

**Christ Church Cranbrook**  
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan  
Sermon for November 10, 2013 ~ Proper 27c  
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In the ninth chapter of his gospel, St. Luke tells us that Jesus "set his face to go to Jerusalem." In today's reading from that gospel, we are exposed to an incident that occurred after his arrival. It seems that every time Jesus got around the Jerusalem Temple he got into trouble. When he was just a boy, he got into trouble with his parents for lingering too long impressing the religious teachers. After his triumphal entry he outraged the Sadducees by overturning the tables of the moneychangers and driving them out with a whip. Now, when he shows up again, the Sadducees set a trap for him. I think I'd quit going to church if I couldn't get along with people every time I went. I've noticed that a lot of people do that.

Who were the Sadducees? They were the high priestly party. Their understanding of the Jewish religion was what you and I might refer to as "fundamentalist." They accepted the first five books of the Old Testament, the Pentateuch, as the only sacred scripture. If a belief or practice was not explicitly approved therein, it was not acceptable. There was a problem in that way of thinking, however, because the Pentateuch was aimed primarily at a nation of shepherds and nomads, while the people of Jesus' time lived in an increasingly urbanized Israel. That meant that much of what was found in the Pentateuch needed to be updated to have practical relevance in the daily lives of people in this new situation. That updating, that reinterpretation was the goal of the party of the Pharisees, and that different view of Scripture brought Sadducees and Pharisees into basic disagreement. Despite Jesus' disputes with the Pharisees, his message was in alignment with theirs in many ways.

Not the least among those disagreements was belief in a future resurrection of the dead. Because it was not mentioned explicitly in the Pentateuch, the Sadducees denied it; because it was implied in some passages in Daniel and the Psalms, the Pharisees accepted it. That disagreement continued until the destruction of the temple in 70 A.D. eliminated the base of power of the Sadducees.

Embarrassing people who held to a resurrection was a favorite way the Sadducees had of challenging that doctrine, and they set about to do that to Jesus. In this instance, they used the law of "levirate marriage" according to which it was a man's duty to father a child by his dead brother's childless widow. That child was then reckoned as the dead brother's descendant, and thus his name was preserved. So the Sadducees now proceed to construct a hypothetical situation in which the combination of that law and the idea of a resurrection from the dead lead to an impossible situation in which the notion of resurrection is reduced to absurdity. They spring their trap on Jesus. If there is a resurrection, which of the seven men she had married will be her husband? All of them? That would be absurd. But how will one decide which one? One cannot, thus proving the resurrection to be an absurd idea, since it leads to situations that cannot be squared with Mosaic legislation. The Sadducees rest their case.

Jesus' answer to the conundrum of the Sadducees is to attack the basis of their belief, as he had attacked the basis of their power when he purged the temple. Jesus answers in two ways: (1) he attacks their misunderstanding of resurrection, and (2) he attacks their misunderstanding of Scripture, showing them that in Moses own present-tense reference to God as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses expressed a belief in life beyond the grave.

Let's see what we can learn from this episode that will help us with our own faith journey.

**When sharing one's faith with others, it is helpful to try to speak their language.** Jesus way of handling the Sadducees was to respond to their conundrum with an argument they could understand. He spoke to them in their own language; he met them on their own ground. He spoke to everybody that way, to those who loved him as well as to those who hated him.

If we truly want to spread the gospel of Christ, the message of salvation and eternal life, then we are going to have to seriously try to understand other people's needs and respond to those needs in ways that are meaningful and healing to them. The church's missionaries since the day of Pentecost have applied this principle. But we have never had a more challenging mission field in all those centuries than the one which faces us today at our doorstep. If we don't get busy learning a new language, we'll find a handful of us standing around in this cavernous sanctuary talking to ourselves.

**Don't underestimate the creative power of the God of grace.** The Sadducees imposed their ideas based on this world on what God has in store for us in the new age. In so doing, they underestimated the creative power of God. They assume that even after the resurrection men and women will need to marry and carry on the family line. Jesus response to them revealed to them that it was their own thinking which was absurd. They misunderstood the idea of resurrection. The world of resurrection is a transformed world, and what may have been necessary in the realm of mortality and sin has no further place in the age to come.

There are people whose emphasis on this physical realm is so strong that it crowds out the realm of the spirit. This leads to great distress when the limitations of physical life become too great. But, God's thoughts are greater than our thoughts! God has more ideas of how to get order, sustain, and redeem creation than you or I can imagine in a million lifetimes. God redeems this physical world via the realm of that which is not seen. It is the realm apart from time and space. It is the realm of God, who graciously desires to share that realm with us.

**Don't let past experience stand in the way of what God can do in your life today and tomorrow.** The Sadducees made the mistake of thinking the future is the past. They were not open to unexpected and creative acts of God done out of God's gracious desire to redeem creation. They assumed that what God had done in the past placed an absolute limit on what he could do in the future. In Jesus, God did something they did not expect, based on their understanding of the past, and they were forced to reject him. To be sure, because God is faithful, God will not contradict what he has done in Christ, any more than in Jesus God contradicted what God had done with Israel. But God did contradict what the Sadducees thought God could do. We must also take care lest our understanding of the past makes us unable to see new manifestations of God's gracious will to redeem all humanity, including ourselves.

**Don't try to limit the range of God's grace.** Perhaps this is the most difficult thing of all for the Sadducees and for many of us good church folks. There is a tendency to try to impose limits upon how far beyond our group God's grace extends. But in Jesus response we are forced to see that if not even the dead are beyond that grace, then surely there is no social or economic or racial status that can put any human being beyond God's benevolent grace. If nothing can separate us from God's love, not even death, then life can take on a contagious joy that must be made known to all people.

I often wonder if most good Christian folks in pews today really believe God's grace is that amazing. If they did, they would be passionate about it. If they really believed it, they'd reorganize their entire lives around the means of grace. Prayer, for instance, would be the primary way we work through our problems, instead of the last resort. People's concern for searching the Scriptures would be so great that we'd

fill all our classrooms with enthusiastic teachers and disciples of all ages every week. Baptisms and professions of faith would be a regular feature of our worship. We wouldn't be able to celebrate the Holy Eucharist often enough. Our churches would be mission stations. After we have a fellowship meal, there would be enough left over to feed the hungry at one of the shelters for a week. But, we seem to think we have as much of God's grace as we need or deserve, and as for those other people, well, they are sort of on their own.

The God of the Sadducees, like their own way of thinking, was very small. They underestimated God's creative power, they let their experience of God in the past obstruct what God could do with their lives, and they tried to confine God's grace to a limited population. This passage leaves me with a question and I will leave it with you. It is one we all might consider. *How big is your God?*