

"WHO MADE ME A JUDGE OVER YOU?"

INTRODUCTION

With a bag of wild oats slung across his shoulder, a young man runs away from home and has himself a time. He bumps along from town to town and job to job in support of a regimen of wine, women and song.

His self-absorption is so complete that he never bothers to let the folks back home know where he is and what he's up to.

One day, by the chanciest of coincidents, he meets up with a boyhood chum who is presently doing a hitch in the occupation army. Over a cup of coffee he learns that his father is dead. Six months ago. Heart attack. No warning.

When the first searing pangs of grief cool to a numbing sadness, it dawns on him that he is richer than he thought. For part of his father's estate belongs to him.

He heads for home and asks his older brother for the money that he takes to be his due. But the older brother balks, saying:

"Nothing doing. You wanted out and now you are. All of the estate is mine. That's the way it is. Tough!"

Angry almost to the point of murder and certain that he has been cheated, the returned wanderer seeks redress.

ONE AFTERNOON

One afternoon he blends in with a crowd that is forming around an itinerant teacher from - of all places - Nazareth. The talk is of the worth of man and the unpardonable sin. But our angry and upset young man is so obsessed with his violated rights that he hears nothing. He restrains himself, not without considerable effort, until this teacher from Nazareth pauses for a drink of water.

That narrow opening of silence is his cue. He seizes it. Loudly enough to be heard by all, he shouts,

"Master, speak to my brother that he divide the inheritance with me."

Jesus cannot go on. His train of thought is broken and the concentration of the crowd as well. Converting necessity to opportunity, he comes face to face with his single-minded suppliant and levels him with a question.

"Man, who made me a judge or divider over you?" (Luke 12: 14)

Following that this teacher from Nazareth delivers a homily on greed!

DEVELOPMENT

If not that, something like this must have happened as the background for this incident reported there in Luke 12.

Already you have an emotional investment in the situation. You are with the defrauded brother all the way. Or you are four square with the brother who would not let go. Or you are aggrry that Jesus was so disrespectfully interrupted. Or, you're irked that Jesus refused to help. Feelings to one side, I think the important issue here is why Jesus refused to intervene. (Repeat question)

NOT HIS MISSION

Jesus refused to pronounce on this dispute because this was not His mission.

On the face of it, this request seemed simple enough. Jesus came through to others as a fair-minded and wise person. He had an innate sense of right and wrong. Rabbis often rendered such a service. How long would it have taken?

But the truth is that such actions on His part would have diverted Him from His calling.

Have you any idea how many people in our society are running around day and night feeling that they have been wronged, cheated, denied their day in court? It's far more prevalent than we might surmise. The cry goes up on every side: divide. Divide. Help us to divide. Between brothers and sisters, after the death of parents, divorcing husbands and wives, couples who have lived together for a while without benefit of a marriage certificate. Divide. Divide.

Between baseball players and owners. Between umpires and management. Between teachers' unions and Boards of Education. Between the Federal Government and the State and the City. Divide. Divide. Help us to divide. There's no end to it.

If He did it for one, He would have to do it for all.

His was a unique and singular mission. There's some doubt, and probably always will be, as to just when and to what degree Jesus became conscious of His being the Messiah. But certainly from that modest incident in the Temple when He was 12 years old and turned lovingly to His parents and said, "Wist ye not that I must be about My Father's business", we learn that Jesus had a peculiar sense of mission. None could force another role upon Him - even a good role. He was, as we say, "inner-directed". He had a strong enough ego to be His own person. He knew His voices and followed where they led. "Who made Me a judge or divider over you?" That was not His mission.

RESPECTED THE POWERS

A second thought. I think Jesus refused to pronounce on this dispute because He respected the powers in society that were responsible for justice. It would be a most tragic and grievous distortion to infer that Jesus was indifferent to justice or that He was so spiritually oriented that this kind of thing that was on the heart of the young man was beneath Him.

Jesus, remember, was steeped in the Law and the Prophets. He verbally and clearly affirmed that justice and mercy and truth belonged to the weightier matters of the Law. He was not so "heavenly-minded" that a lack of fairness in temporal matters concerned Him not at all. No. It was a matter of trusting justice to the institutions and forces of history.

So long as such disputes exist we human beings must have some means of settling them. Peacefully, hopefully. By reform, if possible. By revolution, if there be no other way.

In His day, the ultimate authority was with Rome. Rome had "sublet" its authority in Palestine to Jewish ecclesiastical powers. Jesus would not short-circuit due process; He would not negate those earthly powers. Caesar has his jurisdiction that must also be respected. "Who made me a judge over you?"

A THIRD THOUGHT A third thought. Jesus refused to pronounce on this dispute because it was against His practice to join with another individual against a third. He was never a party to "double-teaming" someone else. Here we see a fine example of refusal on his part to do this.

I think this young man who requested the intervention of Jesus did not wish arbitration...not really. That would seem to be the wish on first glance. I think he really wanted a decision against his brother.

It was a problematic case because the Law was clear. All the way back in Deuteronomy it was written that when a father dies, leaving two surviving sons, the younger gets 1/3 and the older 2/3 of the estate. So there must have been some extenuating circumstances. He wasn't looking for arbitration; he wanted a judgement against his brother.

There's only one other instance in the Gospels where Jesus was asked to side with someone against a third party. It, too, is in Luke's Gospel. Any idea of the one I'm referring to. This time it is not two brothers, but two sisters are involved - Mary and Martha.

Jesus is in their home and Martha is concerned that Mary is not doing her share of the work. "Lord" she says, "Dost Thou not care that my sister has left me to serve alone". (I'm out here in this hot kitchen all by myself.. slaving away...thawing out these TV dinners...watching the stove...making sure the gravy doesn't burn, and she's in there...enjoying her own little Sunday School class with you. It's not fair, Lord) "Bid her therefore that she help me and do her share." (Luke 10:40)

But Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful".

BEFORE CHRIST Before Christ we come always as confessors, never as complainants. He won't consider your brother's sins or your sister's sins, always and only - your own! Still we try to enlist His weight against those who are troubling us. (Like the man who came in to see a psychiatrist with a cowbell hanging from one ear, two friend eggs on his head, and army boots on his feet and says, 'I want to talk to you about my brother!')

Where does this tendency come from that would invoke the action of God against another: wanting God with my nation against some other nation; with my class against some other class; with my color against another color; with my Church against another Church?

Lord, speak to my children that they obey me. And He answers firmly: are you sure you're guiding your children with love?

Lord, speak to my wife that she stop nagging me. And He answers: are you sure you're a considerate, thoughtful husband.

Lord, speak to my boss that he treat me fairly. Are you sure you're giving your best on the job?

Lord, speak to my students that they respect me. Are you sure you're conducting yourself before them in a way that commands respect.

Lord. Is it I? That is the spirit that Jesus honors. And on that question, the gates of mercy open and healing flows in. "Who made me a judge over you?"

A FINAL THOUGHT A final thought. Jesus refused to pronounce on this dispute because both parties were wrong. In a sense his reaction was "A plague on both your houses". Each brother, in his own way, was guilty of covetousness - one wanting to keep what he had, the other for wanting to get it. They were covetous, translated "greedy". That one fact in their situation outweighed all the other facts. So, Jesus turns to the crowd upon hearing this request and says, "Beware of covetousness."

And then He drifted into that frightening story of the man who found that he did not have enough room in which to keep all of his produce and determined build himself some larger and bigger barns. One night the angel of death summoned him out of the world and stunned him with the devastating question, "Whose shall these things be?" (Luke 12: 20)

Covetousness is one of the nicer sins. It's one of the more respectable sins. It just barely got into the Big Ten, into the Decalog. It's as though God said, "I don't want to operate on a base of nine, let's make it ten! Oh, yes - coveting." It's not one of the "biggies" - is it? it's mentioned 19 times in the New Testament, and Paul grouped it with fornication and idolatry. The ancients called it a "malignant passion, hard to cure". Amen, it is. Here in the United States we have elevated it to a virtue and disguised it as drive, hustle, thrift, enterprise, success.

There is no way of calculating the amount of human sadness that has been generated by man's incapacity to control greed. Mark Twain was coming close to the heart of it when he said:

"Man is the only animal that robs his helpless fellow of his country - takes possession of it and drives him out of it or destroys him. Man has done this in all the ages. There is not an acre of ground on the globe that is in possession of its rightful owner, or that has not been taken away from owner after owner, cycle after cycle, by force and bloodshed."

Covetousness. The French entomologist, Henri Fabre, talks about a creature known as the philanthus - a bee eating wasp. Just reading about this insect makes the skin crawl. This bee-eating wasp squeezes its victim and licks the honey from the victim's extended tongue as it dies. Fabre writes,

"At the moment of some such horrible banquet, I have seen the wasp, with her prey, seized by the Mantis: the bandit was rifled by another bandit. And here is an awful detail. While the Mantis held her transfixed under the points of the double saw and was already munching her belly, the Wasp continued to lick the honey of her Bee, unable to relinquish the delicious food even amid the terrors of death".

Not very pretty, to be sure, but somehow when I read that the fix of this city in recent years came to my mind.

There is no society in which everyone does everything for love. We know this. But I believe a society in which no one will do anything except for money is in serious trouble. Indeed, covetousness.

The covetous life is rooted in anxiety. It must, therefore, be replaced by the life of trust.

CLOSING Jesus goes on in this chapter of Luke to speak of the birds of the air that neither sow nor reap, nor gather into barns. He goes on to speak of lilies that neither toil nor spin, yet boast a glory that even Solomon could not match. Of purses that not not grow old, with treasures that do not fail. Of having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

"Master, speak to my brother that he divide the inheritance with me."
"Who made me a judge over you?" Remember this, if you can, that Jesus won't help you get what's coming to you. But He'll give you what you could never in a thousand years deserve, a life in God that nothing can destroy. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear".

PRAYER "Help us, dear God, to act upon the truth that we know. That with your kingdom first in our hearts, that all of our other longings and other relationships may be rightly ordered, for Your glory and our good. Through Jesus, we pray. Amen