



We are reminded today that our God is the God of the living because all of us are alive to God. Whether we are alive in the body we see today or whether we have died and left this physical body, we are alive to God. This is great news that we should celebrate this day and every day. As Paul reminds us, nothing can separate us from the love of God.

While it is true that we do not **really** know what life after death looks like, and sometimes that not knowing can be most frustrating, we can rest assured that we will be reunited with God and with our loved ones when our time comes to cross over from this life to the next.

The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection or in life after death. Their questions and examples were intended to trick Jesus into heresy and blasphemy. They wanted responses from Jesus that could then be used to bring Jesus before the authorities and to get him out of their hair. The Sadducees were the ones who studied the Torah diligently. They were the scholars who could answer your religious questions. Jesus was an irritant because he was someone who proposed different questions and different answers. Jesus expanded upon what was accepted as true. Jesus asked people to consider a new way of thinking about God. To think about God as active, living with us and involved with us in our daily life, and not as a God removed from us or as a God who was done revealing to humans who God is.

We humans tend to be concrete thinkers. It is hard for most of us to imagine what we have not seen or experienced. We tend to extrapolate from what we know. Truly original thoughts are not the forte of most of us. We do, if we are so inclined, draw from things we have read or heard, but truly original thoughts and concepts independent of what we have read and heard and independent of ideas from our conversations with others are simply not that frequent in our lives. So it is hard for us to really know what happens after our death. We simply don't know what heaven will be like because we don't have anyone who has experienced heaven to tell us about that experience.

The Sadducees questions then about whose wife the woman would be after marrying 7 brothers with no children from any of them reflects this inability to imagine what life after death will be. The Sadducees focus on a practice of levirate marriage. In the Jewish faith, generalizing here, it was extremely important to have children. If you did not believe in life after death, then what was important is that you lived on through your children. Your children carried on your name and their children carried on your name and so forth. This is one reason that parents usually named their children with a name from their family. That is a way of intentionally carrying on the memory of those who have died before you. It is one way of celebrating life after death.

We humans want continuity. We want what we have known to carry on. It's hard for us to let something die. Some people have an incredible resistance to change, let alone acknowledging and accepting that things have life cycles just as people do. We are dying from the moment of our birth. What matters then is what we do between that moment of our birth and the moment of our physical death. When it is time to give our eulogy, what will be said about you?

Institutions have life cycles, too. That includes churches. It includes St. John's although I feel certain that any rumors of our death have been greatly exaggerated, if we can paraphrase Mark Twain. Today is the day, though, when we gather in your pledges of support for the ministry of St. John's for 2017. Today is the day when you give your Nielsen rating on whether we are living into the mission entrusted to us from God. Have we met your expectations in 2016? I hope so even as I know that our mission to be a light to the world, to proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ, to care for the sick, the lonely, and the needy is a work in progress and we can do better.

One of the main issues for us as a parish- and not for us only, as this is an issue for all congregations and in all denominations- is our financial well-being. When we can clearly articulate our mission, money generally follows. The mission as created by the Vestry for St. John's is:

*"We are committed to God, to our church, and to each other as a family in Christ, providing and cherishing spiritual growth, and living our faith in the community at large."*

In your opinion, how have we done in 2016? Does your pledge reflect your agreement, your Nielsen rating if you will, of how we, as a community of believers in Jesus Christ, have done in fulfilling this mission? I can point to the many ways that I believe we have done a good job – we have run a good race- in fulfilling our mission this year. What ultimately matters though is not what I believe but what you believe. But what I believe and what I do may be helpful to you in determining what you believe and how you act on that belief. What I believe is that God, through

Scripture, has called upon me to tithe. To give back a minimum of 1/10<sup>th</sup> of my income, to continue the good work being done here at St. John's.

But I cannot keep the doors open alone. My pledge will not be sufficient to continue the ministry that has begun here. I give thanks to those of you who have already submitted your pledges. I give thanks to those of you who are submitting your pledge today.

Remember that you are St. John's. You are the ones that express your faith in every activity and interaction you have with those within these walls and with those outside these walls. Does your pledge reflect your belief about our mission and the work we have done and we are doing to live into that mission? I hope so. I pray so. My dream is that we continue to be financially self-sustaining so that we can continue to be disciples of a living God who wants the best for us. To be lovers of a God who is with us regardless of our circumstances. To be known throughout this community, our Diocese and even the world as ones who know that nothing can separate us from the love of God. To be known as persons who give of our financial resources acknowledging that all that we have and all that we are comes from God and what we return to God through our financial support of St. John's reflects a life being lived generously.

Amen.