

Matthew 22:34–46 (NRSV)

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “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” ’?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Simple and Complicated

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: October 23, 2011 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: *Matthew 22:34-46*

Neither the Pharisees nor Jesus ask hard questions, at least to start with. If you were in school, you would like their quizzes. What is the greatest commandment? Every devout Judean knew the laws, all 613 commandments of Moses. The commandments formed the heart of their prayer life. They touched them every day. When the Pharisees asked Jesus what was the greatest among the commandments, he easily turned to Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18 and gave a perfectly uncontroversial answer: ‘you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ‘You must love your neighbor as yourself.’

Next came Jesus’ turn to ask the questions. And he threw a softball, too. “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” A veritable flood of what we think of as Advent readings would have sprung to the minds of the Pharisees.

Isaiah 11:1 (NRSV)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Jeremiah 23:5 (NRSV)

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

Ezekiel 34:23 (NRSV)

I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd.

Amos 9:11 (NRSV)

On that day I will raise up
the booth of David that is fallen,
and repair its breaches,
and raise up its ruins,
and rebuild it as in the days of old;

The answer is obvious. The Messiah is to be the son of David. Matthew himself goes to great lengths to point this out in the first chapter of the Gospel.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

That is just one-third of the generations that Matthew accounts, in this genealogy that readers of the Gospel almost always skip over. We may skip over it, but for Matthew it was crucial. It was Jesus’ family tree, and it authenticated Jesus’ descent. He was a son of David.

While the Pharisees would not have accepted that Jesus was the Messiah, they would have had little quibble with the right and obvious answer to the question. Whose son is the Messiah? Easy. The son of David.

Then, all of a sudden, the easy questions are over. Jesus quotes Psalm 110: The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand.” This sentence is more than a little enigmatic. The lord said to my Lord. Is the Lord talking to himself? The Lord said to my Lord. Whose Lord is whose? Is there more than one Lord? Is one Lord related to another Lord? Then Jesus says, “If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” Calls who Lord? Whose son? Lord, what is going on in this passage?

It reminds me of a very funny country song from 1947 written by Dwight Latham and Moe Jaffe called, “I am my own Grandpa.” You can find any number of sung renditions on the internet, but just a portion of the lyrics go like this: {slide 1}

Many, many years ago when I was twenty-three
I was married to a widow who was pretty as could be.
This widow had a grown-up daughter who had hair of red.
My father fell in love with her and soon they, too, were wed.
My wife is now my mother's mother, and it makes me blue
Because, although she is my wife, she's my grandmother too.
If my wife is my grandmother, then I am her grandchild
And every time I think of it, it nearly drives me wild
For now I have become the strangest case you ever saw
As husband of my grandmother, I am my own grandpa.

In actuality, the song isn't far off from what's happening in this confounding passage. The Lord said to my Lord. The first problem is that we can't tell from the English text, and almost every translation leaves it just this obscure, we can't tell who the Lord is or if there is more than one—the Lord said to my Lord. But the underlying Hebrew is clearer. A clearer translation would say, “Yahweh said to my Lord.” Suddenly a little clarity comes. David is quoting Yahweh, God. David says, “God said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand.’”

Throughout the New testament it is understood that in the Psalm Yahweh, or God, is talking to the Messiah. So, David says, “God said to the Messiah, sit at my right hand.” There's little question that that is the plain meaning Jesus has in mind in quoting this passage in our Gospel reading.

But that doesn't fully clarify things, does it? For Jesus now poses a real conundrum for the Pharisees. If David thinks of the Messiah as his Lord, sitting at the right hand of God, how can the Messiah also be his son, son of David? Somewhat like the old grandpa song, the very human king David finds himself the father of the divine Lord and Messiah, sitting at God's right hand. Jesus asks the Pharisees, “How can that be?” None of the Pharisees was able to give Jesus an answer.

We've come to a place where you may be asking, are we playing a game of trick questions and silly puzzles? Are we doing a version of how many angels can stand on the head of a pin? Is the point of this story that Jesus got the best of the Pharisees in a rhetorical exchange? Is this story preserved for us just to prove that Jesus was a very clever guy, maybe so clever you would have to grant that he was the best in Galilee and Judea?

Well, it's hard to deny that Jesus often shows up his opponents, not the least the Judean authorities. But hardly ever is showing up others the main point. And it's not the main point here. Jesus is posing a real question for the Pharisees.

The Pharisees, like many if not most in Judea, longed for a Messiah. In almost every case the Messiah they envisioned was a warrior in the line of King David, a warrior who would oust the foreigners who occupied of the Promised Land.

This was the answer the Pharisees gave to Jesus' question. Whose son is the Messiah? The son of David. A savior king in the Davidic line.

But Jesus is ultimately claiming to be a different kind of Messiah.

Jesus is making claim to be a different kind of Messiah, a different kind of king. "My kingdom is not of this world," he says to Pilate. He is not a Davidic king, or at least he is not a Davidic king in the old mold. For he is also the son of God—Yahweh calls the one who sits at his right hand David's Lord. In this little game with the Pharisees, Jesus is giving them a glimpse of the argument. He quotes Psalm 100 to prove that all along the Judeans have been mistaken to expect a king in the ordinary sense. {slide 2}

In this little debate with the Pharisees Jesus is confounding them with something like, I am my own grandpa. Jesus is in the lineage of David, to be sure—Matthew gives us the genealogy; he is David's son—and he is the son of God, whom Yahweh calls David's Lord. The Messiah is both David's son and David's Lord. No wonder the Pharisees leave scratching their heads.

Here in Matthew, and Matthew would say in the Psalms, too, we find the groundwork for what would become the Christian formulation—Jesus, fully human, fully divine; Jesus the son of David, Jesus the son of God.

But you still may be asking, what difference does it make? Who cares about the genealogy of Jesus? Who cares about this esoteric formulation—fully human, fully divine—anyway? Well, I'm here to tell you that these issues make a whale of a difference.

First of all, Jesus uses his origins to make clear that he is not a military king. In that sense, he is not what people expected as the Davidic Messiah. There had been plenty of the others before him who said they were the Messiah, or at least there had been plenty of pretenders. Many times in the Roman years revolutionaries arose and lead revolts against the empire, claiming in one way or another to be Judea's Messiah come at last. One such revolt took place near the time of Jesus' birth in the town of Sepphoris, less than four miles from Nazareth. A revolutionary named Judah led the revolt, and, according to Josephus, "The Roman governor of Syria, Varus, responded swiftly. ... His legions sacked Sepphoris, reduced the city to ashes, and sold its inhabitants as slaves.¹ In Jesus' childhood it would have been as though the city still lay smoldering.

Jesus was adamant that this was not his way. He was the Messiah of the beatitudes, of the Sermon on the Mount, of turn the other cheek, walk the extra mile and pull the Samaritan out of the ditch. He was the Messiah of feed my sheep, and as it says in this morning's passage the Messiah of love your neighbor as yourself. In our own time we may still turn to him to bless our bloodshed, and our attempts at gaining salvation through our own might, but Jesus has made it clear from the beginning that this is not the kind of Messiah he is.

So, the first important difference this new kind of Messiah makes is that he gives us a new path to follow, and that path is marked by love, compassion and forgiveness. And he calls us to live in the light of this path.

¹ Freedman, D. N. (1996). *Vol. 5: The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (1091). New York: Doubleday.

But there's more. A wise man could have come up with this idea of compassion and forgiveness. Wise men did, in fact. The prophets, long before Jesus, proclaimed such a way of living. Throughout Israel's history she was reminded to look after the widow, the lame and the sojourner. One version of ancient Israel's long narrative history is of a people who time after time brought destruction upon themselves because they did not live this way, did not walk in the light of the Lord.

But Jesus gives us more than this path to follow. He gives us this path, alright, but he gives us more. Jesus, son of God, Divine Savior, son of David, Messiah—fully human, fully divine—sees the ideal to which we are called, the ideal that Jeremiah imagines to be written on our hearts. But Jesus, son of God, Divine Savior, son of David, Messiah—fully human, fully divine—sees also our human frailty and limitedness that means we do not and cannot be all that God wishes for us or that we wish for ourselves. Whether we like the language of sin and fallenness or not, most of us can empathize with Paul in Romans when he says, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” It is right here, just at this point that God intervenes on our behalf, as it says in Colossians, “He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

No wonder David calls him Lord, this Messiah, on the one hand born out of his own lineage, but on the other the Son of God, this Messiah who knows our hearts at their best and worst, cradles those hearts, however aching and broken they may be, and restores them, and infuses them with new life. More than the son of David, he makes more of us than our humanity alone can accomplish. As the old hymn says, “What wondrous love is this!” Amen.