

Luke 20:27-38 (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."

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

One time, many years ago, the kids in the neighborhood were arguing about whether if you missed going to church on a holy day of obligation, but then crossed the international date line so that it became the day before, would you still have missed church?

I'm sure what must have happened is that a couple of the kids had talked about this in their catechism class and were debating the issue, since this is not the sort of thing that the guys in the neighborhood would usually have cared very much about. I

also know that the Saducees from today's Gospel reading would have approved of this debate.

In today's Gospel lesson, the Saducees come to Jesus with what seems at least to me to be the kind of hypothetical question that people always use to try to trip believers up. The Saducees begin with the Law, in this case the law that if a woman's husband dies, she should be married to his eldest brother. The hypothetical woman runs through seven husbands, all brothers, marrying each of them when the previous brother, her current husband dies. I would guess that the ceremonies got less and less ornate and more and more anxious. The Saducees ask with apparent innocence, "In resurrection life, whose wife will she be?" Now, since the Saducees don't believe in the resurrection, they are probably trying to trap Jesus in some kind of inconsistency.

This seems to be one of those questions that skeptics ask – can God make a rock so heavy that God can't lift it? Can God draw a square circle? But Jesus is surprisingly patient. He takes the question seriously enough to answer it and the answer is surprising. The feeling you get is that the Saducees are like children playing in the shallow water and have no idea how deep the water can get and how close they are to the dropoff.

Jesus doesn't contradict Moses – in fact, he goes out of his way to involve Moses in his answer. Moses, he says, knows the truth that God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. So far so good. He then says that God is the God not of the dead but of the living, because to God, all of them are alive. What can this mean?

I will confess to you that I like thinking about things like this. Is God outside time? Is God simultaneously present everywhere and everywhen? How can that be? It isn't hard to get me thinking and talking about stuff like this, and I further confess

that when I do, I get even vaguer and harder to understand than I usually am. So, I apologize in advance. I like to engage in these kinds of speculations not so much to test God as to stretch my mind a little bit.

But I also confess that I have a lot of sympathy for the people who refuse to engage in these kinds of speculations. Lots of times these are people who refuse to play in the shallows, but want to wade out to the deeper water where they know God is, where they know God will buoy them up and keep them safe from harm.

These are the people who don't belong to this age, but who are, instead, worthy of a place in an age to come, an age in which God's will is done, on earth as it is in heaven. These are people who see the work that is to be done and are willing to do it. They aren't as interested in fitting into the world as they are in transforming the world. They aren't as interested in describing the Gospel in a way that makes sense to this world as they are in changing the world so that it makes sense to the Gospel.

On Monday of this week, there was a fatal car crash up near Northern High School. A van with four young people in it was making a left turn from Briscoes Turn Road north onto Route 4. The van was struck by a box truck. The driver, Alyson Purvis died at the scene. Her brother Ryan is in critical condition and two other passengers sustained injuries that weren't life threatening.

While none of the young people was a member here, Alyson was well-known to a lot of our high schoolers, and as a congregation, we have known our share of sorrow from young people in traffic accidents, so a few of our congregants got in touch with me to suggest that we open the church to give the young people a safe place to be together, to talk and hang out.

The emails started circulating Monday evening and by Tuesday we'd decided to go ahead and offer a candlelight prayer vigil for Tuesday evening. So, we called up the counselors at Northern High School to let them know and word traveled fast. With almost no planning, from a standing start, relying only on faith and the attractive power of Domino's pizza at 6PM on Tuesday we opened the doors.

The kids who came, and there were a couple of hundred, were not interested in playing in the shallow water. They were grieving the loss of a friend, someone they knew deeply, the way people come to know each other when they are young, without reservation, without limits. They were hurting.

And everything kind of came together, one of those occasions where you just know that God won't let you fail. We used the prayer services from the Lutheran Book of Worship and even though I doubt there were very many Lutherans among the kids, the prayers were just right. Bonnie suggested some readings and those were just right, too, from Ecclesiastes and Romans and John's Gospel. And the kids wandered around with their candles and didn't burn the place up. Kelly Kitzmiller had pulled together a slideshow of pictures of Alyson and they played on a continuous loop and we saw how beautiful and lively Alyson had been and we all cried a little.

I'll bet that not very many of those kids attend church on a regular basis. But it was amazing to me how powerful the act of worship was to them, how powerful simple prayers were, how powerful the readings were. The kids were sobbing, hugging, offering prayer petitions out loud. They weren't like the Saducees, asking questions that they didn't care about the answers to. They weren't even cool the way kids who grew up in my era were. No, they were mourning a friend who had left them 'way too soon, 'way to young and they felt awful and wanted to talk about it.

And I was proud of their parents and our members who were there with them, mourning with them, feeling as awful as they did, but knowing that it was the right thing to do to open the church to them and to stick with them in all their pain and confusion. This was not a night for playing in the shallows. This was deep water and I knew that God was there, holding us all up.

Yes, sometimes we like to think and talk about things that we don't really understand, things about the nature of God, about where heaven is and who gets to go there and what it will be like when we get there. And that's fine. But our God is a God of the living, living people with real pain and real problems and real needs, people who are hurting inside, people who need a God who can be relied on, a God who saves not abstractly and distantly, but who loves us and supports us in all our pain and confusion.

We all learned a lot about that God that night, a God who won't let us fail when we reach out to people who are hurting, a God who is reliable and present, who does not desert us in need and never will. And for that we say, thanks be to God.

Amen.