

“A Question of Faith” 11-6-16 CHC

Psalm 145:1-3, 17-21

Luke 20:27-38

We find Jesus in a series of conversations engaging questions of faith. Emissaries from the Sanhedrin have just attempted to trip him up on questions about paying taxes. Jesus, quick to perceive their craftiness cleverly frames the much quoted response, “Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s”. Jesus’ answer leaves them speechless.

Now it is the Sadducee’s turn. They ask Jesus this 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”. Now all wait, as we do for November 8th, for what Jesus will say.

The question is based upon Levirate Marriage law found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6. The Sadducees accept only the written tradition as authoritative, the law of Moses. They are the wealthy aristocrats and priests of their day, the governing class and collaborationists with Rome.

The Pharisees, in contrast, are a religious body with no political ambition and would suffer any government as long as they could live out the ceremonial law. They accept the scriptures and all of the thousand detailed regulations and rules of the oral and ceremonial law. Their faith embraces the resurrection from the dead and angels and spirits. Not so the Sadducees. A strong belief in fate and God’s ordering of and planning of one’s life contrasts with the Sadducee’s belief in unrestricted free-will. Also, the Sadducee’s did not believe in a hoped for coming Messiah as their counterparts the Pharisees did.

We all bring our own questions of faith to God. We ask about salvation for those outside Christ, the seeming incongruity of a God of love with the horrific condition of the world, the nature of God as a demanding judge ready to condemn us, and on and on our questions go.

We gain some insight here on how Jesus might respond to our questions by how he responds to the Sadducees. First, he answers them on their own turf. He politely listens. Then he responds, challenging the premise and arc of their question. Essentially he tells them that to think of heaven in terms of earth is irrelevant. Life there will be different. Marriage on this earth is an institution for the welfare of two people and the propagation of the race. That necessity disappears when men and women become equal to angels and do not die.

Affirming the Pharisee belief in resurrection and angels, he goes back onto their ground and pulls out their beloved Moses. Essentially he challenges their understanding of Moses’ theology. “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, 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”.

A sociologist reflects upon her experience working with senior citizens in a Chicago housing project. This project is judged one of the poorest. Half are white and half are black. All lived through two world wars and the Great Depression plus all of the social upheavals, all living with death. She observes a striking difference in the way whites and blacks face death. She says many of the whites are increasingly fearful and anxious. They complain about their lives, families, and deteriorating health. The African Americans contrast in their attitude. They maintain a sense of humor and a triumphant spirit even though they have more reason to despair. She is asked about the difference in outlooks. She says the answer is hope, a hope traced back to the African American’s bedrock belief in heaven (Yancey, “Grace Notes”, p.243).

Of course, the scribes and Pharisees are still hanging around listening in on the interaction. As we and the crowds overhear Jesus there is a strong assurance of a world beyond this world. What is now, what we see and experience, is temporary. It will not always be. One of them pats Jesus on the back, saying, “Teacher, you have spoken well”. The crowd is astounded at his teaching, having now silenced both religious parties in their attempt to entrap him.

The key point Jesus makes to us is that God is alive and active in this world and the next. In the account of this conversation with the Sadducees in Matthew Jesus chides them; “You are wrong, because you neither know the scriptures or the power of God” (Matthew 22:29).

Years ago James D. Smart wrote a book entitled, “The Strange Silence of the Bible in the Church”. He feels that this crisis is endangering the churches’ future.

Our Reformed Tradition emphasizes scripture, the Word, and the Spirit. Both are essential to an informed, active living faith. The words of scripture point beyond themselves to God’s life and activity in this world and beyond. The scripture alone leads to dead letter legalism. The Spirit alone leads alone into the zone of fanaticism.

Jesus tells the religious leaders; “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39).

A person in my last church said to me that he would not waste his time attending a bible study. He didn’t need to do so. That was my job. On Sunday he would come and listen to me tell him what the scriptures taught. He neither knew the scripture nor the power of God. He didn’t want to.

Sometimes we formulate what we think the scriptures say about God and life, then out of ignorance, or sheer laziness, never find our way to a deeper reading or understanding and experience of God. Merely to repeat the words of scripture is not necessarily to be engaged living a life full of Christ’s Spirit in us. Christ invites us to reproduce his life, passion, and ministry in laboring for the things God cares about, the redemption of others and an involvement with the sufferings and needs of others. We open

ourselves to both the words of scripture and the Spirit of the living Christ. Then we follow where he leads.

A professor, Virginia Stem Owens, assigned the Sermon on the Mount to her composition class at Texas A and M. Since this is the Bible belt, she expected them to be respectful and write an essay on Jesus' sermon. What she received back shocked her. Here are some samplings that were passed on:

"In my opinion religion is one big hoax".

"There is an old saying that 'you shouldn't believe everything you read' and it applies in this case"

"The stuff the churches preach is extremely strict and allows for almost no fun without thinking it is a sin or not".

"I did not like the essay 'Sermon on the Mount'. It was hard to read and made me feel like I had to be perfect and no one is".

"The things asked in this sermon are absurd. To look at a woman is adultery. This is the most extreme, stupid, unhuman statement that I have ever seen".

At this point the professor said, "There is something exquisitely innocent about not realizing you shouldn't call Jesus stupid...This was the real thing, a pristine response to the gospel, unfiltered through a two-millennia cultural haze".

Then she says something that those in Jesus' day were thinking. "I find it strangely heartening that the Bible remains offensive to honest, ignorant ears, just as it was in the first century. For me, that somehow validates its significance. Whereas the Scriptures almost lost their characteristically astringent flavor during the past century, the current widespread biblical illiteracy should catapult us into a situation more nearly approximating that of their original, first-century audience" (Yancey, p.225).

Just as Jesus challenged the worlds of the scribes and Sadducees, so he continues to do so this morning. We are invited to engage the scriptures and the Spirit. As we gather around this Table of our Lord, we are met by One who loves us, engages us, and invites us to actively participate in his life and follow him into the mess of a world of people like you and me that he is redeeming.

It is a question of faith.