



Pentecost 22 – Proper 27
Year C

Children of the God of the Living

[RCL]: Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Psalm 145:1-5, 18-22 or Psalm 98; 2 Thessalonians 2:1-5, 13-17; Luke 20:27-38

People chase immortality in many ways. Some spend billions on research in search of the technology or genetics or pharmaceuticals or a whole host of things they hope will allow humans, someday, to defy death or radically extend our span of life. Others spend vast amounts to leave a legacy by putting their names on buildings or allowing others to do so to honor them for some contribution they've made. They endow charities and educational institutions and start foundations to make an impact, support something they care about, leave something behind that will outlive them.

Of course, it's not just those with money who want not to be forgotten, and it isn't new.

The author of Ecclesiasticus (also known as Sirach, in the Apocrypha section of some Bibles), writing more than two thousand years ago, makes a distinction between those with fame and those without, those we remember and those we don't:

*Let us now sing the praises of famous [people]
our ancestors in their generations...
Some of them have left behind a name,
so that others declare their praise.
But of others there is no memory;
they have perished as though they had never existed. (Ecclesiasticus 44:1, 8-9a)*

Here's reality: some people we remember; others we forget.

Not so fast, says the author of the Wisdom of Solomon (also in the Apocrypha), who states in poetic but blunt terms that, famous or not:

*Our name will be forgotten in time,
and no one will remember our works;
our life will pass away like the traces of a cloud,
and be scattered like mist*

*that is chased by the rays of the sun
and overcome by its heat. (Wisdom of Solomon 2:4)*

Give it enough time, and we will all be forgotten.

But, back to Ecclesiasticus for a moment. The author says there is a way to escape being utterly wiped away: have children, someone to leave your worldly goods to, someone to continue your traditions and values. The author writes that the wealth of those who die, even those we don't remember,

*will remain with their descendants
and their inheritance with their children's children.
Their descendants stand by the covenants;
their children also, for their sake.
Their offspring will continue for ever,
and their glory will never be blotted out. (Ecclesiasticus 44:11-13)*

Children, especially those who stand by their parents' commitments, are a way that names and family identity can continue in this world, even for the never-famous.

Problem solved.

Although truth be told, even the Bible is full of stories of families in conflict and disputed inheritances and children who cause their parents grief in their old age, so we know children are no guarantee of life on our terms living on past our deaths.

And what about those without children?

This is the problem in the midst of the Sadducees' riddle told to Jesus to ridicule the resurrection. The custom they describe, still practiced in some parts of the world, is a way to try to ensure that a child is produced if a man has died and leaves a childless widow behind. The dead man's brother fathers, or tries to, a child with the widow so that the deceased man will have an heir and his widow will have a child. She will not be alone. His name will be remembered. The life of the father will continue through the child.

But there is nothing but death in the Sadducees' riddle. Brother after brother dies without producing an heir. Time and time again, the widow does not bear a child. Finally, she too dies. Who will remember her? Who will carry on the name and traditions of the family?

"Ah," say the Sadducees, "all is not lost, we suppose, if you believe in the resurrection, which we do not. If there is a resurrection, perhaps she will not be alone after all. She has been the wife of seven men. Which will be her husband in the resurrection? To whom will she belong?"

Jesus gives a startling answer. Not only does Jesus promise there is a resurrection, but he changes all the terms in the Sadducees' riddle. Not only is life in that age, the resurrection, not just some everlasting version of life in this age, but if this woman is getting into heaven, it's because she is a child of God, not because she's a wife, or a widow, or a mother. It won't be because she was barren or fertile or married or widowed or forgotten or remembered on earth. It's because she is, as Jesus says, "considered worthy of a place in that age," and, like everyone else who enters the resurrection, "cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection."

Jesus says that in the resurrection, life will be different. There are things like marriage and customs around marriage and family life that are for *this* age. In *that* age, in the resurrection, your concerns about things like living on through others, like leaving behind someone to remember you, like dealing with the hardships of wanting something really badly or being told you should have something you can't, won't be important. What will matter is being children of God.

Jesus wasn't against marriage or children. Remember how tough he is on divorce. Remember how he welcomed children and blessed them. Remember how angry he got at the Pharisees for not taking care of their parents (Matthew 15:3-9). Instead, Jesus teaches that in the resurrection, making sure there are children to pass along the family story, the family name, even to make sure the community continues, won't be necessary. Marriage is for this age. It can be life-giving in this age. It can be holy for this age. But it can't get you into heaven, and neither can having children or not having them, being remembered by name or not. And maybe that means that Christians are to think seriously about what marriage is for, and how and why and whether we parent children, whether we try to live through them, or raise them to know their first and most important identity is as children of God; whether we regard them as the future, or see them as the present, because here they are, gifts and children of God – right now.

Christians certainly did start to practice a new way of doing family by following Jesus, who did not marry, who did not father biological children, who formed a new family of those who do the will of God. "My mother and my brothers," says Jesus, "are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Luke 8:21; in Matthew's telling, Jesus includes sisters too; Matthew 12:50). Jesus was all for family and created a family large enough to include blood relatives and those related only by being children of God.

And Jesus' family, the church, would grow, not based on how many children people gave birth to, but through the sharing of the good news of God's love for all people in Jesus Christ and through the baptism that good news inspired people to undergo in order to join the family. So the family of Jesus would grow through people as varied as the Ethiopian Eunuch who couldn't possibly have fathered biological children but heard the gospel proclaimed by the apostle Philip and was baptized by him and takes the gospel back to Ethiopia (Acts 8); and Lydia, a merchant, who is baptized along with her whole household (Acts 16); and the jailer of Paul and Silas who is baptized along with his whole family (also Acts 16). It would grow because people like the unmarried apostle Paul, the married apostle Peter, and the Samaritan women who had been married five times and was living with someone not her husband all had encounters with the living Christ and had to share the experience with others.

Being family with Jesus wouldn't be easy, and all the children don't always get along. They often squander their inheritance. They don't always pass along the important traditions as they should. They sometimes ignore or don't live up to the family resemblance. They need all the help of the good relationships of this age they can make and that can be nurtured by the church because this age is hard.

And yes, Sadducees ancient and new, there is a resurrection. And those who will live in that age will be there whether their names were remembered in this age or not – because they are remembered by God, the God of the living and not the God of the dead, the God who *is* the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, *is*, not *was*, because even these ancient and flawed patriarchs are very much alive in God, our God, the constant—thanks be to God—between this age and the age to come.

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