

Thursday, February 2 and Sunday, February 5, 2017
Questions of Jesus: "Friend, who made me judge or arbitrator over you?"
Second in an Eight-Part Series
The Gospel according to Luke 12: 13-21
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Luke 12: 13-21

¹³ Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me." ¹⁴ But Jesus said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?" ¹⁵ And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. ¹⁶ Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷ And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?' ¹⁸ Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.' ²⁰ But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' ²¹ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

For those of you who missed church last week, I began a sermon and study series. This is the second of eight weeks in which the sermon and the Adult Education class will focus on a question that Jesus asked. I got this idea from a book called "Questions of Jesus," written by a Roman Catholic priest named John Dear.

These eight weeks of questions will only skim the surface. Jesus asked 307 questions total in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. That is nearly 77 questions per gospel, for those of you who like to answer questions with math!

In essence, the man who asked Jesus to tell the man's brother to divide their inheritance was asking Jesus to do the math.

In modern Western culture, we have a general consensus that inheritances are divided equally among siblings. There are exceptions of course, but in general we as a society embrace that kind of equity.

This was not so in the ancient Mediterranean world of Jesus. Traditionally, the eldest son would be given the inheritance. The whole thing! So it's entirely possible that the man who asked Jesus to do the math was simply a younger brother who thought that his oldest brother should not have all of the inheritance.

Knowing this, everyone here that is not an eldest son of a family would probably call on Jesus, too! We would have sympathy for the man who feels shortchanged.

So what does Jesus do? For the shortchanged younger brother, Jesus doesn't do anything. And not only that – Jesus turns the situation from a family dispute into a theological discourse.

Jesus tells his followers some very, very important things in Luke chapter 12. I do not want to skirt around the tough message about money and greed that Jesus' parable imparts. At the same time, I think we could miss another important teaching of Jesus if we whisk too quickly past his question.

"Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

Christians the world over claim Jesus, but the reality is that there are very different ways in which Christians describe Jesus. There are very different ways in which Jesus' work in the world is understood.

Christians in different times and different places, in different denominations and other different nationalities emphasize different aspects of Jesus' teachings over others.

Christians agree that Jesus' words and actions guide our lives with the utmost authority. And yet, Christians make Jesus into a judge and an arbitrator in ways that do not actually line up with words and actions of Jesus.

Jesus, for example, never spoke of several of the hottest button issues of America's political debates of the past half century. Jesus never talks about abortion and he never talks about homosexuality.

Jesus rarely referred to other religions – and when he did, he did not provide consistent criticism of them. He was far more critical of his own religion.

It is the Epistles, not the Gospels, of the New Testament, which provide the verses that many Christians quote as their references to not ordain women into ministry.

Jesus says almost nothing that clearly states an opinion about women's leadership. Based on several interactions that Jesus has with women, which are described in detail in the gospels, he did not behave in a patriarchal manner.

This meant that he did not follow his own culture and religious traditions in a conventional way – he may not have asked questions on this topic, but some of his actions would have been called *questionable* by his contemporaries.

Jesus never talks about Islam – it did not yet exist in his earthly lifetime. The question of Jesus that we will focus on in two weeks from now is one I chose exactly because it is one of the handful of times Jesus that explicitly refers to other religions.

It's an important topic for us to give our prayerful and diligent attention.

I bring this all up because it could seem that Jesus gives us little to no help as a judge and arbitrator for key, hot button issues that continue to be hot button issues *exactly because a significant number of Americans consider them to be religious issues.*

This is in spite of no statements from the Lord and Savior of Christians about those issues.

So we come back to a question: what do we do?

Luke chapter 12, verses 16 through 20 is a parable that does not leave us guessing, not like many other parables. But the *question* in Luke chapter 12 verse 14 only leave us with more questions. Jesus does not seem to want to fill the role of judge and arbitrator.

Of course, we want to take seriously all of the gospel witnesses to Jesus. Aren't there other verses in the gospels that would help us to know what Jesus is judge and arbitrator for? It seems we won't find much help.

Jesus does not judge the woman of a questionable reputation who wipes his feet with her hair in the gospel Luke. He does not judge the Samaritan in that parable – he holds the Samaritan up as the good guy.

Jesus does not judge the blind beggar in Matthew and Mark, he does not judge those who cannot walk in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, he does not judge the woman who is hemorrhaging in Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

We think, of course Jesus doesn't judge those people, because they have those conditions by no fault of their own – BUT in Jesus' time, those conditions – blindness, inability to walk, hemorrhaging – those were judged by most people as afflictions that were punishments for sins.

Samaritans were considered Judeans to be worshipping God at the wrong place and to have intermarried with the wrong people.

Jesus was not simply *not judging*, he was being a radical by being welcoming and touching them and talking with them. Jesus was really quite strange.

So if Jesus doesn't seem to *want* to be a judge and an arbitrator, why do we Christians keep wanting to make him be a judge and an arbitrator? Why isn't it enough that Jesus

be our mighty counselor, our prince of peace, our redeemer...our friend? Isn't one of those *a lot*? Isn't one of those enough?

I tried to help this sermon and, more importantly, help me and you, by reading or re-reading several different Christian writers.

I thought somebody could surely shine an inspirational light on something about Christian's tendency to want to make Jesus a judge and an arbitrator for every dispute we have.

Because if it turns out that Jesus *does not want to be our default judge and arbitrator*, what does that mean for Christians? If Jesus does not bang the gavel or isn't "the decider," how can we ever hope to find resolution and reconciliation about all of the arguments we have?

Like I said, I sought wisdom in a lot of writers. And then....

I thought about what we would be doing in worship this week. We will be sharing communion. We will, again, come together at Jesus' table, where he sits at the head, and at the same time, shares and shares and shares again.

At Jesus' table, we can bring our disputes. We can bring our anger. We can bring our grudges. We can bring what we are fed up with and sit down and be fed.

Jesus, who is not a judge on a bench, he is a host at a table. That's not my opinion, that's what it says in the gospels.

Your kitchen table might have had some disputes at it over the past year in particular. It might still be hosting some disputes. You may have had people get up from your table and you haven't seen them or talked to them since – or maybe you are the person who got up from a table and have not returned.

I don't want to make light of the passions that we feel in our day about very, very important issues. We have tough ethical questions to face as a society – things cannot be waved away under the banner of politics.

We live in a democracy, so we're all expected at the table in our civic life, too.

And here's what the gospels have got for us, Christians citizens: a table, with a host who is a mighty counselor, a prince of peace, a redeemer, and a friend.

Imagine he's at your table. Better yet, see him IN the other people at the table. You might just judge things differently. And it's a good start toward reconciliation.

Thanks be to God. Amen.