



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON

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Conundrums, puzzles, and parables – oh my! Sometimes it is just too confusing to figure out the messages of Jesus and of those around him and of those who wrote it down. Who could/would even come up with a strange scenario of one wife and seven brother husbands – just bizarre in my mind and then it's printed in our Bible and it drives my dear father-in-law to distraction. In his years of failing health it troubled him greatly that this story appeared to not honor marriage and he was troubled to think he might not get to be with his wife in heaven. And I mean it really bothered him and I had no answer. What do you say to statements like “those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage?” And “Now he is God not of the dead but of the living; for to him all of them are alive?” But my father-in-law knew he was dying and would soon be dead – so what then?

What then? That is actually some of the challenge of those Sadducees who are criticizing Jesus. They don't believe in resurrection and so they are trying to mock him, to show how silly and unworkable is an idea of eternal life. They are trying to demonstrate that the things we hold dear in this life, including the bond of marriage, will make no sense with this strange idea of resurrection. They are sure there is no life after death. And they are trying to show Jesus to be a strange interloper in their faith traditions, someone who is making claims that just don't make sense.

And I'd have to say that in a way – they are right. Jesus's messages and teachings are hard to follow and to make sense of when combined with the teachings and values of the secular world. This was true in Jesus' time and it is still true in our day. Eternal life is a hope, an uncertainty, an idea impossible to prove.

So is the idea that love will win the day. Or that we always have to prioritize the love of God and the love of neighbor over everything else. And if we are going to admit to the existence of God, then we have to acknowledge that the things we have in this world are to be lightly held. They are gifts and we are merely stewards of our possessions, including our own bodies. All that we have is a gift from God and power, prestige, wealth, and control are rather meaningless and elusive concepts.

When we acknowledge the existence of God, we also acknowledge a higher, greater power than ourselves, and we know that ultimately we are not in control, we are not the ultimate judge, not the great power of the universe – or even of our own family.

When we acknowledge the existence of God, we also acknowledge a world of the divine – a world unseen but present, again, like the other propositions, an idea rather impossible to prove.

So, back to this idea of eternal life and resurrection and the question posed by the Sadducees. If we think like the Sadducees, we are failing to use our imagination. We are ignoring the promises and experiences of ineffable joys, never-failing care, the strength of God's presence, the assurance of never being alone, of being received into the arms of mercy, and of being reunited with those who have gone before us into the paradise of God.

When you talk about things like this, when you talk about the divine, then we can start to recognize the pettiness of the Sadducees question. It seems more like they are mucked down in that power and control stuff that trips us up. Like when we say, "I demand to know, and I can afford to get my way" or something like that.

Yet the fullness of God's love and truth is not fully known to any of us- not yet. We don't know everything. Like the verse Paul writes about "now we see in a mirror dimly, but when the end comes then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part, then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known." Rather like those courageous words spoken by Job.

With great anguish and intensity, Job appeals to have himself known, to have his works written down and engraved on a rock forever, and then to be present to God – a God who will stand beside him and they will look into each other's eyes. Both will know each other.

I spent some time this week reading, "Proof of Heaven" by Dr. Eben Alexander. Dr. Alexander is a quite renowned neurosurgeon who had a journey into the Afterlife in 2008. After spending time processing the experience he felt driven to try and share it with us using the limiting words available to him.

For example, he writes about the place he entered. "In this case, the mother was God, the Creator, the Source who is responsible for making the universe and all in it. This Being was so close that there seemed to be no distance at all between God and myself. Yet at the same time, I could sense the infinite vastness of the Creator, could see how completely miniscule I was by comparison. I will occasionally use OM as the pronoun for God because ...In was the sound I remembered hearing associated with that omniscient, omnipotent, and unconditionally loving God, but any descriptive word falls short."

In the experience Dr. Alexander had, he was certain of a message he had to keep. It ran something like this: "You are loved and cherished, dearly forever. You have nothing to fear. There is nothing you can do wrong." He returned to life on earth certain that we all have a true spiritual self that we are destined to recover. And he feels we should do everything in our power to get in touch with this miraculous aspect of ourselves – to cultivate it and bring it to light. This the being living within all of us right now and that is, in fact, the being that God truly intends us

to be. He says that the way to get closer to this genuine self is to manifest love and compassion. Because love and compassion are far more than abstractions many of us believe them to be. They are real and concrete and they make up the very fabric of the divine, the spiritual world of life itself.

As a scientist, Dr. Alexander spent years researching stories of the world beyond this world. He read the ancient stories and all of the death experience stories he could find, and they all carry essentially the same message. God's love is complete and grand and all that matters in our reunion with those we have known and those who will become new to us and that all is well. In fact those were the words he kept saying as he radiated some sort of bliss while coming back from his coma.

How does his story relate to those Sadducees? Reading about the divine, experiencing the divine, hearing about the world after death here, I am struck by how we limit ourselves to the petty, the useless, and the unimportant. The world is so much bigger than the rules and that which we think we "know."

Thanks be to God.