

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

Luke 20:27-38

Job 19:23-27a

Psalm 17:1-9

2 Thes. 2:1-5,13-17

November 10, 2019

The Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

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My mother grew up in Winston-Salem and attended the Moravian Church. For those of you who don't know much about the Moravians, they are said to be one of the oldest, if not the oldest Protestant denomination. They actually rebelled against the church in Rome almost 50 years before Martin Luther's reformation. They came to the United States in the early 1700's from Germany and settled mainly in Pennsylvania and North Carolina.

As little girl, the Moravian church brought along all kinds of fun traditions. We hung a Moravian star on our front porch every Christmas. My grandmother would send us Moravian cookies that she made herself every year. (And if you have ever eaten one of these paper thin ginger cookies you know how impressive homemade Moravian cookies can be). And then, of course, there was the Lovefeast. Each year at Christmas it was the anticipated event of the season ...where they sang Christmas carols and passed out these delicious sweet rolls and coffee (with lots of cream and sugar).

But as a young girl, I didn't understand anything about the purpose of it all. It was just a fun new way to go to church.

In fact, it wasn't until my great-grandmother, Lessie Myers, died that I started to see something beyond the cookies and sweet rolls. My great grandmother had been a life-long Moravian and when she died, of course, she had a traditional Moravian funeral. The funeral itself seemed fairly standard but when we left the church it became something much more beautiful and deeply moving.

In the Moravian church, after the funeral, everyone processes out of the church and into what they call God's Acre. As you enter, you notice a few things. There is a center path and on either side of the path are simple, flat white marble markers measuring roughly 20 x 24 inches. The stones are carved with just a name, birth and death date and maybe a short scripture. Women are buried on one side of the path and men on the other.

As you look closer you will notice that the dates on the stones are in sequence by the date of death. You aren't buried with your family in God's Acre. Instead, you are buried in the spot next in line. As you arrive at the burial site, a brass band plays welcoming everyone to a somber yet joyful celebration of life and of the afterlife.

The message is this...we aren't separate, insular family units. We aren't divided people. Instead, we are all part of one family...God's family. And in death, whatever divisions may have defined us, we are brought back together in equality. Moravians often refer to it as the democracy of death.

But it isn't just in death that they emphasize this important lesson. They have built a teaching around the importance of respect and humility, a loving way to approach not just death, but life with one another. All are equal. All deserve compassion and care. You might say that how we live in the afterlife helps to inform how we are to live today. We look toward the resurrection to teach us what it truly means to love.

I found this to be an important lesson as we approach our Gospel this morning. In our text from Luke, the Sadducees are quizzing Jesus trying to upend his teachings and back him into a corner of theological interpretation. They go through a hypothetical situation, quoting from Deuteronomy 25 which states,

*"When brothers reside together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the deceased shall not be married outside the family to a stranger. Her husband's brother shall go in to her, taking her in marriage, and performing the duty of a husband's brother to her, and the firstborn whom she bears shall succeed to the name of the deceased brother, so that his name may not be blotted out of Israel."*

In Luke, the Sadducees go back to these rules and regulations and complicate it by providing a scenario where the woman keeps getting passed down through a series of brothers as each one eventually passes away. The Sadducees final question is this...in the resurrection, whose wife will she be?" In other words...how will our earthly life inform our afterlife?

Jesus, as he is known to do, turns the argument around. He says simply that the resurrection isn't about earthly marriage at all. It's about the one community, the one family of humanity, because we are all children of God. And besides that, Jesus goes on, you've got it all wrong. You are focused on death, God is focused on life.

It's a little tricky to grasp. Think of it like this...Jesus was trying to point out that the Sadducees were so worried about rules and what would happen when we died that they had forgotten the importance of taking care of one another in the present. Instead of taking God's example of one, united family, they wanted to figure out how the divisions not only defined them in the present but in death as well.

In contrast, Jesus is saying, look at how the resurrection looks. We are all one family. Now, take that lesson to the living. How can we be united in love and trust and compassion? How can we live with humility and kindness? What would that look like today?

The Moravians have a central motto: *"In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, love"*

Unity in what we need, liberty in what we choose, and love to bind us together.

At the heart of our Gospel text is a group of people wrestling with change. They are nervous of change and protective of what they know. It points to a common struggle we are all familiar

with...when we want things to fit into a comfortable box so that we can understand and protect our way of life. We struggle with being unified when we don't agree or when we feel threatened. We struggle when people make choices we don't understand. We find it hard to love when we are afraid.

Jesus isn't saying it's easy. But he is saying that it is essential to take the message of the resurrection, the message of a full unity as God's family into our daily life, into the present. Because God is a God of the living. Our job is to not let theology or our desire to be "right" get in the way of Jesus.

I think Jesus would like the Moravian motto because it gets to the heart of this lesson.

Making sure everyone has the essentials so that no one is in need, so that no one suffers, so that no one goes hungry or homeless, so that everyone may live in wholeness and health. In essentials, unity.

Making sure that we may live as we choose, to be who we are, to believe what we believe, to act on our convictions without fear of retribution. In nonessentials, liberty.

Making sure that we live out the resurrection today, one family, one community, one world in a spirit of equality, compassion, and respect. And in all things, love. Amen.