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Grace Cathedral, San Francisco, CA Z43
22 Pentecost (Proper 27C) 11:00 a.m. Eucharist
17
Sunday 10 November 2019 Duruflé Requiem

Haggai 1:15b-2:9
Psalm 145:1-5, 18-22
2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-
Luke 20:27-38

Jesus and the Master Narrative

"Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living" (Lk. 20).

1. "I'm not afraid of getting older. I'm afraid of looking older." This week Ali Drucker wrote this in a trending *New York Times* article entitled "If Keanu Reeves's Date Can Embrace Looking Her Age, I Can Too." She commends the actor for dating someone who is only nine years younger than he is, because for most famous men, women seem to have a "shelf life just shy of twenty-five years."¹

In a conversation this week one of my most striking-looking and closest friends waved a hand around her face and said, "This won't last forever." She went on to explain that soon she will not be beautiful and no one will want to have her and she will be alone.

I wanted to interrupt and say, "you are one of the most beautiful people I know and it comes from your inner gorgeousness! The best part of you is eternal." But words like this seem empty when the world around us seems to run according to completely different rules.

2. The social conventions of Jesus' time make it hard for us to understand his confrontation with the Sadducees. But how we see the world matters so much and Jesus offers us a story about our self that leads to what John calls "abundant life." Jesus shows us how to experience God's love and joy at the heart of everything.

Today's gospel happens at a time of excruciating tension and danger (Lk. 19). Jesus has just ridden into Jerusalem with huge crowds praising God and cheering him. When Jesus sees the city he weeps because he knows it will be destroyed. He enters the temple and drives out the people who are selling things there. Then he settles into a routine of teaching in the temple every day. The religious leaders are looking for a way to kill him but are restrained because as Luke writes, "the people were spellbound by what they heard" (Lk. 19).

The Sadducees are a religious sect with ties to the temple leadership. They differ from the Pharisees, Jesus and his disciples in two ways. First, they don't believe in a coming age of resurrection. Second, they only accept the first five books of the Bible as

authoritative and regard these as excluding the possibility of resurrection. Let me be clear they are not there to discover the truth, they are trying to entrap Jesus. They want to get him to say something that will offend the crowds. They want to trip him up, to embarrass him so that everyone will see that he isn't as clever as they first thought.²

Not only does Jesus avoid being trapped but each time he speaks so profoundly that it only deepens the admiration of those who hear him. The Sadducees argue that the whole idea of resurrection is absurd and impossible. To do this they refer to an ancient practice called "levirate marriage" which takes its name from the Hebrew word *levir* which means "brother-in-law."

The idea is simple. If a man dies childless, his brother will marry his widow in order to have children who will then carry on his name and look after the widow when she is old. In our time we are likely to feel a sense of horror that this woman is treated merely like a man's property. This is true. But it is also a compassionate strategy for addressing old age and death. The goal is to leave the widow with children who will one day care for her.

So to prove the foolishness of resurrection the Sadducees present Jesus with a hypothetical example. Suppose a woman's husband dies and she marries his brother, but he dies and so on through a family of seven brothers. They ask Jesus, "In the resurrection... whose wife will the woman be" (Lk. 20)? Although it seems like there is no way to win Jesus immediately answers.

Jesus says that their error comes out of assuming that the cultural conventions and practices of our times will hold in the age of resurrection. He goes on, "in that age the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed they cannot die anymore because they are like angels and are children of God" (Lk. 20). Jesus knows that marriage practices are ways of addressing old age and death. Since there is no old age or death in the resurrection we don't need these cultural practices.

The religious leaders asked whose wife she will be and Jesus answers that she will not be anyone's wife. She will be utterly herself, "a child of God," "a child of the resurrection." If this were not enough Jesus goes on to cite one of the Books of Moses that the Sadducees find authoritative.

Jesus says that at the burning bush God says to Moses, I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He does not say I *was* their God. Jesus says, "Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive" (Lk. 20). Hearing this the scribes can

only say, "Teacher you have spoken well" because they are afraid to ask another question.

Jesus does something far more brilliant than we recognize at first. The Sadducees use an ancient marriage practice to criticize the idea of resurrection. Jesus on the other hand uses life in God, or the age of resurrection, to criticize human institutions like marriage. This widow is not merely the object of an argument. Neither does she enter the next age as someone's property or as a wife. Her marriage status will no longer define her because she will be a child of God, like an angel.

When Jesus talks about the coming age. He's not referring merely to something that happens to us after we die. God's kingdom has come near. It is already happening. It is unfolding. We are already beginning to realize the dignity, freedom, joy and respect that should belong to every child of God. All human conventions and institutions that undermine human dignity, no matter how cruel or persistent, are passing away through the power of Christ.

3. Our Forum guest today is the journalist Jose Antonio Vargas. He grew up not far from our old house in Mountain View and his memoir moved me deeply. We are talking about constraining institutions, conventions and practices. Nothing seems more arbitrary than his predicament as an undocumented citizen. He didn't ask to be brought here. It's almost all he has ever known. He has dedicated himself to studying our shared civic life and writing thoughtfully about it. He walks around with a copy of the Bill of Rights. And yet there is no path, or process for him to become a citizen. And politicians are leading other Americans to despise him because he has no papers.

The same public library system had an immense influence on both of our lives. Vargas writes about coming across a videotaped interview between Bill Moyers and the novelist Toni Morrison (1931-2019). It had a profound effect on Vargas. The two celebrities are talking about the pressures on one of her characters. Morrison says she surrendered to "the master narrative" and goes on to explain what she means.

"The master narrative (is) the whole notion of what is ugliness, what is worthlessness, what is contempt. She got it from her family... school... movies, she got it everywhere." Moyers seems confused so Morrison explains further, "It's white male life. The master narrative is whatever ideological script that is being imposed by the people in authority over everybody else. The master fiction. History. It has a certain point of view. So, when these little girls see that the most prized gift that they can get at Christmastime is this little white doll, that's the master narrative speaking. "This is beautiful, this is lovely, and you're not it."³

Despite the power of the master narrative, and the conventions that support it, through Christ we see signs of new life breaking into this age. The theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes that, "In [our] essence, [our] innermost being, [our] heart we are only what we are gladly."⁴ He points out that we have an experience of what he calls "being in encounter." We have relationships which are not about power or seeking our own self-interest.

I speak from personal experience in married life when I affirm his claim that there is a kind of mutual joy that we find in the existence of another. Barth puts these feelings into words writing, "I have waited for Thee. I sought Thee before Thou didst encounter me. I had Thee in view even before I knew thee. The encounter with Thee is not, therefore, the encounter with something strange which disturbs me, but with a counterpart which I have lacked and without which I would be empty and futile." Barth calls this the unfathomable, unexpressible secret of humanity.

What scares you? Do you worry about looking older – you are a child of the resurrection. Are you afraid of being deported – no one can take you away from God because you are like the angels and have citizenship in heaven. Are you afraid of being alone – you are a child of God. Do not let the master narrative hide what is really beautiful. You are exquisite. God will always hold you and all you love just as God still embraces Abraham and Sarah. God is God not of the dead but of the living!

¹ Ali Drucker, "If Keanu Reeves's Date Can Embrace Looking Her Age, I Can Too," *The New York Times*, 6 November 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/06/opinion/keanu-reeves-alexandra-grant.html>

² So much of this sermon comes from Matt Boulton, "What's Resurrection For? SALT's Lectionary Commentary for the Twenty-Second Week After Pentecost," 5 November 2019. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2019/11/5/whats-resurrection-for-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-second-week-after-pentecost>

³ Jose Antonio Vargas, *Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen* (NY: HarperCollins, 2018) 76-7.

⁴ See Karl Barth *Church Dogmatics* Index pgs. 395-6. Also, Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.2: The Doctrine of Creation* tr. H Knight, G.W. Bromiley, J.K.S. Reid, R.H. Fuller (NY: T & T Clark, 1960) 267, 270, 269.