

Year A, Proper 24, October 29th, 2017

Matthew 22:34-46

Turning Enemies into Footstools

When the Pharisees hear that Jesus has silenced the Sadducees, their rival group, they feel compelled to gather and demonstrate that Jesus couldn't silence them. They would show their superiority to those Sadducees. In a sense Jesus isn't the center of this fuss but their rivalry with the Sadducees is. This is not a theological debate concerning Jesus; it's a horizontal contest between two rival groups using the defeat of Jesus as the measure for who wins.

The Sadducees, the upper class people in league with Rome and enjoying the benefits of that collaboration, had failed to score on Jesus. This delights the Pharisees who hate them. According to the Pharisees, those Sadducees had grown immoral, corrupt and intellectually soft with all their high-class parties and undisciplined living. They were right of course.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, took their religion seriously, studied the Torah and thought that if the Jewish people would just keep all those religious rules, God would help them in throwing out the Romans and making their country great again. In a competition with the Sadducees they knew they could win any battle over the interpretation of Torah since they were the Torah interpretation experts.

Can you see how the rivalry between the Sadducees and the Pharisees drives the action of both? This tells us something about human beings. Often our motivations are not coming from within as we think but from the rivalry with and envy toward those for whom we hold animosity. The Pharisees may have thought they were challenging Jesus because they disagreed with him but actually they were challenging him in the hope of beating the Sadducees. Each side was playing their game with the other in mind and neither was free to just be. Both sides needed an outside focus to maintain their identity, a focus that Jesus, as outsider and threat to both, offered, but neither side could see that. Good Pharisees would never admit they were controlled by their rivalry with Sadducees. Why, that would be like Democrats admitting that they was controlled by their rivalry with Republicans rather than caring about what was good for the nation.

So the Pharisees gather when they hear that the Sadducees had been rendered speechless and of course, they can do better. "One of them, a legal expert, tested him. Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the law?"

"Jesus replied, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind.'" They knew the answer before they asked, of course, but they don't see how this directly contradicts what they have been doing in relation to their enemy-neighbor,

the Sadducees. Has their attention been on God, with all their heart, being and mind? No, it has been on the Sadducees and how they hoped to best them.

Jesus' answer is impeccably correct and then he continues, "This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.'" This is where it gets a little dicey. Who is their neighbor? Could it be the Sadducees!! How can you be in rivalry and at the same time claim to love them as much as yourself? Rivals like to win. Rivalry and love don't mix. The whole reason for gathering and asking Jesus their question was to show they were better than the Sadducees.

Jesus concludes, "All the law and the Prophets depend on these two commands." Jesus extends his comments beyond the law, the Pharisee's area of expertise, to include the prophets. The prophets were always very aware of how people actually treated one another. The Pharisees are not as in charge of this conversation as they had hoped. The specter of losing like the Sadducees had, began to take form.

Jesus now takes center stage and he has a question for them. His question parallels theirs in asking for their understanding of what is most important. They want to know his take on the greatest commandment; he wants to know their take on the Messiah. "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Jesus asks. It's the simplest question in the world and the answer is so obvious. "David's son, they replied." The specter of losing dissipates slightly.

Their thinking, "Jesus, is that the best you can do?" But Jesus hasn't finished yet.

He goes on. "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? Jesus quotes Psalms 110:1 and suggests that God said to the Messiah "sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet." So the Messiah, David's Son sits at the right hand of God and will do so until the Messiah's enemies are all footstools for him and still David calls this Messiah his Lord. How do you explain this, Jesus asks? "Nobody was able to answer him. And from that day forward nobody dared ask him anything."

With this quote Jesus has created an interpretive stumbling block that can't help but trip the Pharisees. The only resolution to it is to either accept the mystery of God that goes beyond their laws and interpretations or to posit that the Messiah is both human and divine and operates outside time. After all, he existed before David and yet is David's son. This puts the Pharisees, so proud of their comprehensive theology, out of control. Something is happening beyond their understanding. Their world view, built on their having everything figured out, is beginning to come undone. A crack has opened and they dare not ask him any more questions lest it grow.

And there is more to it. The Pharisees think of themselves as enemies to Jesus, who claims to be the Messiah. This quote from the Psalms places the Messiah at the right hand of God, the place of greatest authority and suggests he will remain there until his enemies are defeated. Does this mean the competitive Pharisees will be defeated by the Messiah; that they will be serving him as his footrest. Is he taunting them? They don't know what to think.

The Romans constantly taunted the subjugated people they ruled. Public buildings and temples to Roman God's throughout the empire featured images of sword-wielding Roman victors standing with one foot on their subjects who cowered in terror and defeat below them. It was propaganda proclaiming the uselessness of revolt against so mighty a government.

We know the Jews hoped to reverse those images so that they were the mighty ones and the Romans were the ones cowering. They expected the Messiah to lead them in this battle just as David had led the Jews against their enemies; after all he is David's Son. How is God ever going to make Jesus his Messiah when Jesus won't fight? And yet the verse seems to say the Messiah conquers his enemies. The Pharisees have no answer for any of this.

It's a question we face too. How will God, through the Messiah, conquer his enemies and still look like the Jesus we see in the Gospels?

Our text from Matthew is located in the midst of Holy Week. In three days Jesus will be hanging on a cross and the Pharisees will be thinking they have won and Jesus was wrong. But they don't understand, and can't, that it is by hanging on the cross that he wins. He makes his enemies into footstools by allowing them to have their way. In having their way they show the world and themselves how violence and exclusion dominates their hearts and destroys their humanity.

But what really makes them into footstools is when he forgives them. By his grace they discover they are the persecutors who are loved in the midst of their persecuting. This is what tames humans finally, drawing us into a new reality where we feel grateful and honored to be his footstool. When we have grasped forgiveness and found our place as the beloved, we find ourselves praising God and living in gratitude. The Messiah has turned us into his footstools but we don't feel taunted. We feel loved. Amen.