

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost
November 6, 2016

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On the Sunday before Election Day many people are asking a question. “Where do we go from here?” But this question is used in a great variety of situations. Leaf-peepers in Vermont staring at their map when arriving at a fork in their back country road want to know which way to turn. The members of the board of directors in great multi-national corporations, when making decisions how to diversify product lines and increase market share, ask the same question. But I suspect “where do we go from here” originally meant “*what happens when we die?*”

Our experience of life is *earthly life*. We have the strongest tendency to think of the life hereafter in terms of the only life we know. The most common mistake in our efforts to know about life after death is to think eternal life means a continuation of living here. It is as if we have awakened after major surgery to a breakfast of tea and toast and the morning paper! Our only language and vocabulary is earth-bound. When the topic is eternal life, words must be stretched beyond capacity to carry the load. Msgr. Knox once likened this situation to playing a Wagner opera on a comb wrapped in tissue paper!

The Sadducees in the gospel incident had realized the difficulties in knowing anything about eternal life, and so they finally abandoned any belief in it at all. And that is what sets up the gospel incident you just heard proclaimed. These Sadducees tried to drive Our Lord Jesus into an untenable position. Fabricating one of those “either-or” dilemmas, (sort of like “when did you stop beating your wife?”) the Sadducees wanted Jesus either to deny eternal life or allow a woman in Heaven to be married to all seven of her deceased husbands. Waking up in Heaven to seven deceased husbands begs the question of whether we would want to survive death at all! It would be such a ludicrous situation if it were not so serious. The Sadducees thought they were stacking the deck against Jesus. In the Gospel we have the Word of the Lord on the matter.

In many places in the gospels (too numerous to mention in one sermon) the Lord Jesus gives us the assurance Almighty God does not desire that we live and die and be no more but that we live with Him forever. In today’s gospel, the answer to the Sadducees is that we cannot liken earthly relationships to Heavenly ones. They will

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of course remain *personal* relationships. But earthly relationships depend on chronological time and geographical place: a child to his parents, a husband to his wife, friends at age twenty, those same friends at age forty, and so on. Life must be very different when neither chronology nor geography is a factor. That is what Our Lord means by saying there is no marriage, and no death, in Heaven. There is no birth either, for that matter. And no sacraments. Sacraments are for now.

It is hard to understand Heaven. But what else is new? We are, after all, only *embryonic citizens* of Heaven, living as we do in matter and time. We cannot know our way around the heavenly realm, much less be in a position to make it what we want! It is *God's world, perfectly*, as earth is not, and only His will prevails there. Rather than project our life onto Heaven, it is far more profitable for us to ask if we will want to be there.

Those days come when we stand at the casket of a loved one looking down upon a stilled love unresponsive to our call and touch. Death can present such an impenetrable barrier to us. But death is no barrier for Almighty God. Because God is love, He will preserve all that is pure and lovely and true in human love. *He will do it in His Own Way*. He does it in the One Who declared "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life." Because in Heaven we will near God it follows we will be near those we love. Jesus assured us of this very thing and more when He told us "Now He is not the God of the dead, but of the living: *for all live unto Him.*"