

Dead and Alive

November 11, 2007

(Pentecost 24 - Year C)

Luke 20: 27-38

St. Alban's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas

It seems that many people in this congregation have been talking lately about the resurrection of the dead and about life after death.

From what I hear from the Bible Study Fellowship groups that have just ended for the fall, this last lesson has had many of the 52 participants questioning and thinking and pondering Jesus' death and resurrection.

As a result of this theological questioning, I walked into the Wednesday morning Bible study and was pounced on, as the people in that study were firing off questions to me left and right about the resurrection of the dead.

The fact that so many people in this congregation have been engaged in an in-depth discussion about resurrection, just shows you how deep this congregation is growing, spiritually and theologically.

In the midst of Jesus' last week on earth, the Sadducees pounced on Jesus with a question about the resurrection of the dead.

And Jesus answers the Sadducees by saying:

“God is not God of the dead, but of the living.

For to God all are alive.”¹

In the summer of 2002, I worked as a hospital chaplain at the Washington Hospital Center and at the Hospital for Sick Children.

The Hospital for Sick Children is located only a few miles north of the U.S. Capitol.

Most of the children who are in this hospital are long-term patients.

Many of the children are wards of the District of Columbia, which means that they are now the responsibility of the government, because their parents have essentially abandoned them.

The Hospital for Sick Children is a heart breaking place.

¹ Luke 20: 38 (New International Version, modified for inclusive language)

My job was to make rounds, and to pray with the patients and staff. Sometimes my job was simply to hold sick babies in my arms and to pray for them.

One room in the Hospital for Sick Children was devoted to children who had suffered brain injuries.

In this room were 6 patients, including a 13 year old patient named Sandra.

Sandra had been admitted to the Hospital for Sick Children when she was 4 years old, after she was looking out the front window of her house one night and was shot in the head in a drive-by shooting.

Sandra had little brain activity.

She did not speak, but simply stared straight ahead.

None of the patients in this room were responsive, and the nurse told me that none of these children comprehend any communication.

I gingerly approached Sandra's bed and looked into her blank eyes.

The only sound was her shallow breathing.

Not knowing what to say, I rambled.

Then, I asked her if it would be OK to pray with her.

I felt inadequate, not knowing the words to pray in such a helpless situation.

Yet, I prayed out loud:

I gave thanks to God for the gift of life.

I prayed that God would walk beside Sandra in her time of need.

I prayed that she would know God's love and presence. Amen.

But, in my heart, I prayed that she would go ahead and die.

I opened my eyes, and then suddenly I heard:

Whaa!

I jumped out of my skin as Sandra's guttural sound scared the pants off me.

I felt as if I had been called to task by her.

I felt as if she had heard my unspoken prayer and that she had taken offense to it.

To me, Sandra was saying:

“You self-righteous little priest wanna-be.

I am not dead.

I am *alive*.”

For God is not the God of the dead, but God is the God of the living.

For to God, all are alive.

We sometimes fall into the trap that the Sadducees tried to set for Jesus in today’s Gospel reading from Luke, the trap of deciding who is dead and who is alive.

The Sadducees were a Jewish sect at the time of Jesus.

The Sadducees were theologically conservative and were wealthy men of high social standing in the Temple in Jerusalem.

In addition, the Sadducees didn’t believe in angels, and they did not believe in a doctrine of resurrection.

In the reading from Luke, the Sadducees really aren’t interested in Jesus’ views on resurrection.

And the Sadducees really aren’t interested in knowing what happens to 7 brothers who all marry the same woman.

(Although *I* sure am curious as to the stamina of any husband who could outlive 7 husbands)!

Just as these early presidential primary debates are designed to make one of the candidates say something stupid,

The Sadducees were interested in trapping Jesus into saying something stupid, something that would highlight the “rightness” of the Sadducees and the “wrongness” of everyone else.

We fall into this trap all the time.

Traps that are designed to make us say that one person is dead, while the other person is alive.

But Jesus does not fall for this trap.

Jesus says:

“God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living.

For to God, *all* are alive.”

When we judge God’s children, regarding them as living and dead based on categories,

Categories of Pharisee and Sadducee, war hawk and peace activist, liberal and conservative, supporter and detractor of the giant Texas Ranger statue,

When we regard other people as dead,

Then we do not worship the God of the living.

We are to regard the comatose child, the house cleaning woman, the homeless man, the unwed mother, the death row inmate, the annoying co-worker, the starving and the stupid,

We are to regard all of them as equals.

For to God, *all are alive*.

Next Sunday, at the 10:00 o’clock service, we will baptize two people: Jack Bumgardner and Spencer Williams.

I don’t know if we fully realize what we do when we baptize someone into Christ’s death and resurrection.

When we baptize someone, they are buried with Christ in his death.

In Baptism, we are, figuratively, pushed under the water and are drowned.

All of us who have been baptized - have already died.

And then, when we come up out of the water, when we are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ’s own forever, then we begin a new and resurrected life of grace.

The question that we have been asking this last week in our community about when the resurrection of the dead begins has already been answered at our Baptism.

For, as St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans:

“We have been buried with [Christ] by baptism into his death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”²

We have no business deciding who is dead and who is alive.
Because *all of us* have *already* died, drowned in the waters of Baptism.
All of us have *already* been raised from the dead - we have been made
alive, to walk in newness of life.

So, do not regard your sister or your brother or your enemy as dead.
Or else the God of the living might just take offense and say:

Whaa!

For to God, all of us, *all of us*,
Have been made *alive!*

AMEN.

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² Romans 6:4