



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida
24 Pentecost - Proper 27 - Year C - November 10/11, 2007
Job 19:23-27a; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-3:5; Luke 20:27-(28-33)34-38

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, Rector

Do any of you read “*The God Squad*” column which appears in Friday’s “Accent” section of *The Palm Beach Post*? Over the past 12 years, *The God Squad* has appeared regularly on ABC’s *Good Morning America*, on CNN and FOX News. Their column, which is written for Long Island’s *Newsday*, is syndicated all over the country....

Until recently, the two members of the *God Squad* were Roman Catholic priest, Monsignor Thomas Hartmann and Rabbi Marc Gellman. Sadly, Monsignor Hartmann was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in 2001. This summer, Gellman and Hartmann announced in their column that the effects of Hartmann’s disease have become so debilitating he is no longer able to work.. Rabbi Gellman has continued writing *The God Squad* Column on his own.

I became a fan of *The God Squad* when I came across their first book titled *Where Does God Live: Questions and Answers for Parents and Children*¹ which Gellmann and Hartmann co-authored. I love this book. It is an invaluable resource for families with children because it explores deep questions about God in a way that is friendly, theologically sound and accessible for parents, grandparents and children. The Friday *God Squad* column always consists of questions asked by readers which are then answered. This is the question that was asked in this past Friday’s *God Squad* column. The column was titled, “You can’t make grieving better.”²

Question: I was raised Episcopalian. As a young adult, I went through a period of searching for “the truth” and had atheistic thoughts. As a child reading a Catholic friend’s Catechism book one day, it seemed incredible to me that God would allow only people who believe in Jesus access to heaven. I knew in my heart that a good God would not do that. Now I am much older and have become more spiritual than religious. I don’t attend church. I do believe in life after death; that we have a soul that goes to “the other side” after death. Recently, a dear friend who’s Jewish lost her 16-year old granddaughter in a car accident. I wanted to console her, knowing how distraught she was, and we do talk often. When I mentioned that her granddaughter was in another place, that her soul still survives, she told me nicely that her faith does not believe in life after death. I was astounded and said, “Then, what’s the point of having faith in God? What would his purpose be for us? My friend could not answer. Obviously, she’s convinced that she’ll never see her granddaughter again, and this bothers me. Is it true that Judaism does not believe in life after death?” - K. via e-mail

“K”’s e-mail is interesting...It reflects feelings, ideas and questions shared by a lot of people.. In his response to “K,” **Rabbi** Gellman observed that her e-mail really contained two different but connected questions: First, how to comfort mourners, especially those of different faiths and, second, do Jews believe in life after death? Answering the first question, Rabbi Gellman wrote, “*Comforting mourners is not an act of teaching, but an act of listening. Comfort is being present for the bereaved. Comforting is best done by really good listeners, not by really good talkers...*” I appreciate Rabbi Gellman’s answer and I agree with it completely.....

How often people are uncomfortable with silence in the face of the deep pain of others....Too often, we try to compensate for our own discomfort in these situations by talking....Frequently, we say stuff that is either dumb or insensitive. Usually what we say attempts to negate or minimize the pain and grief the other person is experiencing. That’s what “K” did as she tried to comfort her friend....She was really more concerned about herself and her own feelings...

As Rabbi Gellman quite appropriately stated to “K,” *“Your friend is grieving not because she doesn’t know some truth about heaven, but because her granddaughter, whom she kissed and held, she cannot kiss and hold again. The thought that something, anything, we say will make everything okay for a mourner is arrogant and spiritually obtuse...”*³

Gellman added, *“Saying, as you did, that her granddaughter was already in another place (or as some say, “a better place”) is not false. It is true to Jewish, Christian and Muslim teachings. It is true to theology but false to grief. Your friend must come to that truth through her grief, not your words. Heaven is a truth that lies on the other side of tears.”*⁴ Gellman concluded, *“As to your second question, most Jews don’t believe in Heaven, but Judaism does. One of my missionary obsessions,”* Gellman adds, *“is to help Jews remember what Judaism teaches about life after death.”*⁵

Well “K’s” confusion about Jewish beliefs concerning life after death is understandable. Uncertainty about Jewish beliefs concerning life after death is not at all new, it has been going on for several thousand years...Some Jews believe in it, and others do not. That the debate is long-standing is even made apparent in today’s Gospel reading.

We are told that *“Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him and asked him a question.”* (Luke 20:27). The Sadducees are a group of Jews, very educated and mostly from the upper classes, often the priestly class, that came on the scene in Judaism in about the 2nd century before Christ...They were around until the Rome conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple in 70 A.D.

The name Sadducees means “the righteous ones.” *The HarperCollins Dictionary of the Bible* states that the Sadducees “are said to reject the immortality of the soul, to attribute all human activity to free will and none to fate (or providence), and to reject other traditions and especially those of the Pharisees.”⁶

In today’s Gospel reading, Jesus is in the middle of a controversy with some Sadducees. They frame an absurd, hypothetical question to ask Jesus about the resurrection...They are not really interested in his answer. They have already determined what they believe about resurrection. The text makes it clear to us; they don’t believe in it...They merely want to make Jesus look foolish: A woman marries seven brothers. Each dies in turn. At the resurrection, whose wife will she be?

They are picking up on a law they accepted which is found in the book of Deuteronomy which requires a man to marry his brother’s widow if the first man dies before he and his wife have had a child (See Deut. 25:5-10). The law was a means by which a family line was kept alive. In his answer, Jesus recognizes both their motive and the absurdity of the situation they have proposed. Instead of providing a direct answer concerning the woman in question, he provides them with a basic teaching about resurrection. He makes it clear that there is a distinct difference between the earthly order and the heavenly order. *“Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage”* (Luke 20:34-35).

Resurrection is a completely different state of existence, Jesus is telling them...To assume that life in the age to come will merely be a continuation of life in this age is foolishness...Jesus continues by saying of those who are considered worthy of heaven *“Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection”* (Luke 20:36). But what does it mean to be “children of the resurrection?” What do we mean when we speak that word “resurrection?”

I imagine that many people today understand resurrection in much the same way as the Sadducee’s seem to in today’s Gospel reading - as an extension after death of the life an

individual had lived on earth...Family relationships and family roles are maintained and life goes on, more or less as it had before, only it's forever.

Parts of the New Testament indicate that the early Christian community thought that there would be one general resurrection of the dead at the last day, when Christ comes in glory.⁷ Until that day came, the dead were, well, just dead....I'll bet most of us don't understand resurrection in that way and don't accept that teaching, even though it's biblical. I know I don't and that's okay, because the New Testament is not unified on that point.

Historically, though, Christian understanding of the resurrection has been unified and consistent in asserting "bodily resurrection" as opposed to merely "spiritual resurrection" because we believe that the unique person that makes me, me and you, you is made up of body and soul. Without both body and soul the unique and particular person God created does not exist. ..I accept that. For me, resurrection must include something of "body." As I have expressed to some of you before, however, I can't help wondering about the nature of the body each of us is to have at the resurrection...

Susan and I were with a 97 year old parishioner the other day making a pastoral call...This woman regaled us with great stories about her life which has been quite amazing....She is a wonderful person, funny, alert, upbeat and always optimistic....But, at age 97, age has taken its toll on her body. She struggles with osteoporosis and arthritis and is bent over and in pain a great deal of the time....She is wrinkled and hard of hearing and virtually blind. This woman is deeply faithful and loves the Lord....I am confident that she will be welcomed into heaven, but I wonder: at the resurrection, will she be stuck with that frail, fractured 97 year old body?. I hope she gets one of her earlier models!

Or how about a person who was crippled by polio? A person who was immolated in a car or plane wreck? Or a person who is cremated, which, of course happens more and more today?...Clearly the Sadducees were asking an absurd question in today's Gospel reading but it also reflects a common understanding of resurrection shared by many people today...It is also true that many times we don't think through exactly what we mean when we speak so casually and so flippily of the resurrection....

Of course, the Church proclaims the resurrection of the dead because of the resurrection of Jesus at Easter....It is our Christian hope and our expectation that because Christ was raised, we will be raised too and that it will have the quality of "body" about it... But what, exactly do we mean when we talk about resurrection of the body and eternal life?...

In an "Outline of the Faith" in *The Book of Common Prayer*, in the last section titled "The Christian Hope" which is found on page 861 several questions are posed and answered. The first questions ask: "What is the Christian Hope?" The Catechism answer states, "The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God's purposes for the world."⁸

Note well, the answer doesn't indicate that this newness we are to live in comes after death. It assumes we are to live it now. I think that's important. For Christian's, life in the resurrected Christ, begins at Baptism and is eternal. It begins in the here and now, there is no end. Eternity is eternity.

On page 862, the Catechism asks the question, "What do we mean by heaven and hell?" and answers, "By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God, by hell we mean eternal death in our rejection of God."⁹ That answer is quite clear: Heaven and Hell are not physical places, which I venture to say, a lot of people assume they are. Rather, heaven and hell are states of being, eternal states of existence. Both heaven and hell can be experienced during life, and not merely after death.

The Catechism asks, “What do we mean by the resurrection of the body?” The answer: “We mean that God will raise us from death in the fullness of our being, that we may live with Christ in the communion of saints.”¹⁰

“What then,” the Prayer Book catechism asks, “is our assurance as Christians?” The answer quotes from one of the great passages of Scripture, Romans 8:38, “Our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”¹¹

Friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, I don’t know exactly what will happen when I die...Whenever I consider the question, I always go back to St. Paul and what he said in his first letter to the Corinthians, “Now we see in a mirror dimly, then we will see face to face” (1 Corinthians 13:12). I don’t know what will happen when I die, but this I do know, it will be good!

You see, I believe in a God who is Love (1 John 4:8,16)...I believe in a God who is Life (John 1:3-3)...And I believe in a God who has promised...I have put my trust in that God...I have staked my life on that God and because I have, I have confidence that I am already a part of something special...I am a part of the living organism that is the Church, the Spirit-filled body of Christ...It is a part of God...It is a part of eternity, here, now today....

And because I am a part of that living organism, I know that my existence on this earth and in this life will come to an end, but my life in Christ will not....My life in the hearts and love of those whom I hold dearest will also never end....That’s a part of eternity too....The same is true for us all. Now we know only in part, then we shall know fully, even as we are fully known...known by Christ, known in Christ....

Can anything separate us from this love of Christ? Can hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? Can water shortages, political differences, presidential candidates, high gas prices, a health care crisis? Can old age and failing bodies, can car wrecks, or plane wrecks, can any of these separate us from the love of Christ? No, they can’t. Nothing can (See Romans 8:35 -38).

Not death, nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, not things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39).

By virtue of Christ’s dying and his resurrection, by virtue of our baptisms into Christ, we are, each and every one of us, children of God...God who always and everywhere has mysterious power to create life and to make all things beautiful and new, we are, each and everyone of us, children of the resurrection, all praise and thanks be to God, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

¹ Gellman, Marc and Hartmann, Thomas *Where does God live? Questions and Answers for Parents and Children* (Liquori, Missouri: Liquori/Triumph - Liquori Publications, 1991).

² “You can’t make grieving better” - *The Palm Beach Post*, Friday, November 9,2007 “Accent Section” – “The God Squad” p. 3

³ “You can’t make grieving better”

⁴ “You can’t make grieving better”

⁵ “You can’t make grieving better”

⁶ See “Sadducees” in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary- Revised Edition* ed. Paul J. Achtermeier (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996) p. 957.

⁷ See 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; John 11:24; 1 Corinthians 15:50 – 55; 2 Timothy 2:18; Revelation 20:4-5

⁸ BCP p. 861

⁹ BCP p. 862

¹⁰ BCP p. 862

¹¹ BCP p. 862