

Why do we put off doing the things that we know will make our lives better, or the lives of others? I can understand the impulse to put off undesirable things, like forcing yourself to write a sermon when you don't have any ideas, only too well. But then there are life-giving things like spending time with family, reaching out to old friends, giving time and money to worthy causes, that we can always find some reason to put off.

I've heard all the excuses. We say, "I don't want to do it alone." One of my friends, with whom I reconnected after many years, just embarked on a solo trip to southeast Asia. Solo travel can be great, and has its advantages over traveling with others. And, I'm reliably informed, there are a lot of people in southeast Asia. We say, "I can't afford it." As Fran Lebowitz has pointed out when people say they can't afford to live in New York, "Nobody can afford to live in New York. And yet, eight million people do." We say, "It might not be safe," or, "I don't have time," which in a way are the same excuse. Another friend, with two adult children, just got her motorcycle license and is loving life on two wheels. Life isn't safe. None of us is guaranteed tomorrow. We don't know how much time we have. The only guarantee we have about this life is that it will end.

After we have been numbed and halted by excuses, or our perspective has been warped by the secular world, we need a reminder of what's most important, and Jesus gives us a dramatic reminder in today's gospel.

In today's gospel, Jesus is arguing, as he often does, but this time with the Sadducees. Quick refresher: the Sadducees were an ancient Jewish sect that only accepted the five books of Moses as their scripture and insisted on rigorous obedience to that text, which they read in a strictly literal way. They didn't believe in an afterlife because the five books of Moses don't say there is one. This put them in conflict with the Pharisees, who did believe in an afterlife, and, more importantly, with Jesus, who came to open the way to eternal life.

The Sadducees had the bright idea to ask Jesus a trick question. The set-up is based on a practice called levirate marriage, described in the book of Deuteronomy. Basically, if a married man died and his widow had no son, the dead man's brother was obligated to marry the widow. If they had a son, he would be given the dead man's name so that the dead man would, in a sense, live on. This was also a way of managing inheritance rights. Ironically, the Sadducees chose this piece of the law focused on death to challenge Jesus on the question of eternal life. Jesus, of course, knows a thing or two about that. Rather than answer the literal question, he answered the underlying one, the question the Sadducees couldn't bring themselves to ask: Is death really the end?

Today, we don't like to talk about death. Even when we do, we often talk about it as a neutral thing, or even something good. We think it's a mark of wisdom and maturity to "come to terms" with death. Death is something to accept as natural, ordinary, peaceful, we say, all part of God's orderly creation. Nonsense! Absolute nonsense! Our

God is God of life. Death is God's enemy and ours, too. An enemy to be despised, not accepted or, God help us, welcomed. Jesus wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus because he understood only too well the bottomless horror of death.

Jesus didn't just cry about death, he did something about it. He taught people in ways that made sense to them, even his enemies. Since the Sadducees only accepted the first five books of the Bible as authoritative, Jesus pointed out that the very words of God in the second book indicate that there must be life after death. In Exodus, at the burning bush, God could have told Moses that God was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But instead, God says, "I *am* the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." The very name of God can be translated *I am*, so indeed, God "*is* God not of the dead, but of the living." It's not that God prefers life; God's very nature is life.

Of course, Jesus did more than teach. He raised Lazarus and others back to life. And he didn't stop there. Jesus took on death personally, in the greatest undercover operation of all time. Death is a consequence of sin, so death could not claim a sinless man, so Jesus took all the sin of the world upon himself — the perfect cover. Jesus let death seem to win one last battle, over his own perfect life. Death appeared to win that Friday afternoon on Golgotha, but in fact was utterly defeated, overcome by invincible life from the inside out.

Jesus destroyed the power of death, turning a brick wall that everyone would eventually hit into a gate through which all of us could pass into God's eternal present. But his death was just the beginning of his victory. Only in the resurrection is Jesus's victory made real, full, and relevant. Without the resurrection, death still wins and there is no hope, all we are or do is in vain, and we might as well stay home on Sundays, especially when there's a football game on. Without the resurrection, it doesn't matter if we have companionship or money or time because nothing matters. Instead, Christians know that we and our choices matter immensely, and so we gather here, celebrating Christ's resurrection and our connection to it through baptism and the Eucharist. We know that these things keep us in relationship with God and with each other, and those relationships are what's most important. In these personal and sacramental relationships we find confidence and perfect freedom over death.

Even though we know that, sometimes it feels like this world has no end of trouble, no hope. Just look at the war in Ukraine, or the pandemic, or any other catastrophe. The news is full of them, if you can even bear to watch. For a defeated enemy, death appears to be doing awfully well. How can we reconcile our theology with our experience?

The trick is to remember who is really in charge, whose point of view is unclouded by the limitations of this world. God is in charge, God has spoken, and God has acted. We do still have to taste death before we can enjoy the eternal life God offers us, as our present life is marred by sin. But if we really believe in this "children of

the resurrection” business, we have nothing to fear. God has blessed us abundantly in this life and given each of us a one-way ticket to heaven. Death is only around to punch the ticket as we go on our way. A menial job if ever there was one.

Now that God has conquered sin and death, what is left for us to fear? We are free to follow Christ’s great commission, to proclaim in word and deed his gift of life to the world, and live in joy, thankfulness, and anticipation. In God’s design, we have the best of both worlds: the urgency of limited life, and the reassurance of life everlasting. The choices we make in this life do matter in eternity, for they shape and color our immortal souls, but God’s grace is even more readily available to us in heaven, even in its outermost domain established for the most sinful, the most ill-prepared, the domain which we, like Jesus, call “paradise.” And God’s grace is even more transformational than any decision we make.

Let us not be deceived. The one who created the universe by speaking is still speaking. The day of the Lord has come, and will come, and is already here. God has taken his seat in his holy temple. And God is saying, all of us are alive.