

November 6th 2022
A Sunday Service for Summerland United Church
Anne Ellis

THEME CONVERSATION

For the next 3 weeks we are going to spend time with stories about Jesus' ministry as told to us in the gospel of Luke. They're stories that take place towards the end of his ministry and his final day on earth. While this may seem strange as we move towards Advent - the beginning, it is not. The church does not tell the time in a linear fashion we tell time in a different way

Time, time time, there are all kinds of time. Time to get up in the morning, time to go to bed. Time to work, time to play. time to eat. but what is time?

Some people say time is a line. But I wonder what that would look like?

Perhaps like this. Time. Time is a line. Look at this here is the beginning. it's the newest part. It's just being born. It is brand new.

Look here it is getting older. The part that was new in now getting old. I wonder how long time goes. does it go forever? Could there be an ending?

Oh, it ended. look at the ending.

the beginning is that was so new at the beginning is now old. The ending is the new part now. We have a beginning that is like an ending and an ending like a beginning.

Do you know what the church did? They tied the ending that was like a beginning and the beginning that was like an ending together, so we would always remember that for every ending there is a beginning and every beginning has an ending.

We see time as a circle. Here we are at this part of the circle. We're nearing the end of what we call ordinary time. Soon we will move into Advent. Advent is an ending and a beginning. It seems as though the great growing green days of summer are ending. The light seems to be coming to an end... but then Advent begins as we get ready for the light to begin again.

So even as we hear stories about the end of Jesus' life, we know that it is not really the end. It will begin again just as it always has and always will.

SCRIPTURE READING Luke 20:27-38

REFLECTION Expansive love

There is a lot going on in this passage and for us modern readers it's hard to make sense of this ancient theological and legalistic conversation. So let's take a bit of time to break down what's going on here.

First - The Sadducees. They are a Jewish sect with very particular beliefs. They study only the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, sometimes referred to as the 5 books of Moses. The concept of resurrection is not a part of Moses teachings, so they discount it as possible.

They are well educated in a fairly narrow knowledge base. They also believe that God only acts in the corporeal world. There is no afterlife, only the here and now, which is unchangeable.

They are unlike the Pharisees in these matters. The Pharisees are another Jewish sect, not mentioned in this story, but the same story appears in Matthew where the Pharisees are present. It's important to know who they are, despite them not being present in this story, because the Pharisees study the Torah, AND The Prophets and the Psalms. Writings where God's promise and prophecy regarding resurrection is written about. They believe in an afterlife and the possibility of God acting beyond the boundaries of this world, thus changeable.

Jesus of course agrees with the Pharisees on this topic, as does the writer of Luke's Gospel: The resurrection is real.

These are the characters in the story. The Sadducees, show up to challenge Jesus and his wisdom, with their arguments already fully cemented and decided. Jesus is being called to the ring for a fight.

But before we get to the fight.

We also need to know a little more about the audience - the people who are listening to this story. The writer of Luke is teaching primarily a gentile audience who are newly converted to Christianity. They were not educated about the Law Codes of Moses in the Torah. Which is great for us because most of us aren't either. Luke uses this story to provide some education to his audience, and us in a few different ways. (he's also taking a bit of a dig at the Sadducees, whom he clearly dislikes)

First, he's preparing his audience for what is going to happen in a few short chapters: Jesus's death and resurrection and second he is teaching the audience what this means for them.

Just what does a post-resurrection world look like? Remember they're already living in a post-resurrection world, just as we are. The *characters* in the scripture don't know the ending, but every listener does.

Where the trouble for us modern readers comes in is we live in a rather different society from first-century Israel, so this question and the following commentary are confusing.

In ancient times women were considered the property of men. Property of their fathers until they were married and their husbands thereafter. Without this male protection, women were in danger of destitution, slavery, and other abuses. The Torah, as the Sadducees point out, made provision for women who lose their husbands, passing them on to brothers. This same provision is provided for children as well. And in particular, help to maintain the family line.

This is a very patriarchal world, where what happens to a woman's body is decided by men. So maybe not so different after all.

Here's where things start to get spicy. Rather than engaging the Sadducees, Jesus straight-up denies the premise of the question, "those who will take part in the age to come will neither marry nor be given in marriage."

Men will not marry, women will not be given in marriage. The whole concept of 1st-century spousal bonds is being tossed out completely. Jesus goes on to say, "they can no longer die, for they are like angels."

Um. how do these two connect? It's a bit of a tricky argument to follow, but essentially what Jesus is doing is expanding the concepts of human bonding. He's saying that our simple human understanding of relationships is too limited.

Relationships are not limited to two human's being bonded in marriage, but about being connected and bonding with all humanity and all creation; just Like the angels, for whom binary bonds don't exist.

Julian of Norwich a 14th-century mystic called this 'one-ing'. Being one with God. Connecting with God at a level so deep and profound it is as if the individual ceases to exist and is merged with God. Since this is achievable for anyone, then one is also one with every other being. We are all one within the divine love of God.

Remember the words of our opening hymn - we are one. These words speak to all the different ways we connect to one another when we gather, when we pray, and when we share. We feel connected, we bond.

For the Sadducees, this is too ephemeral. They are concrete people who want to maintain the hierarchy of relationships that exist in their world. and they use the example of the woman and 7 husbands to prove that without the hierarchy human relationships will descend into basic anarchy.

In ancient Rome, everyone has a place above or below everyone else. Men, of course at the top. Male slaves next, then wives, then female slaves, then children.

Giving the woman in marriage to her husband's brothers maintains her place in the world along with the place of the men.

But again, Jesus has rejected the premise of this question. he says "they are God's Children, Children of the Resurrection,' putting all people: men, women, children, rich, poor, slave, free on equal footing. Status as they understand it no longer has meaning.

For Luke's audience, this is a really big deal. Luke is writing around 80 - 100CE, only 10-20 or so years after the Jewish revolt in 70CE and the Roman rule continues to be extremely oppressive. Unless you are Roman elite with is probably about .01% of the population.

And while we might think this passage is about the afterlife. It's not. The Sadducees ask about what happens after the woman dies, but remember Jesus has rejected the entire premise and is instead talking about life right now. Luke is teaching the followers what the post-resurrection world is supposed to be like. For them, and for us - it's already happened. The Easter story has already happened for the listeners, just as it has for us.

When Jesus talks about the 'the age to come' or the kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, he's speaking about a new world in this world, in this life. He says so right in this passage, "Moses showed the dead can rise, for he calls God 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'" three people long dead by the time of Moses, yet Moses uses the present tense. They live on (metaphorically) because people know who they are and follow their teachings.

Jesus reminds us "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to God all are alive." Jesus applies this to his present time as well. Saying all who will partake in the age to come will also live on in the same way.

For us the message, a little muddled at the start, becomes clearer as we peel back these layers of history and ancient culture: the age to come, the Kingdom of God will do away with hierarchy and status. All will be equal. Love is unconditional, and protection and safety is unconditional.

We are called to create this new age, perhaps in some respects we already have. The world is more just, for some people in some places. We've come a long way, but don't call me baby.

As we mull over this passage and what it means. I find myself wanting to change the language a little. I want to make it present tense, "We are God's Children, We are children of the resurrection. God is God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob, of Jesus. God is not God of the dead - but of the living. We are alive and we have a say in the age to come. An age of expansive unconditional love for all creation.

May it be so, amen