

# God of the Living

## Luke 20:27-38

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The scripture reading this morning from the Gospel of Luke takes place toward the end of the life of Jesus. He passed through Jericho in Luke 19, where he met and saved that tree-climbing tax collector named Zacchaeus. Then he entered Jerusalem in Luke 20 to the cheers of the crowd and shouts of, “Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord.” No sooner did he enter Jerusalem then he visited the temple area and began driving out those who were selling. As he drove them out of the temple area he said, “It is written, ‘My house will be a house of prayer’; but you have made it a ‘a den of robbers.’” All of this leads to a comment from Luke that as Jesus taught every day at the temple, the religious leaders were trying to kill him. Since the crowd presented an obstacle to killing him, in Luke 20 we see the religious leaders setting some traps for Jesus.

- “Tell us by what authority you are doing these things? Who gave you this authority?” (Luke 20:2) Maybe they can trap him into blaspheming against God. But Jesus simply turns the table on them and sets a trap of his own, asking whether John the Baptist’s baptism was from heaven or men? Either way they answer they will get in trouble, so they slink away.
- But they return, with a ploy to get Jesus to reveal his tax returns. “Teacher, is it right for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” Without batting an eye Jesus asks someone to hold up a common coin, a denarius. He asks, “Whose portrait and inscription are on it?” When they answer Caesar, he declares that they should give to Caesar what belongs to him, and to God what belongs to God. Astonished by his answer they became silent.

Silent, that is, until the passage before us this morning, when one group of religious leaders named the Sadducees come with a question about the resurrection. That this is nothing more than another effort to trip up Jesus is obvious because we know about the Sadducees that they do not believe in the resurrection. The only purpose of their question is to trap Jesus. You can just see them smirking as they approach Jesus. “Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother.” Taking this question to the extreme they ask what if seven brothers had all been married to the same woman, they all died, the woman died too, and they finally all get to heaven. “Whose wife will she be?” This hypothetical question, a question that is truly absurd, is designed with no other intent than to make resurrection look silly.

Well, by the time Jesus supplies an answer someone looks silly, and it is not Jesus. Instead of hemming and hawing about marriage in heaven, he makes it clear that in this age marriage makes sense and is a wonderful gift from God, but in heaven there will be a new order, and the focus there will not be on earthly marriage. Instead, at that point we will all simply be children of God. Jesus doesn't explain everything about heaven, but he does put a damper on hypothetical speculation that has no purpose other than causing doubt and dissension.

And yet that is not all Jesus does when he answers their question. He also affirms the great power and the great gift of the resurrection. The resurrection is a clear sign that death is not the end. The resurrection is a clear sign that God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living. The ones who belong to God, though they may die, yet will they live. So it is when God appears to Moses at the burning bush, God trots out the ancestors of faith, naming them one by one. "I am the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob." Yes, those ancestors of faith have all gone to their eternal rest. Nevertheless, Jesus says God is the God of the living, for to God all are alive. What a good word for us on this All Saints' Day. Dearly beloved family and friends have gone on to glory. We no longer have them here with us. Still, to God they are alive. And because they are alive to God, we rejoice that in a real way they are alive to us.

When the Sadducees formed their hypothetical question about marriage in heaven their question was based on a command God gave concerning a situation where a brother would step forward to marry a deceased brother's wife so that the name of the deceased brother would carry on. It also provided protection for the widowed woman. In the context of the Old Testament it was a command designed to provide safety and security while also maintaining the legacy of a family. The command the Sadducees refer to is not a frivolous command. The mistake of the Sadducees was that the command was not given for heaven. It was given for those living on earth.

This whole issue the Sadducees raise about marriage and death and a family member stepping up calls to mind a saint from the Old Testament. Her name was Ruth. Just to be sure we don't make the mistake of thinking saints are people who are perfect, Ruth was born and raised as a Moabite, a nation that traced its roots from the ashes of Sodom and Gomorrah and the desperate attempt by Lot's daughters to have children of their own, which led them to get their father drunk and sleep with him. So how in the world can we talk about Ruth, a Moabite woman, on All Saints' Day? Well, an Israelite family went into Moab during a time of great famine. They came seeking relief. A man named Elimelech brought his wife Naomi and his two sons to Moab. His sons married Moabite women, one of whom was named Ruth. Tragedy struck and Elimelech and his two sons died. Naomi, now all alone, decided to return to Israel, to her home in Bethlehem. Ruth

went with her. Even when Naomi pleaded with Ruth to stay in Moab, Ruth asserted that she would stick with Naomi through thick and thin. Her words are the words of a saint. “Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if anything but death separates you and me.” (Ruth 1:16,17)

When these two widowed women get to Bethlehem Ruth goes out to the fields and begins to glean, to gather leftover grain, as a means of supporting her and her mother-in-law. Soon a righteous man named Boaz enters the story. Boaz is not a brother to Elimelech or to the two sons, but he is a close relative. By law he is not obligated to marry Ruth. The beauty of the story of Ruth is that it is not a hypothetical situation and it is not a story about heaven and speculations about marriage in the afterlife. Ruth is a story about people in difficult, at times desperate situations, who act in ways that are righteous, in ways that are sacrificial, in ways that demonstrate deep and lasting commitments to family and to community. You see, Boaz marries Ruth, in real life, with all of the real obligations. So many blessings come out of this marriage. Naomi, the widowed mother-in-law, who at one time wanted to change her name to Mara, the word that means bitter, because everything in her life had gone wrong all she knew was bitterness, Naomi ends up holding a child on her lap. The child was her grandson, the son of Boaz and Ruth. Gathered around Naomi was a jubilant crowd of women crying out with joy, “Naomi has a son.”

The story of Ruth doesn't end with the birth of this son. There is a genealogy at the end of Ruth. I realize we aren't very good at listening to genealogies, and we have a tendency to tune out. I hope you listen carefully. This one is pretty special.

Perez was the father of Hezron,  
Hezron the father of Ram,  
Ram the father of Amminidab,  
Amminidab the father of Hahshon,  
Nahshon the father of Salmon,  
Salmon the father of Boaz,  
Boaz the father of Obed,  
Obed the father of Jesse,  
And Jesse the father of David.

Yes, that David, who became the king of Israel. You Sadducees can sit back smug and mock heaven and hatch hypothetical questions about marriage that are meant to trip up Jesus and throw him off his game. But Jesus knows something you don't know. He knows heaven is for real. And he knows heaven is one great, huge affirmation that all things are alive to God. Jesus knows God is the God of the living. Women and men like Ruth and Boaz, who did not live hypothetical lives

but rather wrestled with real life disappointments and hardships and who chose to live righteous lives, doing the right thing, trusting in the living God, women and men like that are saints and those saints have left a legacy. They literally have a genealogy. Now today, on All Saints' Day, we rejoice in the saints who are alive to God, because God is the God of the living. And because they are alive to God, they are alive to us.

We attended a banquet back when we lived in Houston, put on by the folks that ran a huge ministry with the homeless. At the banquet a young man spoke. He graduated from a Christian college, and then did something very strange. He had a heart for homeless people. Even so, he realized he could never relate to homeless people until he had experienced being homeless. So for the first year after college, he lived as a homeless person, traveling through several cities experiencing the great humiliation, shame, and disgrace that a homeless person experiences. I was mesmerized by his story. Apparently many others were mesmerized by his story as well. Soon he was invited to many banquets and galas to tell his story.

That night in Houston, the young man told about speaking at a similar banquet in New Jersey. As is often the case, he was sitting next to a gray haired woman in her 70's at the banquet. Making small talk he asked her to tell him about herself. What she said stunned him.

She began by saying that she used to be a prostitute. Years ago, in her 20's, she worked the streets of a neighborhood in New Jersey. She had a pimp who used her to make money and supplied her with drugs. In that neighborhood, that neighborhood filled with pimps and prostitutes, a Christian woman had rented an apartment. That Christian woman pitched her tent among a neighborhood filled with trouble and disgrace. That Christian woman left whatever "normal" life she had and embarked on a life of Christian service, of Christian sacrifice, of Christian love. She followed God's call to a part of the city where the walls were broken down and the streets were in ruins. That Christian woman, living in a rundown apartment in a crime riddled neighborhood was truly a saint. This 70 year old gray headed woman looked back on her early life as a prostitute and she said this Christian woman tried to reach out to her. But the young prostitute ignored her and kept living her desperate life.

Until...one night her pimp got mad at her, beat her badly, and left her lying in a bloody mess on the street. Sometime late that night the Christian woman came upon the young prostitute lying by the side of the road, beaten and broken. The Christian woman picked her up and carried her home to her small apartment. She nursed her back to health. Sometime during the process of allowing her body to heal, this young prostitute found another healing. She found Jesus. She found the Lord. She became a Christian. Her life was changed. When that saint, the Christian

woman, grew old and eventually moved away, this woman who had been a prostitute moved into that very apartment and she became the Christian woman in a neighborhood of great trouble and disgrace. She became the Christian woman who embraced the life of Christian service, of Christian sacrifice, of Christian love. She became the Christian woman who shared God's love with the least, the last, and the lost. Now all these years later she is a gray-headed woman sitting at a banquet. I guess she is a saint as well.

Life is not hypothetical. Things like marriage are real. And when people step up in relationships like marriage, when people step up when there is death, or divorce, or any manner of disappointment, they give witness that they follow the God of the living. Life is not hypothetical. People get addicted to drugs. Some sell their bodies to prostitution. These are not hypothetical situations. People are homeless. And when some very ordinary people, people who might even have a tainted past, step up, they are saying we know the God who is the God of the living. And we are not alone in what we do or how we live. We have a long line of ancestors and relatives and role models and mentors who have been ordinary, everyday saints. Today we celebrate those saints, and we know that because all are alive to God, these saints are alive to us, right here and right now.

How do you celebrate All Saints' Day? A fellow named Jayber Crow gave me a pretty good idea for how to celebrate All Saints' Day. Jayber was the barber in Port William, a fictional character in a fictional town in Kentucky. He cut hair in the small town of Port William from the 1930's up till the 1960's. Then he retired and moved out by a river, with no electricity and no running water. By then, most of his good friends had grown old and passed on. So Jayber Crow, living out by the river, got a phone call. He was right in the middle of a dream, when the phone rang. Jayber said that was a strange thing, because he didn't own a phone. He said,

*I let it ring a long time because, as I told myself, "My phone couldn't be ringing because I don't have a phone."*

*When I answered it, it was Athey Keith. He said, "Jayber, if you haven't already done something too silly, come on up to Art Rowanberry's and sit with us for a while."*

*"All right," I said, and hung up.*

*I thought, "What's Athey doing calling me up? Athey's dead. And Art Rowanberry. He's been dead two years."*

*But I got up and put on my clothes. It was still night and the air, when I opened the door and stepped out, was damp and fresh.*

*I walked along the river road to the Sand Ripple road and up into the smaller valley. It was day by then, perfectly cloudless and bright. I crossed the creek on the little swinging footbridge.*

*As I went along the lane below the house, I looked up and saw Athey Keith and Art Rowanberry sitting on the porch. Elton Penn was there. Burley Coulter was there. They were smiling, lifting their hands to me, glad to be together, glad to see me.*

*“Howdy, Howdy!” Art called. “Come up!”*

*Elton was sitting beside him in the swing. I had sat there with the four of them many a Sunday afternoon, resting and talking. I went up and sat below them on the top step. To be there seemed strange, but it was all right.*

*“Well, ain’t it a fine day overhead,” Art said, as he always used to do. And Elton picked up Art’s hand and kissed it. There were tears of joy in his eyes.*

*I sat with them a long time, listening to them talk of the things they had always talked about before. But I didn’t know the time. The sun seemed to be standing still. My old silver watch was in my pocket, but I knew it was not running.*

*Finally I realized where I was.<sup>1</sup>*

Jayber done went and had a vision of heaven, where God is the God of the living and good friends gather on the front porch and trade stories, where good friends do more than that, where good friends take the hand of one dear to them and kiss that precious hand, with tears in their eyes. Now if Jayber can have a vision of heaven, why can’t we have a vision of life? Instead of our friends in heaven inviting us to come sit at the porch, on this All Saints’ Day, what if we invited those shining lights to come sit at this table, the Lord’s Table. What if we called on Abraham and Isaac and Jacob to take a seat? And Ruth and Boaz, you righteous role models, can you put aside your gleaning for a minute and sit down, just for a minute? Jayber sat on the front porch with Athey Keith and Art Rowanberry and Elton Penn. Who is sitting with you? Who is right by your side at this table? Who is right by your side in the pew?

Those Sadducees wanted to poke fun at the resurrection and play hypothetical games about marriage in the great by and by. But we know something they don’t know. We know there is a place called heaven. We know heaven is for real. We know there is a resurrection. And we know our God is the God of the living. To our God all are alive. Calling all saints...calling that great communion of saints, calling that beloved community of saints, our Lord is at his table. Believing in that tie that binds all of our hearts together for now and eternity, we gather with the saints to share this joyful feast of the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendell Berry, Jayber Crow, 332, 333.