



COMMUNITY  
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CHURCH

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November 7, 2004  
All Saints Sunday

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Luke 20:27-40

## Paradise People

Intro: Our New Testament lesson is from Luke. Jesus has entered Jerusalem for the last time. He has turned over the tables in the Temple, he just had a debate with Pharisees about paying taxes. Now another group, the Sadducees, who were more elite and aloof than the Pharisees come to ask Jesus about resurrection and heaven. They did not believe in either. Let us listen for God's word to us.

There is a story told about a preacher working a sermon in his later years. He was considering a particular verse from Lamentations the one that says "God's mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning. And as he studied this passage he was moved to write "at my age this promise of newness every morning is at best a mixed blessing. I have come to the point in my life when I really don't want anything new in the morning. I want my slippers right under the bed where I left them the night before. I want my orange juice and bran flakes for breakfast as normal. In my advanced years I can do without a lot of newness, especially in the morning." There is a lot of "newness" for the religious leaders in our passage this morning. New ideas about life after life

that were not expected or welcome by those addressing Jesus.

Somewhere in Sunday school I remember learning one way to help tell Pharisees and Sadducees apart. My teacher said, "When it comes to resurrection the Pharisees believed in it, they were "fair you see". The Sadducees did not believe in it, so they were "sad you see". While that doesn't completely mine the depths of the differences - it is an important aspect of this conversation recorded in the Gospel. Those speaking with Jesus aren't even open to the ideas of there being "a heaven" or the possibility that resurrection happens. I'd like to consider both this morning.

For the Sadducees there was no hereafter, no heaven to look forward to, everything was here and now. God's blessing and judgment all happened in this lifetime and the only way one existed after death was to have one's name live on through children. In this encounter with Jesus, his opponents wanted to make heaven sound ridiculous and to make Jesus look bad.

The question the Sadducees put before Jesus is meant to trick and trap him. They have heard of Jesus' teachings so they use their debating skills to set up what is an absurd situation. There was a law that said if the oldest brother in a family marries and dies childless the next oldest brother should marry his sister in law and keep his brother's namesake going. This law is taken to an impossible extreme by the Sadducees with their question about seven brides for seven brothers and it is always the same bride. (One can just imagine Hollywood having field day making that movie.)

Luke shows Jesus using this question to teach about heaven and life after life. Even though the Sadducees are asking questions they do want to learn anything new or change their minds about anything. Jesus gives all who hear something to ponder, his answer stretches our faith. He speaks of heaven and describes a little of what it will be like. It's a big change, there is newness we can not comprehend. Heaven will be more different than we can even

guess at.

Jesus' answer gives us pause and then more questions. These are jarring words. People won't marry in heaven? People will be like angels? That gives us lots of questions about what heaven will be like. It all sounds so very different from anything we know here. Do we really want to be in such a place? I've heard some people say "if there isn't hunting in heaven I don't want to go". (don't look around for who's not here this morning)

What Jesus is saying when he answers the Sadducees is that heaven will be more wonderful than we can imagine. It will be so wonderful that even one of the best relationships we may have on this earth that of a good marriage, won't come close to what is experienced by everyone. Relationships won't be lost, but there will be even more transcending connection with each other and God. Far beyond anything we have known on earth. And I have a hard time trying to make any real sense of that and we won't have a full sense of it until we get there.

Heaven will be so wonderful that someone said we won't know how to act when we get there. I love this story that Garrison Keillor tells about Minnesotans in heaven: he says "My people aren't paradise people. We've lived in Minnesota all our lives and it took a lot out of us. My people aren't sure if we'll even like paradise: not sure

that perfection is all its cracked up to be. My people will arrive in heaven and stand just inside the gate, shuffling around. "It's a lot bigger than I thought it was going to be," we'll think. We'll say, "No, thank you, we can't stay for eternity, we'll just sit and have a few minutes of bliss with you and then we have to get back."

When we all get to heaven, it will be a day of rejoicing and a day of marveling at the wonder of resurrection life -- heaven will be so much more wonderful than we possibly imagine. I hope we do all stay for quite a while. There are some ways in which we can have a little bit of heaven in this life, I believe. If you have a good and lifelong friendship, then you know a little bit of what heaven is like. If you know or have known a really good marriage, then you know a little bit what heaven is like. The day you hold any newborn child you also know a little bit what heaven is like. If that child is your own or your grandchild, you know some of what heaven is like. Our God is a relational God, who is discovered in relationship with each other and with creation. When you look at the sunset over the mountains, you know a little bit what heaven is like. When you sit on a rock in the middle of a mountain stream, you know some of what heaven is like.

We cannot know fully what heaven is like. It is and will be, beyond words. But we can know a little bit of heaven right here on earth, when we experience

the gift of a loving relationship, the gift of a child. And we can know a little bit of heaven when we experience the power of prayer. For heaven, is the presence of God. Here with us, even now. Heaven is God is doing something new!

Resurrection is God's newness. God's merciful newness, this and every morning. It is glorious unpredictability whether we want it or not. If death is the bad we can not control, then resurrection is the amazing good we can not control. We either trust it and live by it or we don't. Resurrection is something that all Christians hold in common. From fundamental Baptists to progressive Presbyterians, all who would call themselves Christians hold as central a belief in resurrection.

All of us are born, bred and shaped by the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet it will be filled with mystery and Jesus points that out to those listening. Like heaven, we will never completely understand it this side of death. Human realities aren't necessarily divine ones. We can't think outside a human box, because we are human.

As we speak of resurrection, we should be clear what resurrection is not. Resurrection is not reincarnation, the same life reappearing in different form. Resurrection is not immortality, the body dying but the soul remaining alive. Resurrection is not a butterfly coming out of a cocoon, for a butterfly is just a

transformed larva. And resurrection is not a blooming of a flower, for a flower is simply the maturing of an already living seed. All of these images are symbols, I've used them and found them helpful at times. But none of them really does the trick. Resurrection is a much more radical idea. Resurrection is life replacing death, a spiritual big bang if you will. A second creation, a new creation something coming out of nothing. Resurrection is a reality that I cannot explain or understand or dissect or clone or achieve or control. And none of us can. Resurrection is not our thing it is God's thing. Resurrection is God saying that even though we die, God gives life to the dead.

To regard the life to come as no more than a continuation of the here and now ends up trivializing both this life and the next. It means imagining nothing more to existence than golf on earth and golf in heaven. But to recognize that the next life is a new birth, a new age, the unveiled sight of God -- this brings out the dignity of both that life and the one we are living now.

If we can dare to believe like that, we move beyond a self-satisfaction that tries to find complete answers and prove what can not be fully known. Heaven and earth are God's creations, they exist. Resurrection, whatever wonderful reality that holds, is God's promise of newness to us. Amen.