

“Asking the Right Questions”

Luke 20:27-40

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If you were paying attention to politics in the United States in 1988, you will remember this famous question. “Governor Dukakis, if your wife, Kitty, were raped and murdered, would you favor an irrevocable death penalty for the killer?” CNN news anchor Bernard Shaw asked this classic “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” question during the second Presidential candidates’ debate in 1988. Supposedly, Shaw asked this question to give Governor Dukakis a chance to show the emotional side of the Democratic candidate whom many were calling the “iceman,” but I don’t think there was any way to answer it that would have made any other part of the debate the next day’s headlines. Dukakis had no choice but to reaffirm his resolve to oppose the death penalty and he did so with a typically dispassionate response. But consider his options. If Dukakis had responded less seriously, he would have been labeled soft on crime *and* unpresidential. If he had played the righteous husband, he would have sold out his principles *and* been called a flipflop. Either way, he loses. Perhaps he should have taken lessons from Jesus in how to respond to the unanswerable, disingenuously posed question.

“In the resurrection, therefore,” ask the Sadducees, “whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” Damned if you do, damned if you don’t. This absurd question posed by the mysterious and seldom-seen Sadducees references the

practice ordained by God to see to the welfare of a childless woman as well as the legacy of her dead husband. This tradition, still practiced in some cultures today, is called Levirate marriage, so named *not* from the Israelite tribe of Levi, but from the Latin word for brother-in-law. I do not want to dwell too long on this subject except to remind you that it is found in Deuteronomy and therefore attributed to Moses, and it exhibits God's enduring care for those who cannot care for themselves, namely childless women with no hope of dependents to support them. It also demonstrates the predominant Old Testament understanding of life after death, namely that a person lived on after his death by passing on his name, property, and family history to the next generation. The marriage of a widow to her brother-in-law served both of these purposes, since the children born to the brother were to be considered the original husband's own. As incomprehensible as it might seem to most Christians today, it was a generous expression of God's grace in a hardscrabble culture.

The Sadducees have cleverly, if ridiculously, taken this graceful practice to its logical extreme when placed in the context of the belief that at the end of time, all of God's chosen people would be resurrected. The Sadducees, of course, did not believe in resurrection and were trying to make a mockery of the idea held by the rival Pharisees and, clearly, Jesus. To their way of thinking, Levirate marriage was a valuable tradition, especially for those without a belief in some form of life after death. Don't we all have a wish for some kind of immortality, some longing to know that when we pass away, we will not be forgotten, that our days here were not in vain? Genuine believers in God's

law given to Moses, they pit themselves against a teacher with growing repute, hoping to score one for their understanding of what happens after death, saying, “Teacher,” calling him by a title of honor, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies,” and on and on.

And will Jesus take the bait? Will he try to solve their absurd and unanswerable riddle? Of course not. Jesus is too smart for that. He knows that if he answers that any one of them “gets the girl,” he gives them the satisfaction of gaining a dumber answer to a dumb question, and they will follow up with the inevitable challenge to his reasoning. And if he answers that none of them get the girl, he betrays the doctrine of resurrection by making it look illegal, that in the resurrection, God’s law is ignored. And so, with the same panache he displays throughout the pages of the Bible whenever people ask him absurd and disingenuous questions, he dodges the question or, more accurately, makes the questioner look silly by hoisting him on his own petard.

“Teacher, *Moses* wrote for us,” they begin, placing all their eggs in one basket, playing what they think is their trump card right from the beginning. And after affirming that indeed there is a resurrection and that it will not be like anything in this lifetime, what with no death, and no other human institutions, including marriage, Jesus puts the last nail in their coffin by using their beloved Moses against them, reminding them that Moses *also* wrote that to God, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are alive, a clear indication that the idea of resurrection is God’s own idea. “He is the God not of the dead, but of the living.” Nowhere in his answer will the Sadducees find satisfaction. Indeed, it says

that “they no longer dared to ask him another question.” We don’t know if any of the Sadducees were persuaded to believe that resurrection awaited them, but they may have left that encounter with the burgeoning thought that in the end, without resurrection, God can only ever be the God of the dead, and what would that make them besides dead?

In sending the Sadducees away humiliated, or at least scratching their heads, Jesus has pointed up the folly of spending time dreaming up unhelpful questions for which no answer can ever be satisfactory, all the while missing out on what the God of the living has to offer and has promised. The tragedy of this story is what was lost during the time it took to ask the wrong question: the opportunity to learn at the feet of the master and experience abundant life by asking the right question. The Gospels are littered with wrong questions which Jesus turns on their heads: “Should we pay taxes?” “Whose likeness is on the coin you use?” “Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?” “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” “Can my sons take their place at your side in your kingdom?” “Are they able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?” “Who is my neighbor?” “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” On and on and on.

If you don’t know the stories I am mentioning, go home and read the Gospels in your Bibles, they’re all there. You’ll see that Jesus never responds to the satisfaction of those who ask questions with the wrong focus, questions which focus on weakness or

self-justification, questions which contain the intent to humiliate or establish power, questions which seek to make acceptable greed or injustice or self-grandeur. When he responds, he skillfully redirects their focus to God and to the questioner's relationship with God. Would that poor Michael Dukakis were more practiced in the art of refocusing the wrong question.

The question which every nation asks before it sends its soldiers into battle is some variation of "Should we go to war?" It's actually a pretty Biblical question. The kings of the Old Testament frequently consulted their sages who consulted God by asking, "Shall we go up against the Philistines or the Ammonites or the Perezites?" And God would return an answer, and sometimes they would heed that answer, and sometimes they wouldn't. But even though it's a Biblical question, if the Sadducees had asked Jesus a variation of that question, like "Should we go up against the Romans?" I have my doubts he would have given them any more direct an answer to that question than he did to the one about resurrection. And my doubt is not based on the fact that a war against the Romans would have been cultural suicide, but rather because they once again would have been asking the wrong question. You see, "Should we go to war?" is always the wrong question. It might be a necessary question from time to time, but it is always the wrong question, a damned if you do, damned if you don't kind of question. And Jesus doesn't satisfy our needs for answers to those kinds of question.

The Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, and even the disciples and their families are not the only ones to ask the wrong questions, the questions we all should

avoid, the truly unhelpful questions, the ones which sidetrack us from following Christ, the ones which send us squabbling with others, the ones which divert us from experiencing our God as the God of the living instead of the God of the dead. Even the wisest, most Spirit-led among us probably rarely ask the right question. Thanks be to God that usually, Jesus takes advantage of the teachable moment created by the wrong question innocently posed and makes it an experience of grace. We will be faithful disciples if we can do that for one another.

I hope that is what we do each year as we gather as a church and community to remember and honor those men and women who have been called into the service of their nation's questions about war. For when we do pause to remember and honor these vets and their families, we proclaim once again that God is the God not only of those who are seated here tonight, but those who never came home, that God is the God not only of those who held a desk job, but also those who had the misfortune of taking another life in battle, that God is the God not only of our nations when they ask the wrong questions, but every nation when they ask the wrong question. You see, our God is the God "not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive," whether or not they died, whether or not they killed, whether or not they asked the wrong question.

Here is where we might find our clue to the right questions to ask about war. The right questions about war are those that are based on the fact that our God is the God of life. And so in our deliberations about war we might begin with that fact and ask, "Will

this war bring more life into the world?” or “Will anyone live as a result of this war?” Some of you will remember the controversial 1960s song, “War” by Edwin Starr with its powerful, and I think, appropriate question, “War, what is it good for?” Now that’s a question Jesus would probably answer, maybe even just like Edwin Starr did, with “Absolutely nothing!” You see, Edwin Starr goes on to sing something about this fact of life that must be at the center of all of our questions, whether they are about war or anything else:

War can't give life, it can only take it away
War, it ain't nothing but a heartbreaker
War, friend only to the undertaker
Peace, love and understanding
Tell me, is there no place for them today?
They say we must fight to keep our freedom
But Lord knows there's got to be a better way

May God bless us as we seek that better way by asking the right questions and honoring those who have been caught up in the wrong ones. Amen.