

Elephants in Refrigerators Oct 3, 2021

I'd like to start off today with a few riddles.

How do you put an elephant in a refrigerator?

You open the door, put the elephant in, and close the door.

How do you put a giraffe in a refrigerator?

You open the door, take out the elephant, put in the giraffe, and close the door.

One day, the lion, king of all the animals, called an important meeting for all the animals to attend. Every animal came, except for one. Which animal didn't come?

The giraffe. She was still in the refrigerator.

You find yourself at a crocodile-infested river. You have to get across to the other side. How do you cross the river safely?

Just swim. The crocodiles are all at the lion's meeting.

When I first heard those riddles, I remember feeling cheated, though I couldn't put my finger on the reason why. Now, after having thought about those silly riddles for years, I've come to realize the reason: the riddles operate on assumptions that you don't know about. And those assumptions change or grow with each new riddle.

So the first one, the assumption is that there is a refrigerator big enough to fit an elephant.

Then: the refrigerator in this riddle is the same fridge as the previous one, and the events with the giraffe are occurring after the events with the elephant.

Then: "the lion's meeting is part of the same storyline as the refrigerator and the animals."

Finally, "The king's meeting is part of this timeline too."

The riddles only work because there are underlying assumptions that are purposely undefined.

(And I'll be honest, this is the kind of stuff I think about when I'm vacuuming or driving or washing dishes or some other mindless task. Other people use their mental free time to think, "What will I have for dinner?" I think, "Here's why that riddle was intentionally misleading and thus unfair." A scary glimpse into Andrew's mind.)

Having defined assumptions is important to any story. Think of any classic story; let's say Jack and the Beanstalk. Jack and the Beanstalk is interesting because we (the listeners) have assumptions about how tall bean plants grow, and we have assumptions about whether there are giants who live in the sky and whether geese can lay golden eggs, and the story explores the possibility, "What if those assumptions weren't true?"

When we read the Bible (and especially the Gospels), we don't always know the assumptions that are inherent in a story. That's because we aren't the intended audience. We aren't Jewish townspeople living in the 1st century who know the Jewish law better than any other document.

So it's important, whenever we read the Bible, to think about the context, or the assumptions under which Jesus or his listeners are working.

That's especially true today, when Jesus delivers his thoughts about divorce and children.

Assumption #1 in Jesus' time: Men are the stronger gender, more fit to rule and make decisions. This was a patriarchal society, where women were considered lower than men, less than men. I want to be clear: I'm not saying that this is right. I do not think this is how society should be. But that's how it was in Jesus' lifetime.

Assumption #2: Marriage was between a man and a woman. Again, I'm not saying that is right, but same-sex marriage was not even on anyone's radar in the 1st century.

Assumption #3: Everyone knew the Torah, or the first 5 books of what we call the Old Testament. Those books contained the Law of Moses, which included a rule that men could write a certificate of divorce to send off their wives.

Assumption #4: Children were not full human beings. They had no rights or claims to possessions; they were considered the property of their parents, as pets might be considered today.

Those are (some of) the assumptions of society in Jesus' day. And now, only now that we know that context, we can look at Jesus' words.

The Pharisees test Jesus by asking him his thoughts on divorce. They know what the Old Testament says. They want to trap this teacher. Jesus gives a new take on divorce. The old law was incredibly patriarchal, incredibly harmful to women (who were often left destitute after a divorce). So Jesus is intentionally changing things. Jesus says, "This terrible practice of divorce which gives all the rights to a husband and none to a wife is wrong. Divorce is wrong. Marriage is sacred."

That's pretty powerful. That's pretty liberating. That is a serious challenge to the male-dominated institution of marriage in society at that time. Jesus is offering a word of hope and freedom to women who had been hurt by divorce. And what's more, Jesus calls men to responsibility in the second part of our reading. Adultery, which was a crime committed by married women (not men) is now (Jesus says) a sin that men can commit too.

Along with this, Jesus is also redefining marriage as a sacred bond, not a legal arrangement. Jesus calls those who are married (and especially married men) to a higher standard than they were previously held to.

So looking at the societal context, we can see what assumptions Jesus is challenging.

What Jesus is NOT saying here is, "Marriage is only between a man and a woman." This passage has been used to argue against same-sex marriage, and to do that is to take this out of context.

Also, what Jesus is NOT saying is divorce is wrong in all situations and circumstances, especially divorce as it happens today. This is not a passage to say that you should stay in an

unhealthy or even abusive marriage. Jesus is saying that divorce is deeply painful, as any divorcee knows, because it involves taking one couple, one unit, and splitting it. That is painful and difficult, because marriage is so sacred and deep. But I don't think Jesus is calling anyone to stay in a terribly unhealthy marriage.

No, this is a teaching that calls people to responsibility and rejects the one-sided nature of divorce that was practiced in his time. Jesus is speaking up for the rights of women.

And then things turn a bit lighter. We turn away from divorce and the Pharisees and the hardness of their hearts...to children. As parents bring their kids to Jesus, the disciples try to shoo them away for being bothersome. But again, Jesus turns things on their heads. Even though children are not particularly valued in this day, Jesus still welcomes them.

And not only does Jesus take the kids in his arms and bless them, but he also says, "Children are our role models. Whoever doesn't receive the kingdom of God like a child cannot see it realized." Again, breaking assumptions.

The question is, What does that mean, for adults to emulate children? What qualities of kids are adults supposed to embody?

- Maybe it's that children are often hopeful and joyful
- Maybe, based on what Jesus had said before, children are seen as the least and servants of all, and so we are called to be servants of all
- Maybe it's that, unlike the Pharisees whom Jesus said have hard hearts, kids have hearts that are tender and loving and genuine
- Maybe it is that children are trusting, and we should trust God with the same intensity

I will say that this last point, the trust of children, is one that strikes me. When our daughter Cora was first born, I was surprised when she would put her arms around Becca and me, because Cora didn't know who we were. We could've been axe murderers, for all she knew. But she trusted us (and anyone who held her) wholeheartedly, because she was completely dependent on us. That example of complete trust and dependence on God may be what Jesus is inviting us to.

Along with others. There are a lot of qualities in children to respect and emulate as adults. We're not sure which of these qualities Jesus was pointing to. But it's clear that Jesus is going against the typical assumptions to lift up kids as role models in our faith.

It's a good reminder for us today, that Jesus challenged the norms of his society. I wonder if there are assumptions, if there are unspoken rules in our lives today, that need to be examined and even questioned. Something to think about when you read the paper or listen to the news.

Maybe the assumption that cheaper is better, an assumption leads to exploitation of workers?
Maybe the assumption that someone needs to be wrong in order for me to be right?
Maybe the assumption that freedom means I can do whatever I want, whenever I want, regardless of how it affects others?

And closer to home, what are the assumptions in our church life that need to be looked at? Are there practices that we do that get in the way of our relationship with Jesus?

Be on the lookout for assumptions that can be examined and challenged. Because that is what Jesus did. And it brought his followers closer to God.

Amen.

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