

That Game of “If this...then what?”

Have you ever noticed our love for the word “if”? I mean, it seems that we dearly love to set up things as ...conditions...situations...all of which begin with that little two letter word...“if”. The range of places this word appears seems almost endless. And its use seems to begin very early in life. I can remember a very young version of myself using it upon several occasions...saying something like this to my mother: if I do this, then can I do so and so? And I distinctly remember both Tony and Heather being very good at that same game of proposing something to me: knowing about something that I wanted them to do and using that as a bargaining chip beginning like this: “if I do this, then can I?” as they negotiated for something that they wanted to have or to do. Something for which they were not sure they would be getting approval. That little two letter word is actually a very powerful and amazing one, a tool we use. It can be used as in the examples with which I have begun, where it is an example of a negotiating tool. It can also be used as a tool in another sense...the tool of opening possibilities. A tool used to open the mind to explore possibilities that can solve problems. In many ways, it forms the basis for work done in most fields of science...an observation is made about a situation...an existing a problem and the conditions surrounding it...and then a question is asked...What if you alter this or that condition around the situation, then what happens? In the text we have skipped over the remainder of Chapter 19 after Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus which describes Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, his final destination. The entry into Jerusalem and those first actions by Jesus described by Luke that concluded chapter 19 were very dramatic including the driving out of the money changers from the Temple courtyards. After these things, Jesus spends his days openly teaching in those same courtyards. As he does so, Luke informs us that “the chief priest, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him, but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard.” This popularity of Jesus, this holding of the people’s attention so intently is what the Greek literally describes as that they were hanging on to his words. This was perceived by the religious leaders in the Temple as a threat to their authority; to the status quo which they had established with the occupying Roman government; thus their desire to eliminate a threat. As Jesus is there teaching to the crowd, these leaders are among those listening to what he is saying. The first verses of chapter 20 concern questions which they ask Jesus seeking evidence. The first question this group of Temple religious leaders asks Jesus is: “Tell us, by what authority are you doing these things? Who is it who gave you this authority?” Now, as a question from the crowd listening to Jesus and seeking to learn from him, that might be a good question. However, that question coming from someone seeking to entrap Jesus; that doesn’t seem like a sincere question, so Jesus answers the question with a question about the authority for the baptism done by John. Those asking Jesus the question about authority sensed the trap he had set for them. Since they feared choosing either answer, answered that they did not know the source of John’s baptism. Jesus then said to them: “Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things.” Not that he couldn’t tell them, but that he wouldn’t since they would make a choice. Jesus then illustrates that he is aware of their motive by telling them a parable about the wicked tenants who plot and kill the heir to the vineyard. Next this group tries another approach. They sent some spies into the crowd—a type of covert operation so to speak as they were seeking grounds for action against him. These spies, speaking with

admiration, sought to find grounds to bring charges against Jesus, charges of promoting rebellion. The challenge this group brings has to do with the payment of taxes to the Roman government, which they phrase this way: "Teacher, we know that you are right in what you say and teach, and you show deference to no one, but teach the way of God in accordance with truth. Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" Jesus' response was to ask them to show him a denarius, the coin of the realm—a Roman coin—and to tell him whose image was there—the response was the emperor's. Thus, Jesus said, they should give to the emperor the things that were the emperor's and to God those things that belong to God. Their trap had not worked, and so another group was silenced. At this point in the text we come to the passage which formed our reading this morning, the questioning of Jesus by a third group identified as Sadducees. The Sadducees are frequently grouped together in the gospel narratives, but although both groups were religious leaders in the time of Jesus they held some different understandings about what scriptures taught. One of the most fundamental differences was their total disbelief in resurrection, but something that they had in common with the Pharisees and the Hebrew tradition is a fondness for debate. So they come up with this question for Jesus which to them presents the preposterous nature of the notion of resurrection of which Jesus has spoken. The situation they present seems totally odd in many aspects to us that men would debate the ownership of a woman in the afterlife—the question finally asked "whose wife will the woman be?" seems absurd. Yet under the law established in the Torah—the securing of the name of the oldest brother—his inheritance was firmly established. If the eldest son, did die childless, under the Law of Moses, the next brother would take his wife as their child would bear the name of the eldest brother, and so on, until an heir was born for the eldest son. In this "if" possibility the Sadducees have created, all seven brothers die childless and then finally the woman also dies and no child has been born. To the Sadducees, the possibility of a life after death would mean an eternal mess, a social confusion of subjugation and subservience which in mortal life are sorted out according to an established precedence. To them, if she had born a son, she would have belonged to the father of the son. Since she was barren in life, she had no worth and would have no place in an eternal life. The Sadducees think they have proposed a theoretical question, but Jesus gives them an answer based in reality. "Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage." In other word, marriage is a relationship of this world. Jesus continues: "but 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 angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection." In other word, in that age, in the time when God's reign is fully present, the things which govern this life will no longer matter. In other words, the sorting we do, the way we determine the worth of each other will be based on how God views us—as children belonging, claimed and loved—not as we have viewed each other. The Sadducees were not interested in the fate of the individual brothers because in their minds they had worth—but to them the woman only could have had value "if" she had borne one of them a son—so to them in an eternity where there was resurrection—the question "Whose wife will be woman be?" posed a question which could not be answered. To Jesus, it was the question which was wrong. To Jesus, all who are worthy, and Jesus' definition of worthy as shown by those with whom he sat at Table was vastly different from that of the religious leaders—would be present in the kingdom to come as they all children of God are

children of the resurrection. Jesus then gave these Sadducees, these men trained in the Torah, a lesson from their own texts: "And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." This again ended their questioning. However, within this text there are two "if" questions for us. "If" we accept Jesus' statement about the resurrected life, how does it then affect the life we live today? Does it remove some of the determinations we make about who is worthy and who is not worthy? Should it? "If" we trust that God is the God of the living, then can we more faithfully live according to the teachings of our Lord with less fear? Some thoughts about the possibilities of the power that little two letter word "if" can have. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.