

The Gospel from the Weekend of November 9-10th; the conflict between the Sadducees and the Pharisees over whether or not there is an afterlife.

To begin with, I must warn you that today's gospel contains some technical stuff as well as a theological debate; neither of which might immediately be of interest to you, but I ask you hang in there anyway and see what happens...

To begin with, how do you describe the indescribable? How do you help people to understand something that is totally outside of their experience, and therefore beyond their comprehension? Well one method that we might employ is the use of experiences that are known to us so as to glean insights into those things that are unfamiliar to us. To accomplish this task, there are similes and metaphors, poetry and parables that can introduce us into new and lofty understandings.

A simile is the simple use of a word that suggests a wider range of meaning; for instance: I was the caboose of the children in our family...or He was a mountain of a man.

A metaphor, however, is a more explicit form of this comparative language, such as when we use one concept so as to expand the possible meaning of another concept; for instance when someone says: "When you speak that way to me, it is like you are putting a dagger into my heart!"

And finally, a parable is an extended metaphor, a narrative that stretches a single phrase into a brief story: an example would be: The kingdom of God is like a man who had two sons, and he said to the older son: "Go work in my fields;" he said "yes," but did not go...

Now we know that Jesus used all of these forms of speech, but he was especially fond of the parable, the extended metaphor, by placing known images next to unfamiliar ones in the hopes that the known image would form a window through which the respondent might catch a glimpse of a new reality.

Along these lines it is important to understand that in the ancient Semitic world, there was a belief that the spoken word was a living thing and thus had a power of its own. And so since few people could read and write, the spoken word was of great importance to ancient civilizations. Prophets received words from God, which were perceived to be an extension of God's very self.

In today's gospel, we see one more mouse-trap story where Jesus is presented with an apparently unsolvable proposition. The setting is the Temple in Jerusalem, during the last week of Jesus' earthly ministry. The enemies of Jesus, and there were many, were circling with ever-menacing tenacity, looking for any loophole in his teaching, any vulnerability in order to spring their trap. Our lesson today features the attempt by one of these groups, the Sadducees, to cast just such a snare.

Another bit of background is that the Sadducees were a religious group, based primarily in Jerusalem, who were comprised of elite members of the educated class; they were rich and powerful and were closely tied to the Temple. It might be interesting to note that this unpleasant exchange between Jesus and the Sadducee in today's gospel took place right after Jesus threw the money-changers out of the Temple area, thus infuriating the Sadducees.

Theologically, the Sadducees were the most conservative of the religious groups. They only accepted the five books of Moses—that is, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—as their

canon of scripture and as a result, they did not support any doctrine that was not grounded in those five books.

They considered the other books of the Hebrew Bible as inspirational and devotional material, but not worthy of doctrine. And so the writings of the later prophets or the psalms were not acknowledged by the Sadducees.

Well as it happened, the notion that there is an after-life was primarily grounded in the books of Daniel, Isaiah and Job. This idea, and the acceptance of the entire Hebrew Bible as canonical, was taught by the other primary sect of the day, the Pharisees. The Pharisees focused on the written word of the entire Hebrew Bible, but had a special reverence for God's laws, all 613 of them. And so as you might imagine, this brought about a serious disagreement between the Sadducees and Pharisees over the topic of the afterlife.

Furthermore, Jesus answered a good many questions during his ministry, but this one about the bride who marries seven brothers comes pretty close to being a stupid question, but it is not being asked by a stupid person.

Keep in mind that the scriptures do not condemn asking God serious questions, even angry questions. Consider, for instance, Job's vocal complaints about the hardships that he had to endure, or the lamentations of the psalms or Martha taking Jesus to task after the death of her brother Lazarus. It would seem that God actually welcomes such questions. After all, a living faith is a questioning faith. How else would we be able to get any answers? Consequently God invites us into honest dialogue as such questions show that we take God seriously. We should further know that there are honest inquiries and dishonest ones; and we should acknowledge that when some people ask a question, they are not seeking knowledge but rather are making a statement about their own beliefs.

And so it is important to note that when a Sadducee posed a question to Jesus contained in our lesson today, citing the teaching of Moses concerning the marriage of a widow left without heirs, we can almost hear them snickering under their collective breaths. They loved the awkwardness of the notion that the woman in their hypothetical narrative would have seven husbands in the afterlife. You should further understand that that this scenario was just as much a jab at the Pharisees as it was at Jesus.

But now let's go back a bit. Perhaps you've heard the term "reductio ad absurdum," which is used to describe a position that is reduced to an absurdity in order to disprove a point? Well, the Sadducees were reducing one biblical law to an absurd conclusion in order to demonstrate that the notion of an afterlife is totally ludicrous.

This issue had its roots in what was known as the levirate duty. When the Jews first took possession of the Promised Land, possession of acreage was based on inheritance. And so if a man died childless (and it was the man's death that mattered in this system), this biblical law insured that the land would stay in the family by requiring a brother to have children with his deceased brother's wife.

But by the time of Jesus, it was not necessary to keep land in the hands of a particular clan so the law itself was no longer practiced. And everyone knew it, including today's questioner.

And so by using this silly example of the afterlife, Jesus was caught in the crossfire between two groups of believers who looked at the world in different ways: the Pharisees who believed that we make a

choice to follow God's word. And then there were the Sadducees who believed that God had preordained who was to be an insider and who was to be an outsider; they believed in a God who was in total control of history and who had predetermined who was favored and who was not. And in their view, since God's special people—like themselves—received their deserved reward in this life, an afterlife was not necessary in order to balance the scales of justice.

This tension is not resolved even today in our faith communities. On the one hand, we insist that God is in control of history, and pushed to its limits, that view means one has to believe in predestination. On the other hand, we insist that we have free will and that our choices matter, and pushed to its limits, that view means we almost have no need or space for God to intervene in human choice and chance. Scripture can be marshaled to support both views. Actually, freedom and predestination are two sides of the same coin. The omnipotent author chose to write a story about free human beings, not just trees or machines. That means we are really free. We are free precisely because God is all-powerful. If love and power were not one, we would have a classic standoff, an unending conflict between the two. But once you see the center of life is love, then everything else falls into place. Still there is a tension between the two, but we do not need to resolve it. Rather, our task in life is to be faithful.

But now back to the question at hand. As Jesus did with all of the groups who tried to entrap him in word games like these, he slipped out of their grasp by reframing the entire conversation. Jesus did not allow himself to get drawn into the debate about which Old Testament books were canonical, or into a justification for the afterlife.

The failure of the Sadducees' reasoning was that they pushed the boundaries of the metaphorical language too far. Marriage we know, but that does not mean that marriage as we know it will transfer exactly in to the life to come. All attempts to describe the afterlife, using the metaphors that we use in this life, are only suggestive, not definitive. How could it be otherwise?

And so Jesus simply affirmed that we will have relationships in heaven, but that the primary relationship, the primary focus of the heavenly life, is with God and not with each other; and as such, heaven is not some second chapter of our life, like some sort of Hollywood sequel.

Comparing heavenly existence to earthly existence is like comparing baseball to football, or apples to oranges—they are similar in some ways, but certainly not identical. Imagine trying to play baseball by using the rules of football. Such simply wouldn't make any sense.

And that is the point Jesus tries to make to the Sadducees and to us.

Jesus tries to help us imagine that the normal experience of earthly existence—limitations of time and space, cycles of life and death, relationships and roles—all of these will be transformed in heaven, just as our bodies and our understanding will be so transformed.

And so we should not worry about these matters, since they will only sidetrack us from the one thing that makes heaven heavenly in the first place, and that is that we will be eternally present to God who created us, who loves us and who redeems us. Everything else is a secondary detail, best left to God. All that we actually know about heaven is that it will be glorious and that there will be wonderful surprises...