelmingly to censure McCarthy and strip him of all his titles and powers. McCarthy died three years later, still in office but disgraced and virtually powerless.

McCarthy's favorite tactic, and the one to which Welch was referring was the practice of trial by accusation. He didn't have to prove anything. It was enough to accuse someone of something nefarious either directly or indirectly, most often by asking them a question to which there is no right answer.

Do you still beat your wife? Did you ever quit taking drugs? Are you still drinking? Did you ever prove that your children are actually yours? That kind of thing. His favorite was: Are you now or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party? McCarthy knew he had the power to destroy a person's career, even their life, by simply asking that question.

McCarthy expected that his audience, American television viewers would assume that "where there's smoke there's fire." They would assume that if he asked the question, he must have a reason for asking it. Except, usually he didn't have a reason to ask the question except to cast doubt upon the character of the person he asked.

It took Misters Welch and Murrow to demonstrate that not only was there no fire, but there was also no smoke. It was all an illusion created by master illusionist, Senator Joseph McCarthy.

Today, social media is a bubbling cauldron of McCarthy-istic trial by accusation. People believe they can say anything, accuse anybody of anything true or false and there will be no repercussion. And they're right. There usually isn't.

Brothers and sisters, there is no room in the Christian heart for that kind of interaction. For trial by accusation, for argumentum ad hominem (argument against the person), for personal attacks, for insults and name calling, stereotypes and rumors, misrepresentations and half-truths, mocking, shouting down, jamming, or intimidating and a hundred other unethical and dishonest ways of debating

As Christians we will do well to not step into that kind of debate. As we make our way through this toxic political season, let us rejoice in God's truth (I Cor. 13) as it comes to us in Jesus Christ, grounded in scripture, and seasoned with love. Let us state our opinions and why we hold them but them as it is our right to do and then, when the slings and arrows begin to fly as they inevitably will do, let us eschew the mob and their methods.

Having stated our case we need say no more, no matter what someone accuses us of, so no response to their response is necessary. But if we must respond, I recommend we respond in one of two ways. One, as Jesus did, by directing the subject toward the Biblical principles and morality that prompted us to make our statement.

Or we can always use HL Mencken's favorite reply, give them a wink and a smile and say, "You may be right." And watch the argument wither on the vine.

AMEN