

**32<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time/November 10, 2013**

**Haggai 1:15b-2:9; Luke 20:27-38;**

**Rev. Joel M. Krueger**

***"Questioning Jesus"***

*(Sing "I Just Wanna Be a Sheep")*

*I just wanna be a sheep, bah, bah, bah, bah.*

*I just wanna be a sheep, bah, bah, bah, bah.*

*I pray the Lord my soul to keep,*

*I just wanna be a sheep, bah, bah, bah bah.*

*I don't wanna be a Pharisee,*

*I don't wanna be a Pharisee,*

*Cause they're not fair you see,*

*I don't wanna be a Pharisee.*

*I don't wanna be a Sadducee,*

*I don't wanna be a Sadducee,*

*Cause they're too sad you see,*

*I don't wanna be a Sadducee.*

*I just wanna be a sheep, bah, bah, bah, bah.*

*I just wanna be a sheep, bah, bah, bah, bah.*

*I pray the Lord my soul to keep,*

*I just wanna be a sheep, bah, bah, bah bah.*

Pharisees and Sadducees get a pretty bum rap in most of the New Testament or Christian writings. In Luke, they are seen, along with the Pharisees, the scribes, the chief priests and the elders, basically the whole Jewish religious authority, as being up against Jesus and his followers.

You see, the Pharisees and Sadducees, along with a few other groups like the Essenes and the Zealots, were in many respects, much like our political parties. And by the time the gospel of Luke was written, probably between 80-90 CE, the developing Christian Church was becoming another major player in the political/religious mix.

And so, if you can imagine in our own time, how a newspaper article written by a Democratic leaning reporter might portray the Republicans as elitist and unconnected with the common person, or how a Republican talk-show host might deride the Democrats for being the bad guys, for always trying to fix problems with "tax and spend" policies that simply make the problems worse, or of any political or religious group that seeks to place the blame for things on another, competing group, then you have an idea of what is at least partly going on here.

By the time Luke and the other gospels were being written, the fledgling little Jewish sect begun by Jesus and his followers, had gained prominence as a major competitor for the hearts and

minds of the Jewish people. And it was also gaining ground with Gentiles, Greeks and Romans and others across the empire.

As Jesus came to Jerusalem, he obviously would be bumping up against some of these groups more than he had during his Galilean ministry, because they were very involved with the religious leadership at the Temple. Leadership and practices that he took issue with on a number of accounts. And the gospels portray some of this friction between these groups as tensions continued to evolve and get worse during that first century after Jesus' death as the church developed and grew stronger.

Pharisees and Sadducees had a shared history. The Jewish historian Josephus lists the two of them with the Essenes as the oldest of Jewish philosophies. But sometime during the second century BCE, a disagreement over the concept of resurrection emerged between these two groups. For the Sadducees, whose scriptural authority lay only in the Pentateuch, the five books of Torah, or Law of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy), there was no scriptural basis for a belief in the immortality of the soul or of resurrection.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, believed that Torah, the Law, was not stagnant but based on ongoing revelation. Commentator Vernon K. Robbins states, *"Pharisees, emphasizing that written Torah must be kept up to date with oral Torah, namely, ongoing streams of interpretation handed down by word of mouth, coordinated with written Torah new beliefs that emerged in prophetic literature and the Psalms. Of special importance was acceptance by Pharisees of the book of Daniel, which blended traditions of wisdom and prophecy with the new traditions of apocalyptic belief that emerged around 200 BCE. Daniel not only features the angels Gabriel and Michael but also presents the earliest clear biblical reference to resurrection of the dead in the context of a final judgment to everlasting life or everlasting contempt."* Robbins continues, *"Jesus adopted updated apocalyptic beliefs characteristic of Pharisees and participated in their debates about oral interpretation of written Torah."* (*Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4, p. 285*).

So, of the two groups, Sadducees and Pharisees, Christians were more like the Pharisees, as they both believed in the resurrection among other things. And therefore, they would become more competitive with each other as they vied for many of the same people. We know that Paul, the early church apostle to the Gentiles, was himself a Pharisee. And it is likely that many who were trained and educated as Pharisees engaged in this new emerging movement which became the church.

So, what about this question the Sadducees ask Jesus? Why would they ask a question about this poor widow and the 7 brothers she had married and their relationship in the resurrection, when they didn't even believe in the resurrection to begin with? Was it merely a test, a ploy to trip him up and make him look bad in the eyes of the public or divide the crowd? Was it something akin to an old joke, meant to show how ridiculous and illogical this Pharisaic concept of resurrection was? We can't know for sure.

What we do know is how Jesus responds. First, he accepts their question and responds to it seriously and sincerely, even though he is aware that they put it before him out of malice. Secondly, he answers them by quoting their own scripture, the Torah, where God speaks to Moses out of the burning bush saying, *"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the*

*God of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6)*, declaring that God is not a God of the dead but of the living. But lastly, though it is not included in our lectionary passage, Jesus turns and then asks of them his own question.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus dealt with and even encouraged questions. His response was seldom to simply give an answer and be done with it. No, Jesus, like any good teacher, knew the importance of questions and used them to engage his listeners, to bond with them, and in the process forge relationships between people as they explored and pursued the answers together.

Do we encourage questions here at First Church? For some people, questions can be scary. They might shake our faith, rattle our certainty about what we think we know. Maybe it is better to just keep quiet and not raise the questions. Everything can just stay like it is.

But that is not what the church should be about. We need to raise the questions that come to us, and not be afraid of them. But we need to do that as Jesus did, with respect and seriousness, with love and compassion for the questioner and the listener. Questions can be unsettling, yes, but they can also be exciting, for they lead us to new places, new ideas, to answer problems and dilemmas that restrict us. Most importantly, they engage us one with another. Questions cause us to think, to use our God-given brains in ways that can stretch and grow our ever-expanding hearts.

Questions are good! A healthy intellectual and spiritual development requires questions. Last week, in Kate's sermon, she mentioned young Maddy and some of her questions she is raising. In our youth ENCOUNTERS program, our young people are asking a lot of questions and I just learned yesterday that one of them wants to be baptized. At our Wednesday evening House Church we are learning and growing together through the questions we ask, as is true in our Sunday School classes with the children as well as the Bible Study that we have for our elders at Harbor Hill.

Do you have questions? Questions about faith, questions about scripture, about the reality or character of God? Have you been hesitant to allow yourself to bring these questions forward? Don't. Don't let the questions frighten you. Don't allow the uncertainties that you feel isolate you.

I started this sermon with a song that spoke about wanting to be a sheep. Sheep are often thought of as mindless, unthinking, unquestioning, followers of the crowd. I don't want us to be that kind of sheep. Our shepherd demands more of us than that.

Jesus calls us to ask the questions. To gather together to engage and explore and answer the questions that may lead to more questions, and more answers and a deeper sense of who we are and where we are going, together, as brothers and sisters in faith. One family. My hope, my goal is for us to become a place where we offer as many opportunities for learning and growth as we can, to become a center for religious education and experience making the gospel relevant for our place and time, becoming a place where questions are encouraged.

So, in closing, I have to ask you, I have to put a question out there. What is your deep abiding question? And how will you engage with others here as you pursue its answers? Amen.