

Blogging toward Sunday

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As a woman was leaving church, she whispered to her pastor, “Do you have some time for me to talk with you about a matter of concern?”

“What’s the problem?” he asked abruptly.

“Well, it’s personal, but I have just been offered a promotion in my company. It is very flattering, and the money would be wonderful, but it requires more travel and I’m already away from home more than I would like, and. . .”

“Jesus doesn’t have any interest in any of that!” the pastor said, interrupting. Then he turned and began greeting other worshipers.

An earnest young man comes up to Jesus asking the Lord to help him settle an inheritance dispute between him and his brother. Jesus, who has been on a negative, judgmental jag for the past few chapters in Luke, is given an opportunity to show how caring and compassionate he really is. Time to get off the prophetic high horse and get mushy, fuzzy and pastoral.

The man addresses Jesus as “Teacher,” which presumes that the man wants instruction, but in the next breath he demands that Jesus “tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me.” The man knows, or thinks he knows, just what ought to be done in this situation and just what Jesus will do for him.

As happens so often, however, Jesus refuses to answer the question, refuses to respond in the expected way and reframes the question, reworks the expectation. “Friend” (the word Jesus tends to use when he is preparing to thrust the dagger through someone’s heart), “who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”—which is ironic because the man isn’t asking for judgment; he is asking for action on his behalf.

It is also ironic because even though Jesus says he is not a judge over this man's problems, he is judging this man's preoccupations: "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed." This judgment seems unfair because nothing suggests that this man is being greedy. He is asking for simple justice in the matter of an inheritance dispute.

I find it interesting that Jesus dismisses this concern over justice, refusing to arbitrate or to attempt to make peace in a feuding family, and instead tells a story about a successful, prudent rich man whom Jesus calls a "fool." It's hard to see how the story has anything to do with the question of inheritance since the rich man presumably didn't inherit his wealth but got it the old fashioned way—he worked for it and earned it. Yet Jesus calls him a fool.

One reason why we study scripture, one reason why we come to church on Sunday, is so that we can receive answers to our questions, action on our petitions. We come seeking help with our daily problems, solutions to our dilemmas.

And isn't Jesus loving and compassionate? And doesn't he care?

Well, not always, at least that's what this Sunday's exchange suggests. Jesus must be about more important matters even than meeting my needs. He is also judge of my need. The questions that consume me may not consume Jesus. The matters in my life that I consider to be my biggest, most pressing problems may not interest Jesus in the least. It's always a shock to have a conversation with Jesus and to find that he is more than the answer to my questions and the solution to my problems.

What a challenge to worship a friend and savior who is also the true and living God!