

Thanks, but no thanks: Luke 12:13-21

by [Garret Keizer](#) in the [July 18, 2001](#) issue

It was a sad day in the history of the church when Paul's statement about being "all things to all men" first came to be seen not as a call to diversity but as a claim of versatility. St. Paul the Jewish apostle to the gentiles turned into Reverend Paul the Jack of all trades. The love that "beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things and endureth all things" became the love that fixeth all things, settleth all things and sweeteneth all things, and sooner or later maketh all things a very big mess.

The best corrective I know is the story of Jesus and the man who asked him to arbitrate an inheritance dispute. What if we were given only the first part of this story and were required to supply the ending? We might imagine Jesus going to the greedy brother and exhorting him to share. At the very least we might imagine Jesus telling his petitioner that in the age to come "the last shall be first." Instead, he is quite uncooperative and not a little curt. "Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?"

Can't you picture the man, some years hence, recounting what has become a cherished and much rehearsed story about the hardhearted Rabbi Jesus? "I used to go to synagogue all the time, but then one day I went to this Rabbi Jesus with a problem, and he was so incredibly uncaring that it shook my faith, it really did, and that's why when it comes to organized religion . . ." Oh, and can't you also imagine the response of his ordained interlocutor? "It's people like that Rabbi Jesus who give religion such a bad name. One thing I can assure you, my wounded friend: There is no one even remotely resembling the Rabbi Jesus in *this* house of worship!"

But let us go back to the Rabbi Jesus. What is so lovely about his response is its perfect humility. A false and sometimes deceptive show in many of us, humility in Jesus is truth. God is love; humility is truth. And in that we are able to perceive some of Christ's divinity as an echo of the Lord's ancient name: I AM WHO I AM. Says Jesus, I am not what I am not. I am not an estate settler.

To be more precise, Jesus gives his answer not as a statement, but as a question. “Who made me a judge or a divider over you?” As in most sentences, the important words are the subject and the verb: “who” and “made.” Catechisms and creeds usually begin with the acknowledgment of our Maker. It is reverence for our Maker that serves as the best defense against any lesser maker who would fashion us into something false and unbearable: a phony saint, a “real” man, a “perfect” wife, a miserable estate settler. “Who made me a judge or divider over you?” Jesus asks. It certainly wasn’t God. And it’s not going to be you. Perfect humility becomes perfect freedom.

We ought not to see Jesus’ reply merely as the preservation of his own liberty, however. That is to turn Jesus’ love too much inward. Jesus certainly loves his neighbor, in this case his petitioner, as himself. But Jesus understands what many a minister, lay and ordained, often fails to understand. People with a grievance frequently seek out a third party for one of two slippery reasons: either they’re trying to abbreviate the hard work that needs to take place between parties one and two, or they’re trying to circumvent the third party who’s most qualified to assist them in that work.

I used to visit a couple in the course of making my pastoral rounds who would invariably solicit my opinion as to some disagreement between them. We’d be sitting at the kitchen table, sometime between the opening coffee and the parting prayer, and then the question that I knew was coming would come: “OK, here’s something that happened yesterday . . . so what do you think? Was I wrong?”

Lacking Jesus’ humility, and no doubt flattered at the implication of wisdom on my part, I would often do my “humble” best to render some kind of decision. I would try to help husband and wife see something that I felt they both needed to see. Actually, what they both needed to see was 1) a marriage counselor, and 2) that I was not a marriage counselor. I finally said so.

Soon afterward I also said that although I enjoyed visiting with them, if they were serious about their faith they needed to find a church close to home (they lived a considerable distance from mine and hardly ever attended) and a pastor. These prayers at the kitchen table were a nice snack, but they had come to be a flimsy substitute for the nourishing food of worship and community. I suppose I risked making myself the subject of yet another bad-rabbi story, but in fact I found that once I stopped allowing them to make me into something that I wasn’t, I greatly

increased their confidence in who I was. What we made of each other after that was friends.

A former bishop of mine once said that clergy were “the last of the generalists,” by which he meant the last professionals to see a human being as more than the sum of his or her parts. In that sense the disappointed brother did no wrong in coming to Jesus, nor could Jesus have been wrong in offering him more help than he did. In some ways a good pastor, like a good parent or a good farmer, has to be a jack of all trades. Still, I’ve come to think of a generalist as someone who offers general principles in the act of encouraging people to find their own particular way. The only true savior is the one who says, “Your faith has saved you.”