

The Resurrection Life: To See as God Sees

The Reverend Debbie Cook, Grace Church

Pentecost 24, Proper 27, Year C, RCL

November 11, 2007

An 85-year-old couple, married for 60 years, tragically died in a car accident. They had been in good health, mainly due to the wife's interest in health food and exercise.

When they arrived at the Pearly Gates, St. Peter took them immediately to a mansion with a huge kitchen, master bed and bath suite and a Jacuzzi. As they oohed and aahed the old man asked how much this mansion would cost. St. Peter said, "It's free. This is heaven."

Next they went out to the back of their mansion and saw a lavish private golf course which was all theirs. The old man asked, "How much are the green fees?" St. Peter said, "It's free. This is heaven."

Next they went to the clubhouse to see a bountiful buffet filled with steaks, chops, and many of the foods which they have not eaten for years. The old man asked, "How much is it to eat here?" St. Peter said, "It's free. This is heaven."

The old man then asked where all the low-fat, low-cholesterol food was. St. Peter said, "You can eat what ever you want, whenever you want, and you won't get sick or gain weight." The old man looked at this wife, and said, "You and your bran muffins...I could have been here ten years ago."

We all have our own version of what heaven would be like. Some may visualize the clouds and angel wings, and others may think of family reunions, or endless leisure time. I had a godmother who had a shirt that said 'if there's no bingo in heaven, I'm not going.' Well, she has since died...so that means only one of two things: there is bingo in heaven...or she's not there. I'd like to think it's the former. I even had long discussions with pet-loving friends if their dogs would be in heaven. (I'd like to think so). The point is—everyone has their own take on this;

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and in all honesty—none of us really know the answer to what heaven and/or resurrection life is like.

The Sadducees of today's gospel story are not so much interested in the resurrection life as they are in ensnaring Jesus. You see, as it states, they did not believe in the resurrection, for it is not mentioned in the Torah, what we would call the first five books of the Bible. For them, that is all there is. And they framed their question carefully, looking for a no-win situation: a woman married seven times to seven different brothers would certainly be in a pickle in a resurrection life—so therefore, to the Sadducees, the two situations were totally incompatible. And surely God in God's wisdom would not allow such an incompatible thing to happen. The multiple family marriages were necessary to provide heirs to carry on the family name (and live on through your heirs)—so why would God command such a thing if there is a resurrection life?

Jesus was not daunted by their Catch-22 situation; he met it head-on. He did not disavow the Torah Law—but he clearly stated that it is not all that there is. There is a resurrection life—but it is not like this one. Applying the same structures, the same mindset, the same limitations will not work then. All our efforts to put our familiar structures onto this new existence are in vain. It is beyond our knowing, beyond our understanding. Sure, we can dream and speculate, using our own limited images of a 'heavenly' life. But in the end, we cannot really know. All we can do is trust God's promises—that we who belong to God will never be lost to God, for that no matter where we go, God is there.

The fact that God is wherever we land that is the most important fact about resurrection life. It is there that our relationship with God will be primary, first and foremost. It is there that we will know God even as we are known, that we will see God face to face. Every need and

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desire that we strive for in our relationships—love, security, acceptance, purpose—will be fulfilled within that intimate relationship with our Lord. It is a relationship without baggage, without fear, without barriers. It is a relationship based in authentic freedom, one free of other's expectations.

Like all of you, I have served—and continue to serve—in many roles in my life: daughter, sister, student, friend, spouse, parent, employee, supervisor, teacher, pastor—you get it, the list is long. All of us have long lists of the roles we play in this life. These roles are the result of person-to-person relationships; all come with constantly evolving expectations of who brings what to the relationship. This is normal, natural, part of our human make-up. We even attempt to define the expectations of certain roles through the use of employee contracts, student behavior guidelines, and in a way, in our marriage vows (promising to love, comfort, honor). We like to know what to expect from one another, where we stand. Conflict usually erupts when the expectations change on one side, and not on the other; and so there is a re-negotiation of sorts to work things out. Life is filled with the constant dance of evolving relationships.

One of the important things to remember, I think, is that none of these roles, these relationships, define the whole of who we are. All of these roles are indeed a part of us, and have shaped us, and continue to shape us. And that is a good thing, for God works through others in order to reach us at times. But who we are is bigger than the sum of our human-to-human relationships. Who we are, are children of God—and that is to be our primary relationship.

When we focus on our primary relationship as children of God, children of the resurrection, we see and relate to others through that relationship. We begin to see others with

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eyes and heart of God, recognizing that our common ground is God—and not in our carefully negotiated relationships with each other. In our resurrection life, no longer will I measure my relationship with another based on my needs or desires or how that relationship impacts my own self. Instead, I will be able to see and love others freely, as God does.

The Sadducees problem was that they were locked into this world's roles, this world's way of relationships. They saw this woman only a wife—and not as the whole of who she is. They failed to see that in a resurrection life she would be much more—that we will all be much more. With death vanquished, there is no need of procreation to carry on a family name; there is no need to have sociological/traditional family structures. The human limitations that we live with—our finitude, our fears and fragility, the limitations of time and space—will matter no more. Each of us will then be seen and loved as individuals by not only God, but also by one another; living as we are called to live, as one family, God's family.

In this life, too, we are called to live as members of one family. We often fall far short, but we get up and continue to try for the sake of the One who did not give up on us. It is hard, this striving; but we can do no less. Our baptismal covenant—another one of those expectation setting, relationship defining things in our lives—urges us on, reminding us that what we see and experience in this life is not all that there is.

So, whether your view of the next life includes mansions and golf courses, or angels and harps and clouds—or even a never-ending bingo game—enjoy it. Dream on about what the resurrection life will be like, and dream big. Just know that our God is one of surprises—surprising blessings, and surprising love, and surprising life. And know as Job did, that our Redeemer lives—and so will we.

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Amen.