

God Is Bigger Than You Think

Luke 20: 27 – 38

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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Today's scripture from Luke's Gospel reports still another confrontation between Jesus and his adversaries. The Pharisees, already having boots on the ground since they already lived in the towns Jesus visited, were the first to try discrediting Jesus. Despite their best efforts they failed. That's when the Sadducees stepped in finish the job.

Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees who were priests tracing their lineage back to Moses' brother Aaron, lived comfortably inside the confines of the Jerusalem Temple. They rarely ventured out into the countryside to mingle with the people. They didn't have to. The people came to them.

The Sadducees were the aristocrats of Judea, an elite oligarchy isolated from the cares and concerns of the masses with an "Inside the Beltway" mentality.

The way things were set up, the Sadducees had a monopoly on faith and practice. According to the Law of Moses, only the hereditary priests could perform the ritual sacrifices on behalf of the peoples' sins. This authorization empowered the Sadducees to keep the people under their thumbs and guaranteed their primary source of income, the annual temple tax. They also controlled the mandatory pilgrimages to Jerusalem, guaranteeing the tax was paid on time. What's more, on high holy days, the people had to exchange their tainted Roman coins for temple coins, plus pay the added fee for this service.

The Sadducees were in the driver's seat and they weren't about to move over.

Although isolated from the outside world, rumors of Jesus' growing influence slowly filtered through the temple's thick walls.

Initially hoping Jesus would flitter away his fifteen minutes of fame, the Sadducees let the Pharisees fight for the hearts and minds of the people. When they decided the Pharisees were loosing the game, they changed course and stepped in and save the day.

Behind their calm demeanor they were fretting Jesus' radical teachings would threaten to their authority and maybe even their existence. Wanting a quick resolution, the high priest sent out the temple's brightest and best to put Jesus in his place.

Up until this point in the story, the Sadducees were the longtime adversaries of the Pharisees. But as long as the Sadducees kept to the temple and the Pharisees remained in the countryside, despite their mutual animosity, they were able to tenuously coexist. Only when

Jesus' popularity posed a danger to both camps did both camps come to the same conclusion: "The enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Besides each group wanting to be the dominating force in Judea, a second reason for the division between the Sadducees and the Pharisees was their conflicting core beliefs. Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection of the dead. Instead, they taught when you die, you ceased to exist. They could dismiss the resurrection and life after death because there was no mention of these doctrines in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

You heard of the Jefferson Bible. Thomas Jefferson was a Deist and privately antagonistic to the Christian religion. During Jefferson's free time, he took the Bible and edited out anything insulting his intelligence, including miracles, theophanies, and especially any talk of the resurrection of the dead. By the time Jefferson was through, the four gospels stayed, but they were radically edited too. Only Jesus' ethical teachings survived, portraying Jesus as a martyr who died for his unpopular, enlightened philosophy.

A case can be made Jefferson re-created Jesus in his own image, as a champion of the enlightenment. It wouldn't be the first or last time someone put God in a box.

This is precisely what the Sadducees did eighteen hundred years earlier. They edited out all the other scriptures and argued only the first five books were authoritative. Why? Because the first five books legitimized their priesthood and mandatory rituals only they could perform within the confines of the temple.

Truth be told, only self preservation motivated the Sadducees to reject the other books, especially the prophets' writings condemning apostasy and corruption in high places, including the temple.

The third reason for the division: Unlike the Pharisees, the Sadducees were beholden to the Romans who permitted the Sadducees to stay in power as long as they kept order. That explains why the Sadducees were determined to get rid of Jesus. If they didn't, the Romans would see the Sadducees as useless lackeys failing to keep law and order.

So, with their backs against the wall, yet brimming with confidence, the Sadducees sallied forth.

When they finally caught up with Jesus, the Sadducees posed one of those, "Can God create a rock so heavy can he lift it?" type of questions. After quoting the law of Moses, mandating a man must marry his brother's widow if there were no children, they asked Jesus, "If a widow buries seven brothers, in the resurrection which brother keeps her for eternity?"

Remember, the Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection. They were too sophisticated for that. You can almost hear the smugness in their voices. They were about to hoist Jesus on his own petard.

But Jesus wasn't intimidated and quickly turned the tables. Quoting from Exodus, one of the five books the Sadducees accepted as authoritative, Jesus said, "The fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed in the story about the burning bush, when he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to God, all of them are alive."

Jesus' answer caught the Sadducees off guard. He wasn't the uneducated, country bumpkin they thought he was. His counter argument was brilliant. If there's no life after death and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob ceased to exist, then why did God say, "I AM the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," instead of saying, "I WAS the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?"

Jesus' point: God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was still intact and will continue into eternity. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is the God of the living and through the resurrection, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob continue to share in the promise of the eternal I AM of God.

Knowing they met their match, the Sadducees could only mumble, "You have answered well."

What lesson can we learn from the Sadducees? Let's start with this: their God was too small. To justify themselves they put God in a box. They used God to promote their self-serving agenda: protecting the crooked system they created, instead of allowing God to use them to create a new and better system.

Jesus came to free God's people from oppressive systems delaying the coming of God's kingdom on earth. The Sadducees rejected the prophets because their message was countercultural, opposed to their ways and replacing them with God's ways. Like the temple priests before them who attacked Jeremiah, Amos and the other prophets, the Sadducees couldn't handle the truth because God's truth would dismantle everything they worked for.

That would be a hard pill for any of us to swallow.

Someone once said Jesus came to turn the world upside down so it would finally be right side up. Submitting to that premise and all its implications helps us get with the program. Instead of opposing God's will, because it dismantles everything we worked for, when we accept God's will, even though it dismantles everything we worked for, it becomes self evident God's way is the better way.

The sooner we accept that, the better off we'll be.

For the last few Sundays my sermons have been about discipleship and stewardship. You can't have one without the other. Jesus calls us will life of commitment and sacrifice because commitment and sacrifice is good for you. Show me someone who never commits for sacrifices for the greater good and I'll show you someone sad and pathetic. Show me who does commit to make sacrifices for the greater good and I'll show you someone who is not far from the kingdom of God.

People opening themselves to God's truth have a deeper appreciation for God's blessings. They understand giving is reflection of their humanity. They've experienced affirmation from above when they give to the best of their ability. They trust God would never ask anyone to get beyond his or her means. They also believe God loves a cheerful giver and God smiles whenever a believer follows the example of Christ.

Ponder this question and pray about it this week. "What does God require of me as I prepare myself to offer up myself as a living sacrifice, which is my spiritual worship?"

Your pledge of your time, talent and treasure is between you and God. All I ask is that you have a long and deep conversation with God before you make your decision.

May God's will be done here on earth as it is in heaven.

Let's pray.

Loving and gracious God, for our own good help us accept your will so we can please you in our giving and serving through Christ our Lord. Amen.