

Year A, Proper 30, Jesus' Riddle For Us, Matt 22, 34-46

Our story begins and ends in silence. Jesus has already silenced the Sadducees when they asked about paying taxes to the emperor. So now the Pharisees gather to question him. But by the end of the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisees, again there is silence. No one can answer Jesus' question and from that day on, no-one dares to ask him any more questions.

Silence. And this silence is not golden. It's an eerie silence. It's the silence of the "powers that be" as they regroup and plan. The silence of walls being built and sides being taken. The silence that arrives when the time for words is over and something else must be done. This silence is deadly. The next time we see the religious leaders, they will be plotting to kill Jesus.

Today we have the final episode of the ongoing exchange between Jesus and the religious leaders. Back and forth, back and forth, they verbally duel over matters of theology and the interpretation of God's word. They challenge Jesus' authority and his right to be called Messiah. He answers with pointed stories that question their entry into God's kingdom; stories that challenge them to match their deeds with their profession of faith. These exchanges take place in the temple, with a large crowd watching the entire time.

There is tension in these exchanges. The religious authorities repeatedly try to trap Jesus with their trick questions. But every time, he slips the trap. At every turn, Jesus' answers unsettle their way of thinking – the way they follow the rules without their hearts following suit, their outward displays of piety – their way won't get them a place in the kingdom of God.

Finally, near the end of the exchange, Jesus offers a little riddle of his own:

"What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" Jesus asks.

And the Pharisees answer, “The son of David.”

Now, I’ll bet they pretty much whispered that answer because the crowds had been calling *Jesus* the Son of David, spreading palm branches on his path as he entered Jerusalem.

The Pharisees are on dangerous ground here – they don’t want to confirm the crowd’s opinion of Jesus. But no other answer is possible. God said the Messiah is the Son of David.

Jesus doesn’t make it easy on the religious leaders at this point. Instead, he calls more attention to their answer by quoting Scripture -- Psalm 110.

“How is it then that David by the Spirit calls [the Messiah] Lord, saying,
‘The LORD said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I put your enemies under your feet”’?”

If David calls [the Messiah] Lord, how can he be [David’s] son?”
With his little riddle, Jesus interrupts the Pharisees’ nice, neat theology. The old categories simply don’t work here. A person cannot be both son of David and Lord of David. Something new is here, something that can’t be contained in the old way of thinking. The thinking that the Messiah was going to be a powerful, royal ruler – according to the world’s idea of a powerful, royal ruler that is.

The riddle cannot be solved -- except by recognizing and following Jesus. And that response is not possible for the religious authorities. It would rearrange their entire world. It would mean a loss of control and authority. So they don’t answer. And they don’t dare to ask any more questions. Instead, they are silent. And they build their walls and firmly entrench on their side of the wall... and they plot to kill Jesus.

Jesus is inviting them to *look* at the world in a new way, to *live* in the world in a new way and they find that threatening. Many people find change threatening – even small changes can cause an uproar. Riddles are difficult to answer, sometimes seemingly impossible. Jesus likes to make people think. Jesus likes to challenge how people think of the way the world works. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, in South Africa, challenged the way the world works by asking a tough question in the form of a riddle...

A drunk, so the story goes, crossed the street to approach a pedestrian and asked, "Excuse me, but which side is the other side of the street?" Without hesitating, the pedestrian pointed to the opposite side of the road and replied, "That side of course!" Visibly perplexed, the drunk said, "Strange...when I was on that side, they said it was this side."

When is this side the other side? With this silly little riddle, Tutu challenges the rigid definitions of sides that shaped South Africa during apartheid. He points out that our thinking about "sides", whether in South Africa or here in Canada, is all a matter of perspective. There is no solving of Tutu's riddle because every time we take a side, everything else is automatically the other side...and then the "other side" kind of thinking sets in...the other side is wrong, bad, different...not our side.

When is this side the other side? Never – until we live into a new and different world. A world without rigid "sides." A world in which the wall-building and side-taking that divide us begin to melt away.

It's the same with Jesus' riddle. How can the Messiah be David's son if David calls him Lord? Son-Lord – no-one can be both at the same time. There's no solving the riddle with the old ways of thinking. We have to enter a new world where those old categories are melting away and a new, unsettling life calls.

The gospel has all sorts of unsettling stuff in it...challenges to the old ways in which the world works. All the way through the gospel we find riddles and parables that melt away the walls and the taking of the side of the old era that is dying and point toward a new, unsettling creation:

A crucified Messiah? A Good Samaritan? Blessed poor? Love your enemies? A Lord who washes feet? Scandalous! Impossible! Weak power. Foolish wisdom. The first last. The last first.

Unsettling riddles-- all of them. They don't make sense if we think the way the world thinks. They don't make sense if we live the way world would have us live. They create a new reality – a new way of thinking, which we live into by following Jesus.

In Jesus Christ the new creation has interrupted the old age. And the old cannot hold the new, just like the old ways of thinking cannot solve Jesus' riddles. Jesus challenges their thinking, and our thinking, creating an unsettled space of in-between time when the old is falling away but still tugging at our desires and the new is drawing us forward into the future perfection of God's kingdom. We're in a place where things are changing...Jesus doesn't call us to stability or security or certainty. Jesus calls us to follow him, always on the move, always on the way from the old to the new.

And maybe today we are in a position to appreciate this unsettling, in-between gospel. For we belong to a church that is changing, that is in between -- between the old thinking of the world that is dying and the new that is being born, even though we don't know what it will look like.

And we live in a nation – in a world – that is in transition...the future will be different from the past. And, in the midst of upheaval and change, it is tempting to build walls and take sides.

We hear about these frightened reactions – the wall-building, the side-taking - everywhere we turn – the anti-mask wearers, the anti-lockdown protestors, those who say there is no systemic oppression of Indigenous Peoples in Canada, leave our structures alone...there's nothing wrong with them.

As followers of Jesus, however, we don't need to respond to these unsettling times with wall-building and side-taking. We are in-between people moving away from the old thinking of the world. We are people living into the gospel's new, unsettling riddles, following Jesus, preparing for a new kingdom – God's kingdom.

We are invited to feast at God's table in his new kingdom – to break the rules like Jesus did. When Jesus ate and drank, he challenged the old way of thinking and invited everyone to feast in the new creation that is being born. Jesus ate with all the wrong people: those who were unclean, the outsiders, the tax collectors and sinners. At the Last Supper he even served the one who would betray him and those who would desert him.

At Jesus' table, everyone is welcome. Scandalous? Impossible?

It reminds me of a priest in South Porcupine a long time ago. His tradition was to give up the usual family dinner on Christmas Day and hold a turkey dinner in the church basement instead – a dinner for the lonely, the outcast, who had no one else on that special day. Those people were so grateful, it brought tears to their eyes.

A Lord who washes feet.

Weak power.

Blessed poor.

The last first.

Christmas dinner for the outcast a feast in God's kingdom.

There's a riddle for us.

Let's live into that.