Eternal Mysteries

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Luke 20: 27-38 Russell Mitchell-Walker

Recently we had a funeral for a very active and dearly beloved member, Linda Fowler. It is hard to believe she is no longer with us, in this earthly realm, yet she was at peace to join with God in whatever eternal life was. When we experience death, especially of someone close to us, it gets us thinking about eternal life, or life after death. Today’s scripture reading also gets us thinking about this as the Sadducees question Jesus about resurrection.

The Sadducees were a sect of Judaism that did not believe in resurrection because they followed only the five books of the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. In these books there is no mention of resurrection or life after death.

Belief in resurrection in the Jewish tradition did not receive much attention until a relatively late date. Before that the Jews believed with most people in ancient times that after death both the wicked and the righteous would have a miserable, shadowy existence in the underworld, the Hebrews called it Sheol. The idea of the wicked flourishing and the righteous suffering in this life, as the wisdom literature of Job and Ecclesiastes observed, and the idea of reunification of soul and body and the rebirth of the Jewish nation as found in Ezekiel’s vision (Ezekiel 37), gave impetus to the concept of resurrection. The exiles had brought that concept back from their stay in Babylon where they had found it in the Zoroastrian tradition. Later Jewish thought also incorporated the Greek idea of immortality. In the 2nd century BCE the Book of Wisdom fully developed the belief that the righteous would be vindicated and live forever in God’s presences. But the Sadducees were purists and did not believe in resurrection. Some would not have considered them Jews in Jesus’ time. However, the religious authorities used them to try and set another trap to trip up Jesus, so they could have something to accuse him of and arrest him for.

So, the Sadducees challenge Jesus, based on a Levitical marriage law, that should a husband die and he had a brother, the women would marry the brother, so she would be cared for and still have children for the family. She was passed on as property. The question to Jesus was posed in a ridiculous way, of a woman marrying seven brothers after they die one by one. They ask, when she is resurrected, whose wife would she be. Jesus seeing through their questioning, responds basically that in the resurrection there is no marriage, those risen are neither given in marriage nor marry. The eternal realm is beyond these kinds of boundaries and definitions. Now initially this may sound concerning, especially to those who are waiting to be united with their spouse once they die. In this statement, Jesus is identifying that the rules and expectations, and systems of this world will no longer apply. Marriage in his time, was a patriarchal system of passing on women as property from one man (the father) to another, the husband. So, the law that the Sadducees were referring to was to pass on ownership of the women so she was cared for by another man. Jesus is saying that in the resurrection, in eternal life, there would be no ownership of anything, indeed there would be no need of it. The present systems of oppression and injustice will cease to be. Existence will be very different, and we really don’t know what it will be like, but I believe we will know and be united with those we love in a wonderful way and we will be in existence with and connected to God in love.

Jesus identifies that God is God of the living and not the dead, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah, Rebecca, and Leah. In saying this, Jesus is saying that all these people of faith still live. In like manner those we know who have died here, live on with our God of the living. We might ask, how do we keep the trajectory of their lives, their faith, their witness, their good and righteous deeds alive in the living of our own lives? We often say that people live on in us, as we continue the legacy that they lived. We see that as the work that Linda did with the Indigenous Christian Fellowship is continuing, thanks to the leadership of Doug and Leslie Scheurwater and all those who were baking with Linda. Perhaps we can learn to see ourselves as agents of resurrection by continually raising up these holy examples into the living of our lives and working for the love and justice of God, rather than worrying about what life beyond this earthly experience will be like.

We don’t know what eternal life looks like, and it is something that we can name as another one of the mysteries of our faith. We don’t know the details of what is coming, however we have hope and joy in the good news of Jesus, and his message of love and peace. We know through this message, his resurrection, and through our faith, that whatever happens in our life, and after our life here on earth, we will abide in God’s abundant, eternal love. We know we experience this abundant love through others and in community. All of this is a blessing and gives us hope. Thanks be to God.