

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for November 7, 2010
Lessons: Genesis 1:26-31; 2:18,24-25 and Luke 20:27-38

JESUS' REPLY TO THE CYNICS

Ever since we began our visioning process, I have become increasingly aware of the value of questions. People need good questions. Churches need them, too. Questions make us think, while answers may just tell us what we should think. Almost by definition, our faith has more questions than answers because vital faith is trust in the living Christ for God's redemptive love. Trust differs radically from certitude, which knows the answers and so is done with asking the questions, except to test others. Sometimes confident, sometimes scared or just confused, trust goes forward in life with all its uncertainties because past, present, and future have all been entrusted to the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead and whose love has laid claim to us for life.

Does our Christian faith not have particular beliefs that not only reinforce but also guide and correct our trust in God? Yes, our belief in Jesus Christ has both form and content. After this sermon, we will repeat together the Apostles' Creed, reminding ourselves and each other that our faith is not just a vague optimism about life but a dynamic hope in the promises of God who has acted in particular ways for our salvation from futility and corruption. It is important for us to remember that the pillars of Christian faith are *events of salvation*, not formulas of ideology or doctrine.

Over the centuries, church teachers have tried in various ways to explain for people in their particular times and places *how* it can be that Jesus' suffering, death, and resurrection restore us to God and to each other, but our faith is not in the explanations but in the God whose redemptive love has gone to such lengths to give us life filled with hope and keep us from being lost forever. Jesus' crucifixion means far more for us than any explanation can ever tell. Love is always greater than words can explain. From beginning to end, faith is trust in God's redeeming love. We strive and sometimes struggle to understand, but our salvation is in the love, not in our present understanding of it.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke reminds us that there are questions and then there are questions. Not all are the same in spirit, tone, or desire. Sometimes I am asked questions by people who want to be understood not advised. Those questions are very important, especially when any answer I might give would be both useless and offensive. Sometimes understanding and empathy are the only true answers we can offer, because

explanations would only imply criticisms that make light of the person's grief or distress. For example, no one can tell parents whose child has died why it makes sense, because it does not make sense to love, and only love makes sense to God.

In our reading, Jesus responds to a dishonest question. The Sadducees' motive for asking that question is to discredit Jesus and his teaching. They seek neither knowledge nor understanding. Who are these Sadducees? We need to be careful about describing them because our information comes from their opponents, the Pharisees, and few of us would like to be known as our opponents describe us and our beliefs. We do know the Sadducees were the Jerusalem establishment. They controlled the Sanhedrin, the high council in Jerusalem which ultimately condemned Jesus to death though only Rome could sentence him to it. We know also that the Sadducees rejected the very idea of resurrection. The Pharisees believed there would be a resurrection to final judgment to reward the righteous and punish the wicked. Jesus presented a more hopeful view that promised forgiveness and transformation by the power of God's redemptive love to which he called the virtuous and the sinful alike to respond by entrusting themselves to it.

It may be that the Sadducees were, as Pharisees saw them, the relatively well to do who wanted no part of resurrection because they lived rich and wanted to believe they would die safe from judgment. But rich and self-satisfied or not, the Sadducees we meet in Luke hold to a closed belief system and want no epilogue to their well-lived lives. So, to discredit Jesus, they construct a hypothetical situation they think contradicts the validity of belief in resurrection for Judaism. In the case of a married man who dies before fathering an heir to his name, the law provided for what we term a levirate marriage, from the Latin word *levir*, meaning brother-in-law. The dead husband's brother would redeem his name among the living by marrying his widow and naming their first son for the deceased. Jesus' opponents ask him how God would handle the difficulty if that levirate marriage happened six times to the same woman because her husbands kept dying. How about it, teacher? Whose wife would she be if there were a resurrection?

Christians have imagined that Jesus' reply that for the resurrected there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage means there will be no gender or at least no sexuality. Jesus says no such thing, but long suspicious of sex in this life, Christianity seemed only too glad to be rid of it in the promised future. This much we know and can say in faith. Our resurrection hope comes from love, not any theory of being, and love comes from the very essence of God, which tells us love is made to last and, indeed, to outlast the conditions, limitations, and corruptions of life in this world. Human life is relational and shall be personal and relational forever because it will always be a matter of love and not a mere fact of being. You will always be you, and the person you are cannot be known apart from those you love and by whom you are loved. Resurrection means love never ends.

The brother-in-law marriage was a gracious provision God made for people brought to grief under the beliefs and conditions of their time. The Sadducees' use of that gracious provision to try to discredit Jesus' promise of the fulfillment of God's love for us in resurrection to life everlasting is nothing but cynical.

What is cynical? Yes, I know the original Cynics were philosophers who discounted everything but virtue, but that's not what I'm asking. What do we mean by a cynic, how does cynicism work in our life and society, and how does its negativity hurt life and stifle hope? Here's the way we use the term "cynic," straight from the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

A person disposed to rail or find fault; now usually: One who shows a disposition to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and is wont to express this by sneers and sarcasms; a sneering fault-finder.

Need I argue that we are living in an age of cynicism – of sneering fault-finding – or that we are all tempted these days to some degree of cynicism?

These days, sneering cynicism is called tough and so is praised by angry people who feel their rightful advantages in life are being taken from them in favor of others they regard as unworthy. We are living in a time of heaping blame upon scapegoats, when empathy and compassion are scorned as weaknesses that corrupt the tough spirit our society needs. Angry, frightened, and shamed people cry out for the return of the tough guy, who will put the scapegoats in their place, drive them out of the village, and run them over the cliff. How can we represent Jesus Christ in such a time?

To the cynical who treat him with scorn, Jesus replies with an honesty that unveils their real motives but offers them hope if they want it. He answers their self-protecting dishonesty with God's kind of truth which is personal, relational, and life-giving.

We need to take two steps that will not be easy. We need to let Jesus speak God's redemptive love to our own cynicism, to whatever there is in us of the sneering fault-finder. Then we need to opt out of the game of partisanship, and I am not speaking only of politics. Jesus Christ has given us an identity as servants of God's compassion for this world, and that identity is not one that can possibly be exclusive, self-satisfied, or hostile toward others. Compassion and contempt are incompatible. Christian faith is something that can only give itself for others, not defend its virtue or purity or certainly its privilege against others. Jesus offered the cynics hope coming to them from God's redemptive love. That's all he has given us to offer people, but it's more than enough. Amen.