

**Series: Lessons from the Lectionary**

**Today: Living in the Present**

**Text: Luke 20:27-38**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, November 7, 2010**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA 17603**

Our text comes from the final week in the life of Jesus. It is a “no win” situation for him. He is in the Temple, near the end of his ministry, and he is surrounded by people who aren’t really interested in what he has to say. They are peppering him with questions not because they want answers. They have their own opposing points of view, and it is these opposing points of view they are using to try and catch Jesus in a theological and political quagmire.

They kind of remind you of the church who called a woman to be its pastor over the protests of some of its more vocal male members. After the new pastor had been there for a few weeks, one of the members of the Pastor Nominating Committee asked her to go fishing with him. In order to bridge the gap between those who opposed a woman pastor, he also invited a few of the men who had been most vocal in opposing her election as pastor.

When they got to the boat, they motored out to the middle of the lake, dropped the anchor, and it was then that they realized they had left the tackle box on the dock. The man who had most vigorously opposed the election of the pastor said, *“This is what happens when you let women get involved in work that is meant for a man.”* The new pastor remained calm. She said, *“Why don’t you boys wait right here. I’ll get it and be right back.”*

And with that, she got out of the boat and started walking across the water to the dock. The fellow from the Pastor Nominating Committee was impressed, but male chauvinist would not be swayed. He said, *“I told you we should have never hired her. She can’t even swim.”*

In our text this morning, Jesus is put on the spot by two competing factions of Judaism. He was teaching in the Temple when the Sadducees and the Pharisees caught him off guard and challenged him. These stalwarts of the institutional church of his day perceive him as a threat to their authority, and each of them in their own way is trying to find a way to get rid of him.

This was one of those Bible-believing, Holy Ghost inspired type of meetings where religious orthodoxy was the main dish, and Jesus was the appetizer. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter they ask him, “*By what authority do you do these things?*” If he said his authority was from God, they could charge him with heresy; a capital crime for Jews. Just before our text this morning, they ask him, “*Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?*” If he said that they shouldn’t pay, it was an act of treason; a capital crime to Rome. Finally, there is this trick question from the Sadducees. They were the ruling class of Israel. Unlike the Pharisees, who were only interested in the religious questions, they had another agenda. They were interested in protecting their position of power.

Their question is about the Jewish Law. It was the responsibility of a son to care for his father’s widow if the father was to die. If there was no son, it was then the responsibility of the eldest brother to care for his brother’s widow. If a man’s family didn’t take care of his wife, she would be forced into a life of begging, or worse yet, prostitution. So here is the question: “*If seven brothers all married the same woman, who is the woman married to in the resurrection?*”

The Sadducees didn’t even believe in the resurrection. Their only interest was to discredit Jesus among those who did by asking this trick question. However, the way he responds to the questions teaches us two things about communicating the good news: 1) Speak to People on Their Terms; in a language they can understand; and 2) Point Them to the Hope of the Gospel for Today.

### **Speak to People on Their Terms**

The adversaries of Jesus brought him questions. They weren't seeking information. They were looking to make a point. Jesus dealt with them on their terms. He didn't dodge their questions. He answered them, and he spoke to them in a language they could understand.

There is a story that has made its way around the internet which I love. It is about a burglar who found that a parrot could speak to him in a language he could understand. The burglar was making his way around the darkened house with a flashlight looking for valuables when he heard a strange voice saying, "*Jesus is watching you.*"

The burglar nearly jumped out of his skin. He clicked his flashlight off and froze in his tracks. When he heard nothing more, he shook his head, promised himself a vacation, turned the light back on and went back to work. Just as he was emptying the jewelry box, he heard the voice again, "*Jesus is watching you.*"

Freaked out, he shined his light around frantically looking for the source of the voice. Finally, in the corner of the room, his flashlight beam came to rest on this parrot. "*Did you say that?*" he hissed at the parrot. "*Yes,*" said the parrot. "*I'm just trying to warn you.*"

The burglar relaxed a bit. "*Warn me? What do you mean warn me? Who are you anyway?*" "*Moses,*" replied the parrot. "*Moses? What kind of people would name their parrot Moses?*" And the parrot answered, "*Probably the same kind of people who would name their pit bull Jesus.*"

That parrot knew how to speak to that burglar about Jesus on his terms; in language he could understand, and we have to do the same.

The other night we had a party at our home where Cherie and I invited some people who we wanted to get to know better and we had our 33 year old son, Tim, invite some of his friends so we could get to know them better. I had some fascinating conversations with these young people in their

late 20's and early 30's when they found out that Tim's dad was a pastor. Now Tim is not ashamed that his dad is a pastor. It's just that not all of his friends were aware of my profession, so you can imagine what it was like for them to discover they were in a pastor's home having a good time.

As they questioned me about my commitment to the institutional church, basically what they were telling me was this: the traditional language of the church has virtually no meaning in their lives. Like other generations before them, they see the contradictions of the Christian faith. They see people who use the name of Jesus to justify hatred and racism; violence and repression. So I asked them what the church would have to change to reach their generation with the message of the Gospel. One of them responded thoughtfully. He said, *"Music and action. In our generation music means so much to us that if you are going to reach us with a message, it will have to include music; and not just the classical music which the church seems so stuck on. It will have to be music that our generation loves to listen to."*

*"And the Action?"* I asked. *"It will have to be actions which match your words. If you say Jesus loves us, then what are you doing about hatred in the world. If you say Jesus was concerned about the poor, then what are you doing for the poor? Music and Action, Mr. Riggs. That's what my generation will understand."*

That is quite a challenge from one of my son's friends to a father who believes that we are called to reach his generation with the good news of Jesus Christ. I told him about what we were trying to do here at FPC by offering Cherry Street as an alternative to our traditional service, and how we have tried to do it here with our commitment to discover the heart of Christ in the heart of the city. I invited him to come and give us a try to see if the "straw man" he had set up in his mind really applied to us.

### **Point Them to the Hope of the Gospel for Today**

Jesus also told his questioners that resurrection hope is not about the future. It is about today. *"He is not the God of the dead, but of the living,"* is the way he put it. Jesus confronted the assumptions

of the Sadducees. He told them that the good news he came to bring was not about pie in the sky in some future by and by. It is about the reality of hope right here and right now.

In 1985 Ann Wells wrote an op-ed piece for the Los Angeles Times reflecting on her sister's death. Thanks to the internet, it has become a vivid reminder to us that the good news we celebrate is not just about the future. It is about today. Listen to her words:

*My brother-in-law opened the bottom drawer of my sister's bureau and lifted out a tissue-wrapped package. 'This,' he said, 'is not a slip. This is lingerie.' ...She never wore it. She was saving it for a special occasion. Well, I guess this is the occasion.'*

*He took the slip from me and put it on the bed with the other clothes we were taking to the mortician. His hands lingered on the silk material for a moment, and then he slammed the drawer shut and turned to me: **'Don't ever save anything for a special occasion. Every day you're alive is a special occasion.'***

*I remembered those words through the funeral and the days that followed when I helped him and my niece attend to all the sad chores that follow an unexpected death. I thought about them on the plane returning to California from the Midwest where my sister's family lives. I thought about all the things that she hadn't seen or heard or done. I thought about the things that she had done without realizing that they were special.*

*I'm still thinking about his words, and they've changed my life. I'm reading more and dusting less. I'm sitting on the deck and admiring the view without fussing about the weeds in the garden. I'm spending more time with my family and friends and less time in committee meetings. Whenever possible, life should be a pattern of experience to savor, not endure. I'm trying to recognize these moments now and cherish them... "Someday" and "one of these days" are losing their grip on my vocabulary. If it's worth seeing or hearing or doing, I want to see and hear and do it now.*

*I'm not sure what my sister would've done had she known that she wouldn't be here for the tomorrow we all take for granted. I think she would have called family members and a few close friends. She might have called a few former friends to apologize and mend fences for past squabbles. I like to think she would have gone out for a Chinese dinner, her favorite food. I'm guessing -I'll never know.*

*It's those little things left undone that would make me angry if I knew that my hours were limited. Angry because I put off seeing good friends whom I was going to get in touch with - someday. Angry because I hadn't written certain letters that I intended to write - one of these days. [I would be] angry and sorry that I didn't tell my husband and daughter often enough how much I truly love them.*

*I'm trying very hard not to put off, hold back, or save anything that would add laughter and luster to our lives. And every morning when I open my eyes, I tell myself that it is special. Every day, every minute, every breath truly is a gift from God.*

### **Conclusion**

The good news of God's sacrificial love for us in Jesus Christ is not only about the eternity we are going to spend with God. Our God is not the God of the dead. God is the God of the living. This is the good news we proclaim, and the news we must find a way to share with others in a language they can understand.