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We Remember

Wall Street United Church

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Scripture - Luke 20:27-38 NIV

Some of the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Jesus with a question. "Teacher," they said, "Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died, leaving no children. Finally, the woman died too. Now then, at the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?"

Jesus replied, "The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in the age to come and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection. But in the account of the burning bush, even Moses showed that the dead rise, for he calls the Lord 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' He is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all are alive."

San Vito

On the eastern coast of Italy, about halfway up the Adriatic sea (which is part of the Mediterranean), lies a tiny and beautiful little village called San Vito di Chietino. San Vito — as it is called by the locals — is located on an escarpment, a flat-topped hill that rises sharply out of the sea before sloping away gently into the interior of the country.

Since it is located high above the Adriatic and the surrounding farmland, San Vito provides remarkable views to the south, east across the water, and north across the Moro river toward the larger town of Ortona. This meant that in late 1943 and early 44, during the Italian Campaign, San Vito became an ideal site for a radio and medical outpost for the Canadian troops stationed there. From here instructions

could be issued to soldiers, and to here the injured Canadians were brought, often to die.

Why the Troops were there

Canadian troops were sent to the area to drive German troops out of the area and push them further north. The Campaign is usually referred to as the Moro River Campaign or the Battle of Ortona. One part of the goal was to free the town of Ortona, population of about 10,000 at the time, which was then one of the few deepwater ports in the area. Another goal was also to keep the German troops occupied so they could not move to where the D-Day landing was already being planned for in Normandy, to give the allied troops a better chance of success.

The Canadian troops fought doggedly and tirelessly and ultimately triumphantly, pushing the Germans further north and freeing Ortona. There is now a beautiful little square in the middle of Ortona dedicated to thanking Canadian troops. And notice that they specifically acknowledge our often forgotten indigenous people who served in the Canadian army.



But that campaign ... Oh the cost in bloodshed, death, and broken hearts! Ortona was decimated and civilian losses were high. And over 2300 Canadian soldiers lost their lives during the campaign. They are buried at the Moro River Canadian War Cemetery.

Now the little town of San Vito also happens to be the ancient home of my Italian grandfather and his family, which they left in 1905, driven out by failed crops and resulting poverty. In 2015 I was lucky enough to visit it for the first time with my then 81 year-old mother. Neither of us had ever been there before. We took in the beauty of the hills and the coast, then headed to the cemetery. On a still day in late September we stood in front of rows and rows of white gravestones dedicated to our lost Canadian youth.



And I have to tell you — my soul was ripped by unexpected and overwhelming grief. They were so young! And they were so far from home. How much killing and dying did they witness and participate in before they too succumbed? Nobody should have to die this way. Nobody should have to live that way. I could not stop my tears as I wandered around that gravesite. But my grief was only a pale shadow of the grief their families and loved ones must have felt. Grief is an appropriate response to death.

Sadducees

This is why the Sadducees' question in today's reading is so strange and inappropriate. They ask a question about death, but they do not grieve. They ask a question about who "owns" who, without any regard for human dignity, or love.

Now before we go any further let me be clear — they're not really asking a question out of concern for this woman, or about marriage at all. The ancient practice of marrying a widow to one of her husband's brothers was quite common, and was meant to protect the woman and keep her in the family. *Women were given status in society only through their relationship to men, so a widow with no children would be facing abandonment.* That's why the bible often calls on people to "care for the widows and the orphans." Ensuring a woman was always married to someone in the family was actually an act of compassion.

Yet the Sadducees treat marriage as if it is a question of ownership. And fights over ownership of land, minerals, or God help us, people — have always led to war.

The Sadducees have an agenda. They are a group that does not believe in the resurrection. They are stuck over this, because they think that the resurrection would be to the imperfect world in which we live, a world with war and grief. So they are bringing a trick question to Jesus, devoid of any concern for the people involved.

Jesus' Response

Jesus answers, instead, with eternal love and belonging. Jesus tells them that beyond death is a life where thoughts of ownership and hate are shed. What awaits us is a life so abounding in love that there are not really words to describe it.

When in the reading we hear the line *“God is the God of the living, not the dead, for all are alive to God”* we are reminded that love endures beyond death. We shall be like angels and reunited with those who have gone before. We are still connected, and we do have a responsibility to those who have gone before to create a better world.

We also have a responsibility to the living who surround us. The resurrection gives us a vision to reach for, of the world of peace that could be, even through our grief.

The early Christians believed this so deeply that they refused to participate in killing. For the first 300 years of Christianity, they couldn't join the military. This didn't mean that they didn't get involved with conflict — they spoke loudly against injustice just as the prophets did before them. They used their voices instead of weapons, and many died for it. In today's reading we remember that they too are safe in the arms of God.

Questions for us today

The question and quest that Jesus always puts before us is “How we can make this world more like the time of eternal peace and love which will be ours after death,

more like the kingdom of God? How do we get away from this mindset of ownership? How do we step away from war and towards peace?”

These are not easy questions. But I will tell you one thing — when we forget the dignity of each human person, when we no longer grieve every death, we will have forgotten the value of love and peace.

So grieve today. Grieve for those who died, and do not forget the military survivors — those who came home scarred in body and soul. Did you know that the suicide rates amongst veterans is 1.5 times (or more) higher than the suicide rates amongst the general same age Canadian population? Hold them close in your hearts. (Veterans Affairs Canada) Let us protect our future generations then, by working for a just and a peaceful world.

As we remember those soldiers who were shown in the video, let us also remember those not shown: our Canadian UN Peacekeepers. The 40,000 who served in Bosnia where 23 died, and the more than 400 who served in Rwanda trying to stop a genocide.

When we say “*we will remember*” our soldiers, what do we mean? Let us commit to doing whatever we can to create a world where no one need ever feel that they must go to war. While we remember Canadian soldiers today we also cannot forget the cost of war to all people, not just in the past but today as well.

What will we do about conflict?

This is our time. As I speak, Sudanese civilians are being executed, starved and chased from their homes by civil war fueled by our need for gold, and managed by the UAE to whom we provide weapons. Who will stand up for them? Bombs continue to fall on Gaza, notwithstanding the sham of a Ceasefire. Canadian-made weaponry is involved in it, provided by Canadian corporations who trade in war, who have forgotten to grieve.

Will we advocate for peace in these places? Will we speak for the widows and the orphans, for the children of God? Will we raise our voices in grief?

We do not need better weaponry, Christ teaches us. We need better strategies for peace. We need to remember the cost of war.

What does it mean to remember?

To remember faithfully is to live in hope: to work for the world our war dead longed for, the world God desires — where the vision of the Prophet Isaiah may yet come true. He said:

*“They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war anymore.”* (Isaiah 2:4b)

That was written almost 3000 years ago, and yet so far we have failed as a human community to make it come true. But it is still possible, my friends. We believe in the vision of resurrection, we believe in hope, we believe in a kingdom on earth that mirrors the kingdom to come.

So on November 11th, as we stand in silence, as we whisper the words, *“We will remember them,”* let us do so with hope.

Because in the heart of God, none are lost.

Because in the heart of God, peace is still possible.

Because in the heart of God, justice may yet reign.

AMEN.