

## Life and Death Matters

Menno Mennonite Church

November 6, 2022

**Purpose:** To hold the moment of remembrance—social and personal—as mattering to God even as the kingdom transforms our notions of what it all means.

**Message:** As we remember what has been in our lives, we are invited, too into that which God is creating even now.

**Scripture:** Luke 20:27-40 (I will read); Job 19:23-27 (Please read/have read)

**Synopsis:** The month is replete with celebrations of life and death. From the feast of all souls, day of the dead, Veteran’s Day, thanksgiving, and other civil holidays call us to recall the mortality with which we all, unconsciously, walk, and give thanks for the goodness of life. As Christians, we are called to think beyond ourselves, beyond this world to the promises of hope and love that are promised us in the future that is yet being completed. As we look toward the renewal of hope that we have in Advent, we are called to declare with Job that “I know that my Redeemer lives!” and to celebrate the line between this world and the next, and the loving hand that holds us in that balance.

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## Luke 20:27-40

<sup>27</sup> Some Sadducees,  
those who say there is no resurrection, came to him  
<sup>28</sup> 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.

<sup>29</sup> Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless;  
<sup>30</sup> then the second <sup>31</sup> and the third married her,  
and so in the same way all seven died childless.

<sup>32</sup> Finally the woman also died.

<sup>33</sup> In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be?  
For the seven had married her.”

<sup>34</sup> Jesus said to them,  
“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage;  
<sup>35</sup> 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.

<sup>36</sup> Indeed they cannot die anymore,  
because they are like angels  
and are children of God,  
being children of the resurrection.

<sup>37</sup> 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.

<sup>38</sup> Now he is God not of the dead,  
but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

<sup>39</sup> Then some of the scribes answered, “Teacher, you have spoken well.”  
<sup>40</sup> For they no longer dared to ask him another question.

The calendar has a peculiar focus right now. There seems to be a whole lot of looking into the dark on the menu right now. Perhaps it is the unavoidable magnetism we have with the changing of the seasons, clocks and all the rest as we in the Northern hemisphere note the inescapable progression into the physical darkness of winter, or just what you do when you realize that you are on the downslope of the year, but there is much made of what might become of us, and what comes next. The first is obvious in Halloween. For all its candy-covered good natured intent, it asks the fundamental question: what's out there in a universe we do not fully understand or control? Then comes All Souls Day (this is All Souls Sunday in the higher church) and its Latino connected ancillary in Dia De Los Muertos—day of the Dead. Day of the Dead was actually something I came to appreciate living in Tucson where it was widely celebrated with an emphasis on the memory and reverence of those who have passed away rather than anything particularly spooky or superstitious. Then there comes Veteran's Day later this week, more widely known in allied countries as Remembrance Day remembering the costs of war and honoring those who have borne those terrible bills, connecting us to the 11<sup>th</sup> hours of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month when the armistice of the first war to end all wars stopped its slaughter of millions. This wasn't an accidental date focusing on 11 by the way; the date was selected to coincide with the Saint Day of Martin of Tours, the patron saint of soldiers, connecting the peace to a soldier who laid down his arms in witness to Christ. Even Thanksgiving invites us to look back in gratitude for what has been, revering what has come before.

Memory and remembering is much on our minds right now, and rightly so. It is something in the air, and it is good. Perhaps it is the needed setting of the scene prior to the main events of Christmas and New Years. Perhaps it is the naming that proceeds the celebration, allowing us to acknowledge the hard while anticipating the celebration. Because it can be an important time of knowing our grieves—big and small—as we carry them with us into what comes next. It is often difficult to know the anticipation of the season when we also know what we have lost. Just because we are a people who are drawn to sing “O Death where is thy Sting?” in the broad notions of the universe and it faint does not mean that we do not feel that sting sitting with the distinct losses in our lives. What are we to do with our grief when our theology would seem to steer us well away from it?

You could not be blamed if you have not come across this conversation of our story this morning and dismissed it as a trip into the territory of “How many angels can dance on the head

of a pin.” You would be basically right—the stuff that makes people roll their eyes when speaking of religion and its followers. Yet there is something going on here that makes it important for us and in the ministry of Jesus.

First, as you might note by the chapter 20 reference, this is approaching the culmination of the Story of Jesus and those who were following him. This interaction is one in a series, each one designed by their askers to demonstrate how Jesus violates the law and is beyond the pale. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, sects of the priestly hierarchy who were mostly in opposition to each other were united in their suspicion and plotting around Jesus and what he meant to them. This whole chapter recounts the quizzing of Jesus as he taught in the temple which he had acted against just days before, throwing out the money changers and those selling sacrifices. It is here we have this high stakes game of Jeopardy concerning the paying of taxes, the true identity of John the Baptist, and any number of hot button issues designed to be Jesus’ undoing at every turn. This was no different. It was their way to ensnare Jesus into the categories they knew and understood.

The Sadducees, as we are told, didn’t believe in resurrection, mainly because it was not part of the Pentateuch—the first 5 books of the Bible that the Sadducees deemed to be the only appropriate origins of guidance and theology. Within the law of Deuteronomy, anyone failing to continue the family by marrying the widow of a brother was matter to be brought before the whole congregation, and severe punishment was met upon them if they would be refused; any one failing in this essential sense of duty and family was to be disgraced before the whole community and robbed of their name from hence forth. This was serious stuff indeed. Like all the other tricky questions before, Jesus answers fully and clearly in ways that they can understand, and even speaks to the resurrection through the lens of the Pentateuch and a way they could not argue with.

But his answer is far more than just sorting out the somewhat fantastic machinations of who-marries-who in the afterlife. Jesus reframes the issue entirely. What is being dealt with here is not the workings the world as we know it, but the world as it will be beyond the considerations of the law and duty. The nature of the resurrection, the nature of the new life that is received is so different, so new, so other than this world, that one cannot carry over the rules of one age to the other. The translation itself is beyond the imaginations we have, Jesus suggests, and does not bear holding onto. God, Jesus says, is the ever creating, ever creative, ever living

YHWH God of Israel, and does not deal in the dead ways of this world, but creates again a new world, a new reality, a new hope which is beyond the very categories and catch alls of this world. God is the God of the living, whether it is this world or the next, and it is this life, this promise, this hope that the kingdom is all about. Life is there, and abundantly so, as it is here, and we are called in faith to live that life, that hope, and that future, where ever we find ourselves. Life, be it present or future, is the domain of God, and there is hope for each, no matter where we find ourselves.

But it is equally important to note what Jesus does not say here. Specifically he does not dismiss the question even while he re-frames it. He does not say that death is no big deal, or suggest that it should only be thought of as a means to an end, or something to be disregarded without grief or grieving or a care. Let us remember that it was the teacher who wept at the grave of Lazarus, mourning the passing of one who he loved. Jesus is not saying that this is some simplistic formulation of people lounging on clouds wearing angel's wings, but simply that the resurrected life is one that is beyond the categorization and prioritization of this world and this age. Something as simple as time—the very beat of our existence—will be reframed and be no longer, something we can barely even imagine, let alone the glory of the resurrected life. Even in the great beyond, he argues, there is the same creative, loving, inspiring God at the root of it all. It matters, but perhaps not in the way that we think it matters. It may not be the answer we seek full of specifications and exact descriptions of what comes next, but it does speak the truth and invites a new imagination of what is possible.

It is this that Jesus is inviting his hearers into, and through them us to understand. The law is meant to regulate this world. Jesus has as much reverence and respect for the law as any of those who try to entrap him within it (something which we are all rather good at). What makes Jesus the revolutionary and world shaking character that he is lays not within his ability to set the law ablaze in its overturning, but in his ability to reframe what is really important about the law and its ability to bridge the distance between the world as it is and the world as it will be. Jesus seems to perceive the anxieties and concerns that underlie these questions. He does not apply the law as a means of gaining leverage or ascending a moral high horse. Rather, his application of the law is oriented towards what is good, just, and beneficial. The law is not a tool at our free disposal to use to construct and re-construct the life as we know it, but a guide meant to enrich daily life, inviting us into an imagination of what is possible in the great beyond.

In this season of memory and celebration, we can grieve, fully that which we have lost. But our grief should never invites us to discontinue the use of our imaginations for the possibilities of what lies beyond us. Perhaps all that was ours will be returned to us, and fully so—more even that what we can imagine. But perhaps it will be something wholly other; we don't know what will be resurrected—given new life except to know that God will be in it.

But what I think will be left with the dead will be the petty bickering and theological hypothesizing of this world, not because it is bad, but simply because it will be something well beyond our world of care, something that we can release because we will be with God.

May the God of the living, in this world and next, speak to us and through us of the goodness of God. Amen.