

“We Have Better Things to Think About”

Luke 20: 27-38

Before we get started with the sermon, I think we need to name something. We need to name that when it comes to reading Scripture, we all have some biases. Even in our text today, we get to the first line; hear the word “Sadducees” and immediately our biases come out. We’ve all been taught that the Sadducees were part of the system; part of the powers that be that didn’t take a liking to Jesus, all because he was rocking the boat a little too much for their taste. Now I will say all of that is fair teaching especially since we know how the story ends but unfortunately, these teachings about the Sadducees lead to some assumptions about them as well.

For over two thousand years, we as the church have given the Sadducees and yes, even the Pharisee as bad name simply because, in our culture, in our understanding of how things work, we need to have a bad guy in the story or a group of bad guys to show how good the good guy really is. We need the bad guy to make the good guy look well...good.

And that’s exactly what we do each and every time we hear the word Sadducees or even Pharisees. So before we even get started with the sermon today,

I'd like to share a little background about the Sadducees to help our understanding of this story.

Think of the Sadducees as well....splits in the church or at least one different faction in the same church. They divided because different groups interpreted Scripture differently. Sounds familiar right?

Well, the Sadducees only believed that the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, was Scripture. All the other stuff was added later but they felt it really didn't contain the Word of God. All the Sadducees needed to know and live out as practices in their lives could be found in the first five books of the Bible while other groups believed differently.

Hence the different groups, the different factions within the Temple, something that would never happen today. Surely we as the wider Church would never split or argue over the different interpretations of the Word of God. Please notice the sarcasm in my voice.

So we have different groups in the Temple, divided over the question what exactly is the Word of God. Each group made up of people of faith doing the best that they know how, trying to live out the Scripture in their lives, trying to live out what they consider to be the Word of God through their actions and words.

Sounds familiar right? In reality, the Sadducees were not that different from you or me. They were not that different from us: the conservatives, the liberals, the

progressives, the evangelicals, the spirituals but not religious. They weren't that different from all the other different factions that exist today and make up the wider Body of Christ here on earth. Both then and now, bottom line as people of faith, we are all just trying to do the best that we know how to do, living out what we have interpreted to be the Word of God in our lives through our words and actions.

So realizing that fact, knowing that we aren't that much different from the Sadducees, we as people of faith need to take a step back, put aside our biases when it comes to Scripture, and really see what is going on in this text.

And when we do just that, our actions take us back to the first line of the text. Luke tells us that the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection, simply because it is not mentioned in the first five books of the Bible. It is mentioned much later but remember the Sadducees don't hold those other books to be the Word of God. They only hold as beliefs and practices what can be found in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

So if this talk about the resurrection isn't in those books and the Sadducees don't hold it as truth anyway, then why this question? What's the purpose behind their question about the resurrection if they don't believe it can happen?

Well, I do agree with the traditional teaching that on some level, their question was an attempt to trip Jesus up, to show how wrong Jesus really was.

After all, just a few verses before these, Jesus really did begin stirring the pot a little too much. He went into the Temple and literally started throwing things around. He overturned tables, called everyone robbers, and preached hellfire and damnation.

So yeah, I'm not going to deny that on some level the Sadducees' question was an attempt to trip Jesus up a bit. I'm not going to deny that it didn't have a "We'll get him and his little dog too" attitude behind it as well. But what if there was something more than just this revenge attitude behind their question? What if the Sadducees really saw Jesus as an experienced, intelligent, well-rounded person of faith and they were just trying to engage him in a conversation of faith? Maybe part of the reason behind their question was that they were trying to wrap their minds around just exactly who this Jesus guy really was. Maybe they were just trying to figure out how to incorporate what Jesus was teaching into what they already held as Truth.

What if the question that the Sadducees posed to Jesus really was a hypothetical question meant to help them expand their faith?

We all do the same thing as people of faith. We pose questions to one another, trying to figure out how it all fits into what we believe. It is where we start as Disciples of Christ. We pride ourselves on unity and ecumenism, which we feel can only be achieved by asking faithful questions of one another. Unity and

ecumenism, as Disciples of Christ, we hold to the belief that they can only be achieved when we try to find some common ground. And we do that by engaging in faithful conversations and questions.

Now before we go any farther, some background about the Sadducees question. What the Sadducees are talking about is the practice known as Levirate marriage. We need to understand that at this point in time, and definitely earlier in time, family was everything. People relied on family for support, for food, for working the fields, for well, everything. Family was key to people's survival. And this included family lineage as well. Children were essential in keeping the family line going because it all traced back to the original covenant with God. No one let a family line die out or disappear because then part of the covenant was broken. And you couldn't let that happen.

So yes, there was a practice that if a woman's husband died before they had kids, the husband's brother was then required to marry the woman. And the first son born to this "new" couple would be claimed in the dead man's name, all because the lineage could not die out.

So when the Sadducees ask their question about Levirate marriage, it was a known practice and the Sadducees held it to be the Word of God because examples of it could be found in the first five books of the Bible as well as a direct statement advocating for it in the Bible of Leviticus. Sure, maybe not to the

extreme as the example the Sadducees brought forward but it is there in the Torah. Just go back and look at some of the stories in Genesis and you will find it to be true. Even Jesus should thank his lucky stars that a thing such as Levirate marriage existed; otherwise his family tree would have been cut down due to death.

So the Sadducees' question was not as weird as it sounds today. But still Jesus knew and the Sadducees knew that Jesus knew that the example that they gave was truly extreme and more than likely not going to happen. Marrying Seven times? Please, Jesus knew and the Sadducees knew that Jesus knew that their question was extreme. Both parties knew that the question was a hypothetical question in the first place.

So, yes the Sadducees' question was meant, partly to trip Jesus up a bit in response to Jesus' behavior, but I also think that that the hypothetical question was part of a larger faith conversation between people, people who were just trying to find some common ground, just trying to engage in some faithful discussion.

So in this text, here is what we know: we have this crazy question, a hypothetical question to the extreme and now the Sadducees are waiting for Jesus' response.

And here is what I love about this story. Jesus doesn't respond with a "Man, you Sadducees are crazy. He doesn't respond with an "I know you guys are trying to trip me up." In fact, Jesus doesn't even really give any credence to their extreme

hypothetical question by really answering it all. He just bypasses it by saying, “Marriage is of this world, not of the Kingdom of God.” In other words, Jesus responds to the crazy question by saying, “God is not a God of hypothetical situations. God is a God of real life situations.”

What Jesus is telling the Sadducees and us today is that God is not concerned with all the crazy faith possibilities that we can think up as people of faith. God doesn't care how many angels can fit on top of a pen. We're the ones asking that hypothetical question, not God. We're the ones searching for answers to our crazy questions, not God.

No, God is out there, among the people of God, walking beside us, leading us, caring for us, loving us, and guiding us. God is not a God of hypothetical situations. God only cares about the real. God is only concerned about the authentic relationships between the children of God.

God is concerned about the living. God is concerned about the messiness of life, the good, the bad, the ugly, and how we as the people of God are going to respond to help bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth for all the children of God. Jesus wants the Sadducees and us to understand that if God was truly interested in hypothetical situations, God would have chosen better test subjects than what God chose in the first place. Let me explain:

As we all know, the very outcome of any experiment relies heavily on controlled conditions, on controlled elements. And that is certainly not what God got when God called the people of God.

Think about it. Remember all the science fair projects that we did in school. We would all pose a hypothetical theory and then set up an experiment to prove or disprove our theory. For example, if we were trying to show how quickly beans could grown in good conditions we started out first by setting up the perfect conditions. We would choose the best beans, not ones that had noticeable defects or splits. And to keep the perfect conditions going, we would choose the best locations, a place where our bean seeds would get plenty of light and we would make sure to give them plenty of water. And then to make sure that nothing skewed the experiment, we controlled every variable from the type of soil to supporting the plant when it began to grow.

Our grade on that science project depended on how well we controlled and perfected the conditions, how well we created a perfect environment for those bean seeds to thrive.

Well, if the same could be said for God's creation experiment, we would have to give God an F. All because the experiment went wrong somewhere. Sure, God gave us a beautiful creation. Sure God has tenderly loved us into growth. But somewhere God's experiment took a turn for the crazy. And that moment was

when God called us humans, flawed, broken, imperfect humans to be God's partners in creation. The crazy hypothetical situation went all haywire as soon as God called us to be in relationship, as soon as God entered into covenant with us in the first place.

Think about it. From the very beginning of our story, it's been the people who are the unknown variable in the equation. It is like that crazy math question on the test that completely boggles your mind. We can sit here forever and still never get the answer to the question. "If you have a beautiful garden and God adds male and female. And then the serpent comes along and takes away Adam and Eve's ability to follow directions, how many generations does it take until the covenant with God is restored?"

And that crazy math happens within just a first few chapters of Genesis, the very first book of the Bible!

So to prove his point even more, to prove that God really is part of the messiness real life we all experience, Jesus keeps going. Jesus brings up the names of the people whom we all call as ancestors of our faith, people who dealt with the messiness of life every day, people who were, let's face it, the first dysfunctional family and we celebrate them! We have Abraham, who married his half sister. They couldn't have a baby so Sarah gives, not says how about you be in relationship with, but literally gives Hagar to Abraham like she is some piece of

property. Hagar has a son; Sarah gets jealous, starts nagging Abraham who sends Hagar and her son into the desert without any concern for her safety. And then when Abraham and Sarah do have a son, Abraham hears the voice of God, telling him to kill his son, Isaac. And this is the family God chose to be in covenant with as God's people

And let's face it the dysfunction didn't end with Abraham. It kept going down the family line. Sure Isaac and Rebekah seemed normal on the surface but in reality, their family was falling apart. Esau and Jacob couldn't stand each other and each parent knowingly showed love and affection to his or her favorite. Talk about family systems failure here! And that's not all. Rebekah and Jacob trick Isaac by lying to him when he is lying on his deathbed, when Isaac was blind. They trick him and make him believe that Jacob is Esau and steal the birthright meant for the firstborn son. That borderlines on elder abuse.

But these are the people that God chose to be in relationship with as God's people. Messy, crazy, dysfunctional people, not hypothetical situations.

And if Abraham and Isaac weren't crazy enough. Just think about Jacob and his story. Jacob was known as a trickster from birth and then at some point, the tables are turned on him and he is tricked on his wedding day. Jacob wants to marry Rachel but is given Leah instead and so he has to work another seven years for Rachel. Already there is family tension because one wife hates the other and if

that wasn't bad enough, Jacob and the wives add more dysfunction to the family when the women start competing for Jacob's attention by giving him their maids to have more kids, because they want to see who was best.

And well, the kids of this crazy union weren't angels either. One son sleeps with his father's wife who isn't his mother, thankfully, while another time, all the sons gang up on Joseph and throw him in pit just because he was his dad's favorite.

The dysfunction started from the very beginning. And we hold these people up as examples of faith. These are the people who have shaped and molded our faith. We come by the dysfunction as the Body of Christ honestly. In fact, if God had intended to prove a hypothetical theory about a perfect creation, where beauty and peace abound, God would have chosen better test subjects than what God did choose. But God didn't. God chose messy people. God chose real people. God chose broken people. God chose imperfect people to be in relationship with, to be in covenant with as God's own children. God chose us and the messiness of life to engage us as God's very own children.

We celebrate that God is not a God of hypothetical situations. We celebrate that God is a God of real life, messy, life, the good, the bad, the ugly parts of live.

That's what Jesus wants the Sadducees to realize that day. That's what Jesus wants to realize as well. As children of God, We are not called to deal with or focus our attention on the hypothetical situations of life. We are called to deal with

and focus our attention on real life situations, situations where people are hurt and lonely, real life situations where there is war and violence, real life situations where life and relationships get messy.

As people of faith, we are called to deal with and focus our attention on real life situations because when we do, we realize, there is hope in the brokenness and healing in the reconciliation.

We as children of God firmly believe the God that we know and have experienced in our own lives is real, not hypothetical. And because of these real life experiences, we are called to share them with all of God children. We are called to share real love, real peace, real grace, real hope, with all of God's creation.

We are a faith that thinks and acts beyond hypothetical situations. We live out a faith where the Word of God becomes real for us as the people of God through our words and actions. Yes, truly we do have better things to think about than crazy hypothetical situations. We are called to start out living the real grace, the real love, the real peace, the real love of God in our real life messy relationships with one another rather than just think about the what ifs of our faith.

So what are we waiting for? There's a world out there that is anxiously waiting to experience the real life messiness of the Kingdom of Heaven right here

on earth. So let's get moving and may we always remember that our God is a God for the living and not a God of hypothetical situations? Amen.