

Beyond the Grave

by Linda Rex

November 6, 2022, PROPER 27—Lately I have been learning a lot of new things about the apostle Paul and the culture in which he lived as a missionary, sharing the good news of God's love in Christ. One thing that I have seen in a new way is how Paul so often paid close attention to where people were in their understanding with regards to God, met them where they were, and then worked to bring them closer to the truth as he understood it.

In Paul's writings, we can see him agree with his opponents, but then, as he explained where he actually stood on a topic, he taught what was in exact opposition to what his opponents taught. This makes reading Paul's writings challenging, because we have to follow him through his entire thought process before we decide exactly where he stood on a topic.

In our gospel reading for this Sunday, we see the same method at work. Apparently, Paul used the same method as Jesus, in reaching out to opponents by beginning where they were to bring them to where they needed to be. What Jesus did in totality (joined us in our darkness to bring us into his light), he seemed to do even in everyday conversations with those who stood in opposition to him.

When approached by the Sadducees of his day, Jesus took into account their cultural background and religious beliefs. These men were from a wealthy, aristocratic class of people who believed that the only part of the Old Testament scriptures they should pay close attention to were those in the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. They also rejected any idea that there may be supernatural forces at work in the world, and this included angels or miracles.

When they saw the Pharisees and scribes were silenced by Jesus, in spite of the clever ways in which they attempted to trap him, the Sadducees pulled out their best weapon, a story which usually succeeded in shutting up their opposition. This story involved levirate marriage—a practice which many Americans would not be familiar with, or would consider strange and maybe even offensive.

Levirate marriage makes a lot of sense to people in cultures and times when the death of a spouse would leave a woman vulnerable and without any means of provision. It also guarantees that a family's property would remain within the ownership of the family and would not become a part of some other family's possession. When practiced, a woman who lost a husband and had no children to inherit the property would be given to the man's brother as wife so he could give her an heir to inherit the family's property.

The story these Sadducees told involved a woman who lost a husband, but then was married to his six brothers, one after another, who each died without giving her an heir. Then she died. Honestly, I feel sorry for the poor woman—I would have died too, just to get it all over with. But it is just a story and meant simply to be a means by which the Sadducees could ask their penetrating question in hopes of trapping Jesus: "When they rise in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?"

First off, Jesus knew who the ones asking the question were. He knew that what happened to their family's wealth when someone died was important to them. He knew that marriage did not mean to them what God intended it to mean—a sacred space which revealed the reality of God's presence and nature as two persons were brought together and made one. And Jesus knew their hearts, that they simply sought to discredit him and shut him up.

Jesus started where they were, and worked to bring them into a new point of view, pointing out to them their mistaken way of looking at God, the resurrection, themselves, and others. The common understanding of many in the Jewish culture of that day was that life would simply continue in the resurrection, meaning that married life would continue beyond the grave. Jesus didn't attempt to clarify every detail regarding life in the resurrection, but did make some significant points.

The first thing Jesus pointed out was that our existence in this life is much different than what our existence will be when we are resurrected. Those who rise in glory will be like the angels in that they will not be performing marriages or be married to one another like people do in this life. Contrary to so much of our popular media images regarding the afterlife, humans do not become angels when they die—their existence simply resembles that of angels in that it does not involve marriage and procreation in the same way it does nows and they no longer die. And there is no reason to believe we will lose our gender identity in the resurrection, but that is a different topic all together.

Getting back to the story, we see Jesus continuing to meet them where they were to bring them to a new place. The Sadducees believed that there was no resurrection, and used Moses in order to prove this point. So Jesus brought up Moses himself, pulling from the prophet's initial encounter with God on the mountain where he spoke from the burning bush, and showed that even Moses spoke of the resurrection. God called himself, "I Am that I Am." And he called himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

As human beings, we live in linear time, where one event happens after another. We have a past, a present, a future, and a death. God, however, lives in a different way than we do, since he is present in every moment in all time, having created space and time for us to live within. God, in Christ, entered our time and became present to each of us in every moment in a new way. These are mind-blowing thoughts that I won't dive too deeply into. But what Jesus was saying here was that God was present in that moment to Abraham, who had his existence in him, at the same time he was present to the Sadducees. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

This should be very comforting to us. Jesus was, at that moment, in the process of doing what was needed so that every human being could participate in the resurrection from the dead. Elsewhere in scripture, we are told that because of Christ's self-offering, every person participates in the resurrection from the dead, some rising to life and others rising to face judgment, a judgment which is meant to purify, heal, restore, and renew, not to annihilate or destroy (see John 5:29), for God's heart is that no person perishes, but that each and every one repents (2 Peter 3:9).

Though I am grateful I live in a culture where I do not have to marry my husband's brother, should Ray die someday, I'm even more grateful for what Jesus has done so that each of us might live forever. What a precious gift God gives us by being present to us each and every moment through Jesus in the Spirit! We are not orphans. We are not left to do things all on our own under our own strength. No, we are each a beloved child of the Father, who in Christ by the Spirit has been given our own chair at the divine table with our own name carved on it, personally crafted by the carpenter from Nazareth, Jesus Christ.

Thank you, dear Father, for including us in your life, for being present to us in every moment, having prepared a place for us at your table, now and forever, through your Son Jesus and by your Spirit. Amen.

²⁷“Now there came to Him some of the Sadducees (who say that there is no resurrection), ²⁸and they questioned Him, saying, ‘Teacher, Moses wrote for us that “if a man’s brother dies,” having a wife, “and he is childless, his brother should marry the wife and raise up children to his brother.”’²⁹ Now there were seven brothers; and the first took a wife and died childless; ³⁰and the second ³¹and the third married her; and in the same way all seven died, leaving no children. ³²Finally the woman died also. ³³In the resurrection therefore, which one’s wife will she be? For all seven had married her.’
³⁴Jesus said to them, ‘The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, ³⁵but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; ³⁶for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. ³⁷But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the burning bush, where he calls the Lord “the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”’³⁸ Now He is not the God of the dead but of the living; for all live to Him.’ ” Luke 20:27–38 NASB