

A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Janine Wilson, Associate Minister, at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 10, 2013, dedicated to creative listeners and challengers, whose arguments for good make the glory of God visible even now.

“Arguing for Good”

II Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17

Luke 20:27-40

Let us pray, May the words of my mouth and the mediation of all our hearts, be acceptable to you Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer, amen.

One of the interesting things about being a pastor, at least in my own extended family, is that I have also been invited a few times to become the family chaplain. When a relative dies, some of the family seems to think, or hope, or assume, that I have some special authority, or depth of wisdom that come complete with answers – especially relevant when it comes to death and dying. I am flattered, it’s always nice when the people who have known you since diaper days suddenly quit teasing you, as the patterns were set from childhood, and ask you for a thought on something.

It used to be particularly startling though when the relatives that used to tease me and beat the heck out of me on the croquet course – often sending my own shiny orb shooting across the lawn, turn to me and ask questions about death and dying. It used to startle the bejeebers out of me. I’m one of the younger ones in the clan. I remember days when I wasn’t given credit enough to choose which ice cream we would get to buy, and then suddenly, they thought I had answers about heaven and death. It was a stretch...

The day came when my Aunt died. The relatives upped the ante. My uncle asked if I would preside at her funeral. I was caught between that rock and the hard place – that peculiar land

between scared and honored. Could I really do that? Could I really say anything of faith and meaning for someone I knew and loved?

Long story short, I accepted the ask and preached as a way for all of us to start to find our way to say goodbye; see you soon; see you later; most of all – thank you and thank you God for letting us be family. The service had gone fine, if my trembling hands were visible; no one seemed distracted by it.

What I hadn't counted on was my uncle's last words at her grave. A difference I had known and respected, but had never engaged and discussed. After the homily and prayers giving thanks; after the music and the graveside; after my mother had hugged me, along with her kin, my Uncle – husband of the aunt who had died walked over to the grave. Instinctively I followed him - as much in the pastoral role as in the role of niece. He looked into the still open grave and said, "Well, I guess that's all there is. I'll never see you again. "

This is not a scenario that ever surfaced in any of my classes at seminary. No wise professor ever once said to me, "Janine, people will ask you to occasionally lead funerals for people they loved and cherished, some will even be relatives, but don't be too surprised when the day comes when your uncle makes it clear that he does not believe in the resurrection." No warning..., but a lot of reality that rushed in that day.

Like my Uncle, the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection. This morning, Jesus is standing with the Sadducees -- "Okay Jesus, let's say there is this woman whose husband dies and her brother-in-law marries her so the family name can be carried on and so she has a name in the community...and then brother number one dies...and brother number two picks up where he left off and marries her and then he dies....and so on...until she's finally been married to the whole string of brothers. After SHE dies, which husband does she get to be with?"

If you ever had a little brother or sister you might have played a similar kind of word game. The kind where you make the problem so giant that you are basically making fun of your kid sister; the

person who asks the giant question is the one with the power. The power broker Sadducees thought they caught Jesus. They verbally lurched forward at him, posed the most absurd question to needle him a little at the same time....planning to push him far enough to make it clear he was an imposter. But the game backfired.

Whether it was a martial art Aikido move – a swift step into the assault followed by disarming them - or his well practiced art of Socratic method, posing questions instead of giving pat answers -- Jesus reversed the power and threw everyone off balance. He flipped the power and asked his own question in return.

Jesus began where they began – with Moses, but he moved the dialogue away from heaven and earth to the love and mercy of God instead. Under the surface he began to teach that God's ways are not always identical to ours. Illustrating there is no point in arguing about the mystery of death, especially a mystery they have already rejected. He moved away from meddling and into teaching and engaging in what appears to be an argument. Jesus had a purpose larger than what is obvious...there is an extra layer. Each question pointed toward a solution that the original questioners may not have wished to arrive at—nonetheless, they arrive at Jesus' prescribed destination. (He is a master at layering questions and answers in an opposing way seems impossible without unintentionally stepping over to Jesus side and highlighting Jesus' teachings!)

The chief priests and scribes want to know, 'Where do you get the authority to say and do these things, Jesus?' And Jesus asks a question that he knows they cannot answer without helping him avoid their original question. To say too much about having authority of God would surely have resulted in arrest and persecution right then and there, but his time to move to the cross had not yet come.

So he built his view up with layered responses, to guide those who had ears to hear. And it seems it worked. The Sadducees gave up their attempts to prove that Jesus had no authority because he was proclaiming what they believed to be false teachings about the

resurrection. Their attempt to catch him in a web of words failed. And we are blessed as a result.

The truth of the gospel is that God's ways are not identical to our ways. The lowliest of society here on earth are not the same as in heaven. Jesus opens the discussion platform and it's as if the possibility that the last really will be first and the first just might be last. And there, staring back at them is the possibility that men will not be able to take control over women, or even men over men and women over women after death. One day the victims of trafficking, slave trades, genocide, forced labor, manipulation of trade and markets and children, will no longer be directing the way things have become. In their place will be the love of God. Jesus tells them in not so many words that the God in charge is the God of their ancestors – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob... “for to all of them God is alive” (v37).

In the end, what if it matters more how we live today than what we wonder about unseen tomorrows? What if we were to trust God to be God of the living, as well as of the dead? Or would it be helpful if we looked at it in the opposite way – what if our lack of action today for the ‘least of these’ played a role in what happens to us next. Would we find the money and the courage to change a single thing we do?

If we are indeed to be ‘alive to God’ both now and again, then how do we open our lives up enough to step up to the genuine challenges – not just of winning an argument against Jesus, or a raise, or being in the top ten percent of this or that – but to be one who finds ways to set other free to prosper, free to feed both their children and themselves before getting a good night's rest; free to praise the person next to us instead of building up ourselves; free to imagine our America as a country where we not only have enough beds for the homeless in Columbus, Ohio every night (which is not the case today), but in every city and town having enough food and shelter for every man, woman and child around the globe? In the day to day of it, our moments unfold one at a time. Our faith builds up the same way – one faithful act of love for God, self and others at a time. We have so many choices we can make along the

way – for ourselves, for each other, for all of God’s creation. They become our legacy....or not.

In the end, my wonderful Uncle, who once gave ice cream bars to my children and I every time we visited moved north after my Aunt passed away. He lived another twenty or so years – dying at the age of 102... but before he died, he ended up marrying a second time. He married his high school sweetheart - both of them somewhere in their nineties. I won’t know for certain what my Aunt thought for a while, but if love is love - both God’s and ours - I trust it all worked out just as God promised.

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