First Presbyterian Church of Soda Spring

God of the Living

November 6, 2022

Luke 20:27-38

**27**Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him **28**and asked him a question: “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies leaving a wife but no children, the man[a] shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. **29**Now there were seven brothers; the first married a woman and died childless; **30**then the second[b] **31**and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. **32**Finally the woman also died. **33**In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.”

**34**Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage, **35**but 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. **36**Indeed, they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. **37**And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. **38**Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.”

This is an interesting passage, for a number of reasons, so buckle up, y’all, we’re going to dive right in.

In Jesus’ day, there were two main groups of religious leaders; the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a group of leaders who believed that the first five books of what we know as the Old Testament, or the Torah, contained the entirety of God’s law. Nothing could be added, nothing could be taken away and there was to be no room for any interpretation. They were the biblical literalists of their day, and they took it upon themselves to be the guardians of the faith. If you were to think of them as the “purity police,” you would not be wrong.

There was no room in the Sadducees theology for any concept of resurrection or afterlife, no room for the concept of heaven or hell and, indeed, they believed that once someone died, that that was the end of the matter.

Now, most, but not all, of the Temple priests were from the Sadducees sect and they also held a majority of the seats on the Sanhedrin, which was the body the Roman occupiers set up to govern the day to day lives of the Jewish people. They were, without exception, members of the upper class; wealthy and connected. And because of their close association with the Roman occupiers, they weren’t very popular with the common folk, but they controlled the Temple worship, so they were tolerated. The Sadducees primary focus was on the Temple and what went on there. They were obsessed with doing things “decently and in order,” so to speak. This would, ultimately, be the Sadducees undoing, since with the destruction of the Second Temple, in 70 AD, the Sadducees purpose for being was gone and they ceased to exist as a group.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, had a very different take on theology. They believed in what was called the “Oral Torah.” Yes, the written Torah was to be understood as God’s word to the people of Israel, but in the theology of the Pharisees, that wasn’t the end of the matter. They were much more flexible in adapting the writings of Moses to their unique circumstances. They also believed in life after death, heaven and hell and the resurrection of the physical body.

One of the major differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, revolved around the appropriate way to worship. The Pharisees felt that worship was not simply confined to the Temple, as the Sadducees did, and so the they developed the synagogue system and are now considered to be the founders of modern day Judaism, and most of the middle and lower classes belonged to, followed, or believed in the Pharisees theology, and that included Jesus and his disciples.

Honestly, when I was doing the research on the differences between the two groups, for our Tuesday night Bible study, I was surprised at how relatively liberal the Pharisees were.

If you count up the number of times the Pharisees are mentioned in the New Testament, the number comes in at roughly 90 mentions, give or take, while the Sadducees are mentioned less than 10 times. And that’s what makes this passage significant.

In today’s reading, we see Jesus in the Temple and a group of the Sadducees have decided to lay a trap for him. They concoct a ridiculous scenario about a woman who marries seven brothers, in turn, who each die leaving the woman childless. You may notice that this scenario is based on a law laid down by Moses, which was still in effect. The purpose of this particular law was to provide for the care and wellbeing of widows.

The Sadducees have, of course, presented a situation that stretches the law to absurd extremes and Jesus sees right through the trap. Jesus, knowing his scriptures, interprets the Torah for the Sadducees in a way that makes it clear that they had it wrong. Jesus makes it very plain that there’s a clear distinction between what happens in this world and what happens after death.

Because we are all children of the resurrection, Jesus told them, we are all children of God and alive in God even after the death of the physical body. Verse 38 sums it all up when Jesus tells the Sadducees, *“Now he is God not of the dead but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.”*

Here’s where I hit a fork in the road, as I was preparing this sermon. I could continue down the path of celebrating the fact that those we have lost; those who have passed on, are not truly dead, and since this is Sunday on the liturgical calendar where we celebrate All Saints Day, that path would be entirely appropriate. The understanding, the belief, the faith, that our loved ones aren’t really dead, is a great comfort and is indeed a cause for celebration.

But, here’s the thing; I believe that resurrection isn’t just limited to individuals. I believe that resurrection is something that can happen to congregations, as well. And I believe we, as a congregation, are experiencing resurrection right now.

One of the first things I did, after arriving here, was to dig out the Session minute books, in order to get a sense of the history of this place. We Presbyterians are master record keepers and back in the office we have pretty much a record of every Session meeting that has taken place here in the past 130 years.

It’s quite a bit of information, even for a history geek like me, and I haven’t been able to read through everything (just try and read minutes written in long hand without getting a headache). That said, there are some things that stood out. The fact that at times Session consisted of just the Clerk and the Pastor, or the fact that Session met only once a year. And let me just say to our current Session; no we aren’t going back to one annual meeting of Session, sorry.

 Two things, in particular, stand out for me. The obvious anguish the Clerk felt when the LDS controlled school board forced the congregation to stop meeting in the old school house, which was our first meeting place prior to the construction of the sanctuary. And the second was where the Clerk reported that two women were removed from the membership for “immodest behavior”. Make of that what you will, as there was no further information provided about that particular event.

The Session minutes show the usual things you’d expect of a congregation that has been around as long as ours, the reception of new members, the dismissal of members who have moved away, the hopes and dreams for the future, as well as the joys and the sorrows. But, for me, they also show something else. Though wars, through social changes, through two world wide pandemics, through times when this sanctuary was bursting at the seams on Sunday morning to times when just a small handful of people worshiped; through all of the ups and downs we’ve experienced, what I see is this one simple fact; We. Are. Still. Here. We may not be as large of a congregation as we were 50, 30 or even 10 years ago, but We. Are. Still. Here.

When I began my time as your pastor, the official membership stood at 20 with about 15 in worship on an average Sunday morning. In some early conversations I had with the leadership, I heard the real fear that the church wouldn’t survive and would be forced to close. But, God had, and has, other plans for this place. As we prepare to receive a group of new members this morning, the membership currently stands at 30, with an average attendance of 22 in worship. In case you’re doing the math, that’s a 40% increase in membership and about a 68% increase in weekly attendance, in just over one years time.

I believe the growth, the new energy, the renewed sense of excitement, all are gifts from God and should be celebrated. However, it raises a question. What are we going to do with these gifts? What’s next for us and how do we continue to be a force for good in our community? What do the next 130 years have in store?

Yes, the Holiday Bazaar, the Christmas Eve service and the Community Garden are all wonderful ways in which we have contributed to the life of our community. Individuals from this congregation volunteer in a variety of ways and, again, all of this is important to life here. But is there more that we as a congregation can do? If so, what might that be?

What has kept this church going for so many years isn’t just the faith that we in this room continue to exhibit, or the faith of the great cloud of witnesses that have gone before us, it’s also our willingness to accept people where they are, without judgement and accept people right where they are on their journey It’s our willingness to not hoard the gifts God has given us, but to share them with as many people as possible.

So, are we willing to keep trusting that God will show us what’s next? Are we willing to let go of our fears and anxieties about the future? Are we willing to be guided into that future by the Holy Spirit?

We are still here because those who went before us trusted God, let go of their fears and anxieties and allowed themselves and this church to be guided by the Holy Spirit. Are we ready to do the same? If we are, we will surely continue to be blessed by God and we will surely continue to be a blessing to our community and the world. What’s next? AMEN