

3rd Sunday in End Times – Saints Triumphant Sunday – Year C – November 14, 2010
Based on Luke 20:27-40 written by Pastor Paul Horn, preached at Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

“Look at the Big Picture”

- I. There is a resurrection
- II. There is eternal life in heaven

Making assumptions can lead to embarrassing mistakes. Asking a woman if she is pregnant because she has recently gained some weight is an example. Assuming that the affairs of earth, namely marriage, could be used to ridicule the affairs of heaven, the resurrection, led to a big mistake by the Sadducees.

The Sadducees were the aristocracy who controlled the political life of the nation of Israel in Jesus' day and the high priest's office. Their opposition to Jesus was most likely because he was popular and successful among the people and he threatened their leadership. So they felt the need to discredit him. They didn't have all the facts. Matthew and Mark have similar accounts of this story and both record Jesus replying to the Sadducees, **“You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures.”** They weren't looking at the big picture. They focused on the wrong thing.

How often does that happen with us? Someone asks, “Why are we building a new church?” Some of our own members have said, “We're running out of room!” “We're building so that we can have more members!” Neither of those reasons fit our mission statement very well, do they? The mission of this congregation is to seek the unchurched, to strive for spiritual growth, to strengthen one another through the Word of God and his Sacraments. How can we best reach the community, serve their spiritual needs, make more disciples of Christ, strengthen the saints that are already here through teaching and preaching of the Word of God and administering the Sacraments? A new building.

The same is true with our inactive members. What is our goal with them? To get them into church just to have a warm body in the pew? No. But that they be faithful in their study of the Word of God and participate in the Sacraments, so that they do not lose sight of the big picture, that they continue to believe that they are sons and daughters of the resurrection, sons and daughters of God, heirs of heaven.

The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection or the afterlife. But why mention it? They were trying to make Jesus and Scripture look foolish. What was foolish was their hypothetical situation. A man and a woman get married, but the husband dies, leaving no child. The brother marries the widow, but he also dies, leaving no child. There were seven brothers, and all died, leaving no child. Sounds like the beginning of a bad joke. But the Sadducees had a point. In the Old Testament the LORD provided for widows when he commanded that the brother or closest relative of the deceased was to marry the widow so that the family line would continue.

Jesus answers their question, “There will be no marriage in the afterlife... they will be just like the angels.” (Jesus mentions angels because the Sadducees also did not believe in angels.) This does not mean that we will turn into angelic creatures with wings fluttering about from cloud to cloud. We will be like the angels in that angels are immortal, they cannot die. Here on earth, because of sin, humans die. One of the purposes of marriage, according to God's plan, is to replenish the human race. In heaven, where there is no death, there is no need for marriage to supply any deficiency in numbers caused by death.

Having disposed of this false notion that there was marriage in heaven Jesus now proceeds to prove the resurrection of the dead – that was the most important part of the conversation. He uses Scripture to answer the Sadducees. Jesus could have used any number of passages from the Old Testament, but he chooses to fight on their level. The Sadducees used a passage from one of the five books Moses wrote because the Sadducees did not regard the rest of Scripture as authoritative. So Jesus uses a passage from Moses to prove that the dead are raised. (Exodus 3:2,6,15; 4.5) **“Have you not read?”** he asked them. Of course they had. They just didn’t pay attention. They failed to look at the big picture.

“Surely you remember the story of Moses at the burning bush? He calls the LORD, ‘the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’” What remained of those men’s bodies? It had been nearly 2,000 years since they were laid in the grave. They were nonexistent, only memories of history. Yet God identified himself with these men, proving that they were not dead, but alive. God is a God to all those who live in him. Those men, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, put their trust in God, that he is the God who raises the dead. Even though they die, they shall never die, because even in death God considers them alive, assuring believers that they have hope in death, the sure certainty of the resurrection.

Jesus made his point, “There is a resurrection of the dead on the Last Day. Moses even proves it.” Jesus had even made the point a week earlier by calling his friend Lazarus out of the grave, an act witnessed by some of the Sadducees. Finally, Jesus finally proved the resurrection of the dead when he himself rose from his own tomb on the first Easter Sunday morning.

That’s good news for us! To hear from Jesus’ own mouth that death is not the end of us. These bodies will live again. One day you will rise to die no more. Have you stopped to ponder the profundity of that wonderful truth? Look at your hands... one day these will grow old and crippled, and stop functioning and eventually move no more, the lifeless flesh and bone will rot and turn to dust. And then, in an instant, Christ will bring the cells of your body back together and breathe new life into them, a fresh new body that will not grow old and frail, a body that cannot die, that will not die. In a world where everyone dies, this is great news!

Since there is a resurrection of the dead, it would probably be a good idea if you knew where your resurrected body was going to spend eternity. And so Jesus focuses on the big picture. There is a resurrection. There is also an afterlife. Here’s how to get there...

Vs34,35 **“Those who are considered worthy in taking part of that age...can no longer die.”** *That age* that Jesus speaks of is the age of eternity in heaven. Only those who are considered worthy will take part in it. Sadly, worldwide ignorance of how to get to heaven is the tragedy of humanity. Their actions, accomplishments, good behavior, as they judge it to be, make them worthy. A catastrophe! Worthiness before God is not determined by human ability, accomplishment or merit. Not even if we had earned all the distinguished service crosses, silver stars, and purple hearts in the world, God would not consider us worthy.

Because He demands that we never sin, that we always do good, that children should always respect their parents, that husband and wife always love, honor and respect each other, that Soldier and civilian alike always serve God first, then their family, and then their country. How well have I done that? Well enough to stand before God that he would consider me worthy of heaven?

Jesus determines who is considered worthy of the resurrection of the dead to eternal life in heaven. Jesus said, **“Those who are considered worthy... are God’s children, since they are children of the resurrection.”** I am considered worthy not because he saw anything good in me, but because he saw perfection in his own child, His Son, our Savior Jesus.

In 2000 Steven Spielberg released a movie entitled *Saving Private Ryan*. The movie is set on the battlefields of France during WWII. A young soldier by the name of Ryan loses all three of his brothers in the war. The chain of command order a group of eight men to bring Ryan back home. A retired Lutheran pastor had enlisted with the Army before he had entered the ministry, explained that when he sat in the theatre he cried at the end of that movie. Not because most of those soldiers died saving one, but because of what Tom Hanks' character said at the end of the movie. As he sat on the ground dying, he whispered into Private Ryan's ear, "Earn this." The Lutheran pastor was upset because Tom Hanks' character was a Ranger. The US Army Ranger motto is *Sua Sponte, of their own accord*. In other words, following what is said in the Ranger creed, "Recognizing that I volunteered as a Ranger..." I signed up for this. I will sacrifice myself for you.

Jesus was ordered to go into the battlefield and save not one, but all. He was ordered to sacrifice himself. Jesus' motto was "of my own accord. I signed up for this. I willingly volunteered to take on this job." And so he fought our enemies that made us unworthy of God's love; our sins, death, Satan and our sinful flesh. Jesus did not need to use an M242 or 120mm round firing from an Abram's tank to defeat our sins. He defeated our enemies with his perfect life of obedience, never once sinning, always keeping God's commandments. He defeated our enemies by his sacrifice on the cross, taking our place, dying our death, suffering our hell, enduring God's wrath which we deserved.

God doesn't turn around and demand that I earn it to show my worthiness. God gives me all that Jesus has done as a gift. He gives you all that Jesus has done as a gift. He gives you all because you are his child. He made you his child through Holy Baptism. By the power of the Word of God attached to the water, the Holy Spirit created faith in your heart, which has received all the blessings that Jesus won for you; the forgiveness of all your sins, salvation from death, from hell, from Satan, the gift of the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. What a gift and what a privilege to be called a child of God!

These truths are all connected together beautifully. You will be like the angels, immortal, unable to die, because you are children of God, you are children of God because you are children of the resurrection, you are children of the resurrection because you have faith in Christ, you have faith in Christ because God loves you.

At the end of the movie, Ryan is an old man, he stands in front of the gravesite of Tom Hanks' character, surrounded by his children and grandchildren. With tears in his eyes he turns to his family and asks, "Have I lived a good enough life? Am I a good person?" He still wondered at the end of his life, if he had done enough to earn what those men did for him. At the end of your life you will never have to ask that question. You don't have to ask it now. You know that God considers you worthy, because you are his child, and he sees Christ in you. I pray that the Holy Spirit will keep you in the one true faith in Christ Jesus until that day he comes again on the clouds with this angels and we join all the saints who have gone before us, to live together forever in heaven! Amen.