

Luke 20: 27-38 What happens if...?

What happens if...? This is a question which can open up possibilities. It can be a way to anticipate future events. It can be a way to suggest options to solve problems. Luke 20:27-33 might be that type of situation. Today's passage comes in the middle of those texts we normally read during Holy Week. That is the background for the text and the question. Jesus has made it to Jerusalem and has entered the last week of his life before his arrest and crucifixion. In Luke's gospel during this week, Jesus has wept over the city, has chased those selling animals to be used in ritual sacrifice from the temple courtyard and gone back to the courtyard and is teaching those who gather around him. This attentive crowd which is described as spellbound in the NRSV draws the attention of the religious authorities. The chief priests and scribes have questioned Jesus' authority do the things he has done. Instead of answering, Jesus poses a question for them about John and the authority of the baptism he had done. Was it from heaven or earth? After talking among themselves about what the consequences of an affirmative or a negative answer would be, they decided that their answer was "don't know." Jesus then said, "Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things." Jesus has thus neatly sidestepped a direct answer to their question. They have failed to find an excuse to take action against him. The next parable Jesus tells the people is directed at the chief priests and scribes and they know it, but are afraid of the reaction of the crowd if they act against Jesus. So we have the chief priests and scribes watching Jesus and seeing how the crowd reacts to his healing and his teachings. They are afraid of his influence and seek to entrap him by sending spies with a question about the legality of the Roman tax. Should it be paid? He avoids this trap of urging disobedience by pointing out whose image is on the coins of the realm, the denarius. These exchanges silence this group, but Jesus' very skill at avoiding their traps only serves to strengthen their fear of him. These questions seem very different on the surface, but they have one thing in common, they aren't really questions asked in order to gain insight or understanding. They are questions asked where the questioner knows the "proper" answer is but believes that Jesus will provide them with one which will allow them to discredit him or give them a reason to take action against him. This morning's text opens with a third group within the religious leaders of the time—the Sadducees. These men are also religious leaders, learned and well versed in the teachings of the Torah. But they have a more conservative interpretation on many matters of Mosaic Law than do the Pharisees. The Pharisees considered resurrection to be a possibility; the Sadducees did not which immediately illustrates their lack of seriousness about the question they bring. Traditionally these two groups had extensive debates over various aspects of the law—designing different scripts for events and then debating what actions were acceptable under the law. This type of questioning falls into a group which I would call "what if" questions. These can be useful under the right circumstances, if you are seeking a solution to a problem for example, it might be helpful to say I wonder what happens if I do this—When designing experiments in a laboratory or clinical setting, these are very helpful approaches. But that is when the question you are asking is for the purpose of better understanding, to clarify an issue. When the Sadducees approach Jesus in the Temple courtyard they know who he is. They know has been healing

those who come to him, and has even raised a young girl from the dead—do they ask about these things? Is their question about the resurrected young girl? Are they trying to understand what is happening, or why or just who this is living among them. No. They ask Jesus a theoretical question about how Levirate Law would work upon resurrection. Since they don't believe in resurrection, this is not something they think is a possibility. This is obviously not a real concern for them. Levirate law was designed to provide a stable family situation when a man died without a son, his widow would be wed to the next oldest brother who would then be responsible for her care. The first son from that union would inherit the first husband's property. The Sadducees have created an elaborate scenario where one woman has married seven brothers in succession and no child is born to any of the unions. Their question after describing this sequence of events is: "In the resurrection whose wife will she be?" Jesus' response gives them an answer which they did not perceive as a possibility. Jesus tells them: "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage." That's the state that they know and covers the events they propose. But he continues, "Those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage. Indeed, they cannot die anymore because they are like the angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection." And this is the point which Jesus is making by using Torah teachings about Moses. When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush God identifies God's self saying I am the LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. These are present tense claims: God is the God of the living, not of the dead for to God all who are the children of God are alive. Verse 38: Now he is God not of the dead but of the living. The Sadducees question is irrelevant. It doesn't matter whose wife that woman is or was for we all belong to the Risen Christ. That is the truth, whether we live or die in this life, once Jesus is raised from the dead, we are the LORD's. That should be the reality that rules our actions, guides our thoughts and shapes our lifestyles in all circumstances. Sometimes when we come to Jesus with our questions we resemble the Sadducees. We ask questions of Jesus that aren't genuine. And we don't really want to hear the answer. We come to him already certain of the answer. What we want is confirmation of our beliefs or evidence to convict those with whom we disagree. Karl Barth, a well known 20th century theologian once said, "The Bible gives to every person and to every era answers to their questions as they deserve. We shall always find in it as much as we seek and no more." We are not told the Sadducees reaction to Jesus' statement that Yahweh is the God of the living. It certainly was not an answer they desired to hear. The scribes who were still there listening, who must have had Pharisaic leanings because they approved of this response: verse 39: "Teacher, you have spoken well." The result we are given in verse 40 is they no longer dared to ask him another question. This tells us something not only about the Sadducees but also about ourselves. Those who have come to Jesus with these questions do not find satisfying answers. Jesus gives them what they deserve. But Jesus always has time for questions that are real, that are sincere. Because these questions deep in our hearts are what lead us to be in relationship with him. Jesus' answers to those who question him insincerely usually end up with those who bring the question being shown in an unfavorable light in Scripture. Yet Jesus always has time for those who are truly seeking. He responds to questions like "Can you heal my child?"; "I have lost my

way, can you bring me back?"; "I have a demon which torments me, and I can find no rest, can you help me?" or "No one will come near me because they say I am unclean. Do you love someone like me?" When people ask these questions of Jesus, he responds not with words but with the gift of himself: he touches, he encounters, he relates, he invites people to journey with him on the Way. Jesus is present with us, so we may bring to him our deepest questions. Our deepest questions will not have simple answers, but they are doors through which we may walk to meet Jesus who tells us "I am the Way." When we do this, it is possible with him and through him to live our way into real answers. The Sadducees and the others in these passages cannot ask these types of questions because they think they already have the answers. Real questions are doorways into journeys where we often find the answers of this world are not really answers at all. Jesus invites us to think of a new world—a world of God's kingdom—a world where our old rules which create barriers and hatred out of fear do not apply. The steps we take on this journey are where we can find glimpses of God's kingdom, even here. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.