

# “Democrats, Republicans, Particles and Waves”

A sermon given by Rev. Ian Cummins

to the congregation at

Montview Boulevard Presbyterian Church of Denver

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Scripture: Luke 20: 27-38

<sup>27</sup>Some Sadducees, those who say there is no resurrection, came to him <sup>28</sup>and asked him a question, “Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man’s brother dies, leaving a wife but no children, the man shall marry the widow and raise up children for his brother. <sup>29</sup>Now there were seven brothers; the first married, and died childless; <sup>30</sup>then the second <sup>31</sup>and the third married her, and so in the same way all seven died childless. <sup>32</sup>Finally the woman also died. <sup>33</sup>In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had married her.” <sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, “Those who belong to this age marry and are given in marriage; <sup>35</sup>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. <sup>36</sup>Indeed they cannot die anymore, because they are like angels and are children of God, being children of the resurrection. <sup>37</sup>And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, in the story about the bush, where he speaks of the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. <sup>38</sup>Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive.”

In addition to the Roman occupiers, there were two major political parties in Jesus’ world: the Sadducees and the Pharisees. The Sadducees tended to be wealthy and come from the upper class of Jewish society. They were responsible for maintaining the Temple and they only recognized the written Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, as authoritative.

The Pharisees tended to reflect more of the common people and were the precursors to the Rabbinic tradition in Judaism. As such they embraced oral tradition as well, and this often put them at odds with the Sadducees over interpretation of Mosaic law.

Jesus, who headed up a new and quickly growing Independent party, believed both groups were deeply flawed. He regularly accused the Pharisees of being ‘hypocrites’ and his campaign manager, John the Baptist, once called the Sadducees, “a brood of vipers”.

My point is, there was clearly no love lost between these first century would-be leaders. It was time marked by deep mistrust, angry words, exaggerated claims and name calling on all sides.

I just wish there were a modern day example I could think of to compare it to...I'm sure it'll come to me.

In our story for today, a group of Sadducees approach Jesus and ask to whom a woman would be married in the afterlife if she had married each of seven brothers in this life. And if you're wondering if the question sounded as ridiculous back then as it does to us today - it did.

The Sadducees weren't really interested in the answer to their question. They didn't believe in resurrection to an afterlife since there is no mention of it in the written Torah, and they were taking a jab at their Pharisee counterparts who did, while at the same time trying to trap Jesus by the absurdity of the question.

So the issue in our text today is not really theological, but political. And on the eve of the eve of our country's most contentious election in memory, it has me wondering about our own times and our own political struggles. If nothing else, our story today reminds us that political acrimony is nothing new and even Jesus didn't, or couldn't, avoid the fray.

And as we all take a collective in-breath, knowing that when we gather next Sunday, no matter who is elected, about half of our country will be deeply disappointed, perhaps today is a good time to reflect on what each of us will do on Wednesday, when the work of trying to heal the deep divisions in our country begins anew. Because no matter who wins on Tuesday, the job of 'making America Great' or becoming 'Stronger Together' is going to be up to us.

And so today I want to offer an idea that I think can give us some language and some perspective from which to find a way forward.

A couple of weeks ago I offered the idea of the 'ecotone' as my new favorite theological concept that didn't come from theology. Today, I want to offer my second favorite non-theological theological term, which this time comes out of theoretical physics. It was developed by Neils Bohr, the contemporary of Einstein, who was a pioneer in sub-atomic exploration, and he called it 'complementarity'.

I would normally not even pretend to understand something from theoretical physics, but thankfully, Frank Wilczek, the Nobel prize winning professor at MIT recently wrote a book called *A Beautiful Question* that, while still mostly incomprehensible to me, talks about 'complementarity' not just as a physics term but as a philosophical and even religious one.

He says, "Complementarity...is one of the deep principles of quantum theory, but its importance, as an insight into the nature of things, goes beyond physics. (Complementarity is, I think, a genuine *metaphysical* insight – a rare bird indeed.)"

He goes on to define it: "At its simplest level, complementarity says that there can be many different views of your subject that are equally valid in principle, but that to observe the subject you must choose a particular one."

Ok, stick with me. Don't start daydreaming about what's for lunch just yet, cause this is pretty cool. What all that means is that in the world of quantum mechanics, which just means the world of ridiculously small things, the rules are turning out to be a little different than they appear to be in regular-sized life.

Take light, for example. It turns out that its best to think of light as both a particle AND a wave. Now our logical, categorical, ‘put things in a box’ minds want to ask, well, which is it? Is it a particle OR is it a wave?

But if you really want to learn as much as you can about light...if you want to learn the whole ‘truth’ about light...you have to measure it as if it’s a particle and stand in those shoes. And then measure it as if it’s a wave, and stand in those shoes. Because it turns out that there are things you can learn about light from either perspective that you can’t see *from* the other perspective.

See where I’m going with this? Or more authoritatively, see where Frank Wilczek, Nobel Prize winning MIT professor is going? If the basic building blocks of the universe require both/and thinking to reveal their secrets, could it be that other things do too?

For example, at one level science tells us we are all just a collection of electrons and photons; water and blood and electric current. And at another we are thinking, feeling, amazingly complex people. Which one is true?

Or another example: We live in a world of exquisite beauty and goodness. *And* we live in a world of squalor and suffering. Which is it?

Our minds have trouble holding both ideas at the same time. We want one to be right and the other to be wrong. But considered one at a time, they’re clearly both true.

Sometimes it’s more useful to consider things one way, and sometimes another way. When we try to hold them simultaneously, it can seem like a problem. And complementarity says, “Ok, then don’t. Just take them one at a time.”

Let’s take an example from politics: immigration. To paint with a wide brush, one side of the argument tends to focus on security– physical security or economic security. The other side focuses on the human need of those who are often trying to escape terrible situations.

And in an either/or world, we feel forced to choose between these. As if - if one were true, the other couldn’t be. As if it’s either a particle OR a wave. And when we get into arguments, about immigration or anything else, we tend to think that if we acknowledge any truth in the other perspective, it diminishes the truth of our own perspective.

But complementarity says this doesn’t have to be the case. We may eventually have to make *decisions* that prioritize some values over others. But we’re so divided that we’re not even willing to acknowledge that there *are* other values. Complementarity says its possible to still be right, even if we acknowledge the other side is right too.

Now I’m not arguing here for a relativistic worldview – I’m not saying there’s YOUR truth and MY truth and who are you to question someone else’s truth. Complementarity does not mean every perspective is as valid as another.

There are things that are true. And there are things that are *not* true. But we are rarely in a position to see the whole truth. And to get the fullest picture possible of what really *is*, complementarity says we have to look at things from multiple angles – in physics...but maybe also in politics, philosophy, and even religion.

There's a great interview with Wilczek that you can find at a podcast called 'On Being' (which is wonderful by the way), and he jokingly says there that when people ask what his religious persuasion is, he says he's a Complementarian. I kind of love that. And I think we could use a few more complementarians in this world.

Actually, I think there's good evidence that Jesus was a Complementarian. In the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew's gospel, for example, Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. <sup>18</sup> For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, <sup>[c]</sup> not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished."

And then a few chapters later, he goes into a synagogue and "a man was there with a withered hand, and (the Pharisees) asked him, "Is it lawful to cure on the Sabbath?" so that they might accuse him. (They already know the answer to their own question, just like in our text today).

But Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has only one sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath; will you not lay hold of it and lift it out? <sup>12</sup> How much more valuable is a human being than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath."

<sup>13</sup> Then he said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and it was restored."  
(Matthew 12)

That's complementarity at its best – Jesus refuses to be trapped in an either/or world. He shows the value of the other perspective, in this case actually breaking the law, in such a beautiful, irrefutable way, that the Pharisees can't deny seeing its truth.

Actually, it turns out they don't see its truth. In a telling moment of human nature, the very next line reads: "But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him."

And maybe that's the real danger of where we've gotten to as a country. There's so little trust between red state, blue state, I Hate You state, that many of us have become more committed to winning than the truth.

Now in this election, in particular, it has been hard for people on both sides of the aisle, to see any validity or goodness in the other side at all. But maybe that's all the more reason when this election is over, to become a practicing Complementarian. Really try to put yourself in the shoes of other people and find the truth in their perspective. Thanksgiving is coming up so all those family gatherings will give you plenty of chances.

And I know of few more powerful things, and few more entertaining things, than in the middle of a heated political argument, just when things appear that they might come to blows, to stop, look the person in the eye and say:

**YOU KNOW WHAT?!...I think you might be right.**