

The Questions That Matter Most

Sunday, November 6, 2022

Luke 20:27-40

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Jesus' proclamation about the kingdom is rooted in promises of hope and resurrection.

There is good news and bad news this morning. I'll start with the bad news: in case you have not heard, no one won the PowerBall drawing last night – which means that super lottery will jump to nearly 2 billion dollars tomorrow. Some of you may ask: is the preacher promoting gambling? My answer is, perhaps, but only if you promote the Biblical concept of tithing one tenth of your income to the church.

Whether or not you drop a few dollars into the lottery is not my concern, which leads me to the good news. Even though you might not have won the PowerBall, you will feel as though you have won the lottery come Tuesday evening because as soon as the election is over, the nonstop barrage of political ads will come to an end as well. Or maybe they'll just go into hibernation for a few months. They will be replaced by commercials from car companies urging you to ask Santa for a new car.

Commercials, particularly political ads, are not oriented around asking questions about issues but instead posing questions about character. By the time the election is over, it is estimated that both political parties will have spent more than \$17 billion¹ dollars asking for your vote. About 15 percent of that has come out of the pockets of billionaires—which means if you do win the lottery this week, you'll suddenly be surrounded by a lot of new friends. has been spent by both political parties on the midterm elections, with about 15 percent of that coming out of the pockets of billionaires. In other words, if you did win the PowerBall last night, you may suddenly find yourself surrounded by a large group of new friends.

But, perhaps not unlike Sadducees questions for Jesus, those ads are not asking the questions that really matter. According to political scientist Samara Klar, voters find attack ads stressful and fatiguing.² She notes they also distort the truth, which is that there is far more common ground among voters than is generally talked about in commercials.

We're not asking the right questions.

Something similar happening in the Gospel this morning. While Luke does not tell us, it is not hard to imagine Jesus rolling his eyes as the Sadducees pose this ridiculous question about a woman married to seven brothers. It's a story filled with more hyperbole than an old Harry Carey broadcast. Bent on trying to trap Jesus, the religious authorities are unable to ask the right questions.

Sadducees were not known for being people of wonder and imagination. Seminary students remember the differences between Sadducees and Pharisees this way. A Pharisee says "you are so sad-u-see because I am so fair-you-see." The Sadducees had primary authority over the Temple and only recognized the original five books of Moses, the Pentateuch) as being authoritative. They rejected claims of resurrection that were held by the Pharisees, who had expanded scripture to include the Psalms and prophets. Jesus, having just cleared the money changers from the temple, had suddenly hit the radar of

¹ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/03/us/politics/midterm-money-billionaires.html>

² <https://www.kgun9.com/news/elections/frustration-anxiety-over-political-ads>

the Sadducees who are now aligned with the Pharisees in an attempt to discredit him among the public. Luke, chapter 20 traces the way these groups had tried to silence Jesus by trying to pin him down in a theological wrestling match. The problem is, however, they are asking the wrong questions. Jesus, it seems, is asking the questions that truly, ultimately matter—and the crowd is spellbound by all that he says.

So the Sadducees concoct this rather ridiculous story concerning a woman who had no children. They cite a provision of the law that preserves a man's family name by stipulating that should a man die childless, the man's brother should marry the widow.

They're trying to dismiss questions about resurrection and thus discredit Jesus.

But Jesus says they're asking the wrong question. For a group that does not believe in the resurrection, these Sadducees seem particularly interested in an afterlife consisting of one marriage after the next. The point, Jesus tells them, is that God is a God of the living. God is concerned not with arcane matters of who marries whom in heaven – after all, planning a wedding on earth is hard enough – who will pay for all those angels and hosts of heaven? The real point, says Jesus, is not how many angels can dance on the head of a pin nor how many husbands this unlucky woman collects. The question they need to be asking is: How does faith challenge our imagination?

The Sadducees weren't known for their rich and varied imaginations. Eventually, they sort of faded into history and disappeared. For whatever reason, both Mark and Luke include this incident in their Gospels. There's no clear answer why this story is included, except that perhaps there's a little bit of Sadducee in everyone. Christians wrangle over questions about the resurrection—some want exact details and architectural renderings of heaven while others are stopped by what they perceive as the rational inconsistencies of a man being raised from the dead.

We are, it turns out, all a bit like the Sadducees when it comes to matters of resurrection. Because we are creatures locked in systems of finite time, says David Lose, it is hard for us to comprehend. Jesus pushes those who are asking him questions to think beyond philosophical puzzles to the promises of God that are beyond time. "The claim," writes Tom Long, is that God raised the fullness of Jesus, the person of Jesus, from the dead. God raised Jesus, the Jesus who was known and experienced in the things he said and did with his body—not the idea of Jesus, not the spirit of Jesus, but Jesus; and that is an embodied reality."

Here, Jesus pushes believers to broaden our capacity to ask questions that matter. Don't worry about pointless arguments, he seems to say, but instead consider what it means to be joined with God. Look at the ways God has appeared to Moses. Consider how God has spoken through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, as well as Sarah, and Elizabeth, Mary. Luke reminds us that time and time again that this story of Jesus is built around Mary's simple words: with God nothing is impossible.

The questions we ask matter.

Those questions drive us back into the story of scripture where we find God forever reaching toward us, inching closer, coming along side, yearning to connect to our deepest needs. Scripture is the story of a loving God who liberates all people from their suffering and anchors our hopes in this promise: "I am the resurrection and the life."

Martin Luther was once asked what would he do if he knew the world was going to end tomorrow. He is said to have responded, "I'd plant a tree." In other words, he would invest in hope. He'd sink his resources into the soil of God's creation, trusting that God will bring about new life in ways that we cannot, on this side of the grave at least, fully understand. The question is not about how many husbands a widow may have, but rather, "Can God be trusted?"

That is the story we are called to proclaim. That is the why our offerings of time, talent, and treasure matter so very much. In making our promises of faith, we are not attempting to raise money. We are, instead, raising hope. "How much money does your church bring in?" is not the right question. The better question is, "What is your church doing to tell the story of Jesus? How are we, as members of the body of Christ, telling the story of resurrection?"

This is our hope. To paraphrase from Tom Long once more, Christians possess not a crudely literalistic faith nor do we "saw off all of death's rough edges," but instead dare to stand together each week and affirm: "I believe in the resurrection of the body."

Our questions, our offerings, our proclamation all lead us to tell stories of hope that release others from their suffering. So often, notes Gil Rendle, churches fall into cycles of despair and decline by focusing on what he calls "a rehearsal of weakness." Those stories, Rendle says, ask so little of churches, in the hundreds of churches where he has consulted, Rendle notes that decline is always matched with rehearsing the litany of weaknesses. But a story of hope disrupts that vision of decline. That story is built on faith, and it pushes God's people to stop asking safe questions to pursue resurrection. Step away from those pointless questions, Jesus tells us. Don't keep saying "That's not the way we used to do things" but instead guide us to say, "God is not a God of the dead, but of the living." Amen.