

Pentecost 25

14 November 2010

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Ascension Lutheran Church, Landover Hills, Md

“Eye Has Not Seen”

1 Corinthians 2.9

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ!

My selection of a text for this morning was shaped by today’s Gospel story, a conversation between Jesus and a group of Sadducees, Luke 20.27 - 38. Reflecting on that story, I chose as my text 1 Corinthians 2.9, where St. Paul writes:

**‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him.’**

You cannot imagine the unimaginable.

You cannot explain the unexplainable.

You cannot describe the indescribable.

Any attempt to describe heaven is doomed to failure because heaven is beyond anything we have experienced and anything we can conceive.

When Christ returns all who have followed Him will rise to LIFE. The mortal will put on immortality. The corruptible will put on incorruptibility. The perishable will put on imperishability. We shall at last be fully redeemed, completely restored to what God intended us to be before the Fall. We will be ushered by Christ into the presence of God and will live forever in perfect harmony with God and one another.

**‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him.’**

You cannot describe the indescribable. How do you describe to people whose only experience of life is dying, who from the day they are born begin an inevitable march to the grave, who get ill and hurt and break down and gray and wrinkle and age, who with doctor’s visits and life insurance and funerals have learned to accommodate death into their way of life – how do you explain to us what it means to be immortal?

In conversations where we speculate about heaven the question is sometimes asked “How old will we be in heaven?” “Old” is about “aging”, “aging” is about marching towards death. “Old” doesn’t exist when death is swept away. The question “how old will we be in heaven?” has no meaning. (If you can’t find the handle on that, then my point is made: you can’t describe the indescribable!)

How do you describe to people who are alienated from God, who find it as reasonable to believe that God IS NOT as God IS, who rebel against God’s rule and are driven by passion and appetite, who put their own wills and agenda’s first – how do you describe to us what it will be like to see God face to face. You cannot describe the indescribable.

A group of Sadducees come to Jesus. They have heard about this young preacher. He’s going about talking about the Kingdom of God. Which is great! They believe in God’s rule over us.

But this Jesus is also promoting some new-fangled ideas. He is saying that God is preparing a place for us in heaven. He is saying that there will be a resurrection and all the dead will rise. He is going so far to say that he himself is the way *through* death and *to* that place in God's heaven. And they found that kind of talk to be nonsense.

The Sadducees were an old group within Judaism. The only authority they recognized were the Books of Moses – the first 5 books of Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Those books don't say anything about a resurrection of the dead or life after death or our having a place with God in God's heaven. And so as far as the Sadducees were concerned there was no reason to believe in a resurrection or life after death or our having a place in Heaven. And if Jesus promoting that kind of stuff, well, he just needs to be brought down a notch.

Here's the logic of their argument: the way we live in *this* world does not translate well into heaven; therefore, the notion of heaven is absurd.

“Jesus: A woman had seven husbands in this life – how many will she have in heaven? Will she have seven husbands in heaven? Or just one? And if only one ... which one? The first husband? The last? Her favorite???? It is just too ridiculous to contemplate. Life as we know it does not translate well into heaven. And so the notion of your heaven is absurd.”

The Sadducees could have used any of a thousand examples.

“Jesus, there was an orthopedic surgeon. He has set thousands of broken bones. He has become adept at replacing hips and knees. How many broken bones will he set in heaven?”

“Jesus, there was an insurance agent. He writes policies that cover people's losses in the event of illness, accident, or death. What will he do in your heaven if there is no more illness, accident, death?”

“Jesus, there was a pharmacist – how many pills will he dispense in heaven?”

“Jesus, there was a locksmith – how many locks are there in heaven?”

“Jesus, there was a prison guard – what will he do when there are no prisoners?”

“Jesus, there was an attorney who specialized in contract law. He could write a contract that is airtight, that protects against every possible way to cheat or evade terms. What happens to his skills when everything is done with a handshake and no one cheats. What will he do in your heaven?”

How we live in *this* world does not translate well to heaven, does it. The Sadducees conclude that, therefore, heaven is absurd. But that how we live in this world does not translate well to the next points to the fact that it's *this* world that is absurd.

The absurdity lies in the here and now. We live in a broken world. This is not the world of God's design. God's design has been broken by our sinful rebellion. And, sadly, we have learned all too well how to accommodate that brokenness. We have learned how to adapt to and live with sin and death and illness and pain, suffering, misery, strife, war, violence, crime, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, selfishness, bigotry, betrayal ... the list goes on and on. We don't like that stuff ... but we've learned how to live with it.

And we've adapted so well, made so many accommodations, that sin and death and illness and pain, suffering, misery, strife, war, violence, crime, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, selfishness, bigotry, betrayal ... have become the status quo.

We don't like it ... but we've come to expect nothing less.

We don't like it. But we really can't conceive of a time and place without it. And to talk about resurrection and life in Christ and a place where there is no sin and death and illness and pain, suffering, misery, strife, war, violence, crime, hatred, envy, jealousy, greed, selfishness, bigotry, betrayal ... well, it just seems absurd.

Born alienated from God, driven by our passions, willing accomplices of the Evil one, in bondage to sin, and pointed towards death, we can't begin to imagine a time and place where we would be fully reconciled to God, freed from our bondage to sin and death, able to control our passions, fully and finally alive. Every attempt to describe heaven is an attempt to dumb down what is perfect to fit into minds that can only conceive the imperfect. It is an attempt to describe the indescribable.

It is absurd ... but it is ours in Christ. Stick with the notion that **this** is the way things are meant to be, and heaven **is** an absurdity.

Believe that it is life in **this** world that is absurd, and you are on your way to being a Christian.

And when – by God's grace in Jesus Christ – we reach that time and place where there is no sin or death or illness or pain or suffering or misery or strife or war or violence or crime or hatred or envy or jealousy or greed or selfishness or bigotry, all of those institutions and systems and routines that have helped us cope and function and recover will have no utility.

“A woman had seven husbands in **this** life – how many in **heaven**?”

None.

Marriage, Jesus says, is an accommodation for life in **this** world and does not translate into the next. That is that “till death do we part” part of the wedding vows. Married life begins with these vows and ends at death. It does not carry over to life beyond.

Why's that? How did **marriage** become an accommodation to a **broken** world?

God created us to enjoy companionship, created in us the need, the impulse for companionship. “It is not good for humans to be alone”, our Creator said. And so we seek companions and partners and friends and families. That is God's design for humans. We enjoy that now and will **continue** to enjoy that in heaven.

But part of our brokenness in this world is we get all selfish and possessive – that is **my** house: I'll put locks on the doors and don't think about entering without knocking. That is my car, that is my money – my, my, my. God knew that would carryover to people as well – that is my partner, those are my kids.

It's reflected in this story. If you were listening carefully you noticed I turned the question around. “How many husbands will she have?” is **not** the question the Sadducees asked. “Whose wife will she be?” was their question. Because in those days women were the property of men. Husbands owned their wives. “Seven men had the same wife ... who will own her in heaven?”

No one.

Then we will have a fundamentally different way of looking at one another. But to protect us from ourselves while living in this broken world, God had to put hedges around things – you cannot steal things that belong to others, you cannot covet things that belong to others, you cannot covet people that belong to others ... you shall not commit adultery.

“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage;” Jesus says, “³⁵but those who are considered worthy of a place in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. ³⁶Indeed they cannot die anymore.”

No longer being sinful and mortal, we will not need marriage to protect our relationships any more than we will need locks to protect our doors. I don't know that I can explain it any better than that. And maybe you can't wrap your mind around that. The Sadducees couldn't either.

And we don't have to. Because we really can't begin to understand what life will be like beyond sin and death and illness and pain and suffering and misery and strife and war and violence and crime and hatred and envy and jealousy and greed and selfishness and bigotry.

‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no human heart has conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.’

Paul Duke said it well in the “Christian Century”:

“We are left in a brilliant ignorance...: the resurrection is utterly other than what we have known, and its center will be the One we have always known, however dimly. All that is contingent, cultural, political and religious will fall away in the great discontinuity of resurrection.

“But what is Real, what is Love, will be lifted into light. All relationships and all faces will be transfigured for the children of the One whom Jesus called ‘the God not of the dead, but of the living.’ In that transfiguration, we will at last become the living.”

In Jesus' name.