

SERMON
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
November 10, 2019

Luke 20:27-38

Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus and asked him a question...

The most important thing is always to remember to keep the most important thing, the most important thing. When I was studying for ordination exams, I had a tutor from St. John's College—the Reverend J. Winfree Smith. He served on the St. John's faculty for nearly 50 years. He was regarded as the last survivor of an era in the college's history, and of the first group of international scholars who were attracted to the college by the New Program. The New Program was established at the college in 1937. It was based on a curriculum of the great works of Western civilization—referred to sometimes, as the 100 Great Books. For a few months prior to the ordination exams, I went to his house weekly for instruction. Each week he would assign a book of the Bible for me to read. When I reported back, he would ask me—“What was the book about?” I would go on at length about what I had read. “Yes, yes,” he said. “That’s what happened. But, what was it about?” I attempted to add details. He listened. He asked me again, “Yes, that’s what happened. But what was it about?” I shook my head. And he would answer, “It’s about grace.” Week after week, the exchange was the same. “What was the book about?” I would go on at length to prove I had done the reading. “Yes, yes,” he said. “That is what happened. But, what is it about?” I gave more details. Until I finally caught on.

The most important thing is always to remember to keep the most important thing, the most important thing. It’s about Grace. The Holy Scriptures and our life in Christ. It’s all about grace. Courteous goodwill? Civility? Decorum? Decency? Respectfulness? Thoughtfulness? Even Diplomacy? Grace is expressed, or rather reflected, in all of these human ways of being. But grace itself, belongs to God. Specifically, in Christian circles, grace means “the free and unmerited favor of God, and “the bestowal of blessings.” Favor. Approval. Acceptance. Respect. Support. Goodwill. Generosity. Kindness. Beneficence. These are the God’s gifts of grace. Grace, in its human expression, is all about access to God’s grace. “God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power” (Hymn 594). Grace is an extended period, granted as a special favor.

A pause. A respite. A continuation. As a verb, it means “to do honor or credit by one's presence.” Grace is a relationship. A presence. To be able to perceive God’s presence in and through all creation. It is a wonderful, benevolent relationship between God and us—something entirely, undeserved and totally unexpected. It is something God does, whether we know it or not. It has been said that grace is like the fragrance of a flower. If we have snuffy noses, we are unaware. If we are blind, the light means nothing to us. And, if we are so full of ourselves, so ego-full, then we care nothing about God’s grace. We are insensitive to grace. To be able to perceive and enjoy God’s grace means becoming sensitive and awake to God.

This is what the Book of Genesis is about? And Exodus? Even Leviticus? When we read through the library of books called the Bible—39 Old Testament books, 27 “little books” in the New Testament (in the Protestant version), written over a span of 1600 years—with roots going back much further—a lot happened! But what is it about? *The most important thing is always to remember to keep the most important thing, the most important thing.* And so we read in today’s Gospel lesson that some Sadducees—those who do not believe in the Resurrection—came to confront Jesus with their queries. First, what happened? It’s important for Luke— In his Gospel he wants to be sure that we understand—that we know about the Sadducees and their rejection of the idea of the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees hold on to an ancient tradition of Israel, in which “eternal life” means, simply, that one lives on in children and in the memories of the living. For ancient Israelites, “eternal life” was understood as producing heirs who would continue the family's ownership of their land. It was a fundamental ethical obligation of a family member to ensure the family’s continuation through progeny. So the story the Sadducees lay out for Jesus—“one bride for seven brothers”—may sound totally implausible and absurd. But it’s an argument, a traditional teaching—about this understanding of eternal life. It can be found in Deuteronomy 25:5-6:

When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go to her, taking her in marriage...

and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel.

The Sadducees' question and concern, like the rest of us, is that no one's name will be blotted out. But this is no academic debate for Jesus. Jesus is living out his last days in Jerusalem. He is entrusting his own life and death and future to God—to another kind eternal life. This is what happens. But is this story about the woman and the seven husbands? Is it about the Law as prescribed in the Book of Deuteronomy? What is most important as Jesus faces his own final days? We see that his concern, his focus is not about himself, but about God. It is about trusting in the favor of God and in the bestowal of God's blessings. It is about his relationship with God. Jesus smells the fragrance of *the flower of life* in God. Favor. Approval. Acceptance. Respect. Support. Goodwill. Generosity. Kindness. Beneficence. We see through Christ, that grace includes an extended period—a resurrection from the finality of death. "It's grace," says Jesus.

Remember the Lord is the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. He is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to God all of them are alive.

For God, all of them are alive! This is no academic debate for Jesus. He is living out his last days entrusting his own life and death and future to God—to eternal life in God's favor.

This past week a friend of mine died. We had an odd sort of friendship—didn't agree about much of anything, but I like her. I really really liked her. She was opinionated. She spoke her mind. She was also generous and courageous. She adopted three children. I'm told by her children that they remember going with her to a church service where the Church Mission of Help was being celebrated. Church Mission of Help was the name of the national church adoption agency years ago. The three children remembered going up to the chancel to be recognized and blessed and when they returned to the pew, they found her weeping. That's what happened. But what was it about? It is about grace. Grace, all around. Grace for them, for her, for everyone.

Resurrection is such a big, important word—perhaps we miss the ordinariness of it—and the prevalence of it—and the fact that we are part of it everyday in all the circumstances of our lives—in God, through Christ, and in community with each other. Resurrection is not an academic debate for Jesus and it is not an academic debate for us either. We live out our days in grace—entrusting our life, our death, and our future to God—to nothing less than the grace of God’s gift of eternal life.

My friend’s life was far from perfect, whatever that may mean. I don’t know anyone whose life is perfect. She had her struggles. Did you ever stop and realize that everyone is struggling with something you know nothing about? Be kind. Grace is about “the free and unmerited favor of God, and the bestowal of blessings.” And when we become sensitive to God’s grace, we are empowered to offer acceptance, respect, support, goodwill, and kindness in the name of Christ. Grace is an extended period, a continuation—a salvation from being forgotten. Grace offers a resurrection from the smallness of ourselves. It is a victory over our limitations, a victory even over death.

Here’s what Paul Tillich has to say. Paul Tillich is a Christian existentialist philosopher and one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century:

*In grace something is overcome;
Grace occurs in spite of something;
Grace occurs in spite of separation and estrangement.
Grace is the reunion of life with life,
The reconciliation of the self with itself.
Grace is the acceptance of that which is rejected.
Grace transforms fate into a meaningful destiny;
It changes guilt into confidence and courage.
There is something triumphant in the word grace.
Sometimes at that moment a wave of light
breaks into our darkness,*

*and it is as though a voice were saying:
“You are accepted.”*

When this happens to us, we experience grace. Everything is transformed. In that moment, reconciliation bridges all our many separations. But keep in mind, grace is not about us. Not about what we do or don't do. It is about God. Grace is what God does. It is who God is. It is what Jesus means when he says:

*Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living;
for to him all of us are alive.*

Jesus is grace incarnate—a direct gift from God, giving us a new awareness and trust in God. As we live out our days in Christ, we entrust our life, our death, and our future to God—to the grace of God's gift of eternal life.

What is there to say to a friend who is dying? What is the most important thing? *The most important thing is always to remember to keep the most important thing, the most important thing.* So, I wandered down to her house and gave her children these words, this song that we just sang together.

Pues si vivimos, para El vivimos
When we are living, it is in Christ Jesus,
y si morimos para El morimos.
And when we're dying, it is in the Lord.
Sea que vivamos o que muramos,
Both in our living and in our dying,
Somos del Señor, somos del Señor.
We belong to God, we belong to God.

We belong to God, we belong to God.

Amen