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### **Conversations Worth Having**

Some conversations are worth having. And some conversations can just take us down one rabbit hole after another.

You may be familiar with the question: "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" It is said to date back to the Middle Ages when scholars debated such things. Today the expression is used as a metaphor for wasting time discussing things that have no real value or importance.

Timing of course matters. It's not always a good idea to bring up something important if we have one foot out the door on our way to work or right as we are dropping our loved one at the airport to catch a flight. Conversations that matter take time to unfold.

What are conversations that bring people closer and build and support community?

Family can be a good place to begin. Asking and talking about family cuts across class and culture. "How's your grandmother doing?" "What's the latest with your kids?" It is something I am reminded of when I travel overseas, in that, in some cultures one has to ask about family before even thinking of moving forward and asking about what you might really want to know or discuss. There is a pecking order and protocol to conversations that one dare not rush.

There is sports talk of course. I am channeling David Holroyd a bit here, since he is now mid-way through his rehab from his shoulder replacement surgery. He would remind us that sports can bring communities together and take us out of the routine repetition and conflicts of our lives. When our monthly men's group meets every third Saturday morning, we do put a box around on how much sport talk we allow ourselves before we move deeper into weightier subjects and prayer. 30 minutes in the kitchen is our limit.

Religion can be tricky. Each of us has a story and a past when it comes to the church and faith. How we were raised. Did we have a positive experience? Not always. Was it something our families even talked about?

It is not always easy to know when someone we meet is genuinely trying to witness and share what they know to be a positive part of their lives -- and when they are pushing a bit too much. We like our private space (and stone walls) in New England and we're not so used to people asking and talking about their faith in public. And at the same time, isn't God the ultimate reality and mystery? Stories of faith should be worthy of listening to and discussing.

And there are the angels on the head of pins-kinds of conversations. In the climate we live in today, political conversations can be less than satisfying. New Hampshire as we know is forever in the spotlight with so many presidential hopefuls coming our way.

My take is that many conversations today are contained within circles of people that already agree with what everyone is saying. They are often safe, predictable and in many ways not very satisfying. How do we know what are the conversations that are needed and worth having? Today's gospel may give us a good roadmap.

This morning's gospel reading leads with a question and follows with a conversation between Jesus and the Sadducees. It is literally a conversation about life and death. Let's put that in worth having column. What happens, some of the them asked, when we our life as we have known it comes to an end. Will our lives be the same or will they be different?

The belief in resurrection, that there is life beyond this world, was not universally believed in by all Jews at the time of Jesus. Testing and teasing Jesus then, the group who said there was no resurrection, the Sadducees, wondered how it would work out beyond if seven brothers had married the same woman in their lifetime -- as was the custom to care for widows. How would all that get sorted out?

One of the central questions that many religions grapple with is what lays beyond what we know -- what we can see and touch and feel. What, or who, is on the side of the life we know?

Isn't that what parents, sooner or later, have to map out with their children when someone dear to them dies? Pets are often the test cases. Many children's first experience with death can be that goldfish won at the fair, or that hamster that wasn't moving in his cage at the end of that long family vacation. I remember the shoe boxes that became little caskets and words of remembrance offered in the back yard before those little creatures were laid to rest. Which direction will parents take? Are they honest and/or do they hedge or delay? When grandma dies, that is a moment to talk about what it can mean to believe in Christian resurrection.

These are questions that beg for conversations and answers that are rooted in our deep and long faith tradition. They are conversations worth having because the more we can imagine what comes next, we might feel and act with less panic or fear and be freer to live into what comes now with a sense of joy and thankfulness.

I don't have studies or statistics to back me up, but my spiritual hunch is that children are more open to honest answers, or at least a thoughtful try to wrap their minds about something vast, than the adults in their lives may think. In Matthew's gospel, we read: The disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?"<sup>2</sup> He called a child, whom he put among them,<sup>3</sup> and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 18:1-3

The Sadducees were asking if the arrangements and ties that bind in this lifetime will carry over into the next. Jesus found a way to answer their question by not exactly answering their question directly. Jesus said to them, "Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; 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."

It was as if he was saying: your thinking is too small. Expand and deepen what you think and believe is possible with God.

What comes next will not look like what we have here. Let's wrap our minds and hearts around these implications. As one commentator has suggested: whatever will come, it will not be more of the same.

"Not more of the same" can be good news for those whose lives are marked by injustice, oppression, physical pain, poverty, tragedy, loneliness and hunger. There is release into the life of resurrection. We can imagine and hope: no more war, cruelty, racism, division. Jesus said in v. 36 Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. And, it can give pause and make the powerful, the well-fed, and the rich think again about how they are living and loving.

What conversations are worth having?

Conversations around race and racism continue to be a good place to start. Can racism be unlearned? It certainly does not fit within the dream of God set forth in the gospel.

How are we going to care more for creation? Young people around the world are leading the way. Walking out of class, moving into the streets, speaking at the United Nations, calling out to world leaders to do more to limit our carbon footprint before it is too late. They will live with the consequences of the decisions being made today more than the vast majority of those gathering here this morning.

Conversations worth having. Are our worldly affairs in order? Who will make medical decisions for us when we cannot. What will be the legacy we leave behind?

Whatever comes after the life and world we know is also beyond our knowing. Yet it is still a cosmic bet -- a holy hunch -- that resurrection is at the heart of God's plan. That the whole of who we are will be united with the God in whom we believe.

The teaching of the church is this: by his resurrection, Jesus overcame death and opened for us the way of eternal life" (BCP, p. 850). We are not reincarnated to return to this world for a do-over. You and I are not immortal.

All of this probably a lot to take in on one Sunday morning. And that's OK. I'll end with this: Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." Luke 20:38