

Whenever the text of the day has an attorney in it I have a hard time resisting telling lawyer jokes. Therefore, I don't. I emailed a number of attorneys this past week and told them that my lawyer jokes were a little stale and wondered if they had any new ones to offer. They are such a good source for such about themselves. They didn't fail me.

Mark Twain finished speaking at a New England society banquet when attorney William M. Evarts stood up with his hands in his pockets, as was his custom, and remarked: "Does it not seem unusual to this gathering that a professional humorist should really appear funny?"

Twain stood back up and remarked with his familiar drawl: "Does it not also appear strange to this assembly that a lawyer should have his hands in his own pockets?"¹

Two attorneys went into a diner and ordered two drinks. Then they took sandwiches from their briefcases and began to eat them.

The waiter became quite concerned and went over to them and said, "You can't eat your own sandwiches in here!"

The attorneys looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders and exchanged sandwiches.

The following are in a book called Disorder in the Courts. They are actual things said in a courtroom.

Q: What is your date of birth? A: July 15th

Q: What year? A: Every year.

Q: How old is your son, the one living with you?

A: Thirty-eight or thirty-five, I can't remember which.

Q: How long has he lived with you?

A: Forty-five years.

Q: Now doctor, isn't it true that when a person dies in his sleep, he doesn't know about it until the next morning?

Q: How was your first marriage terminated?

A: By death.

Q: And by whose death was it terminated?²

A doctor and a lawyer were talking at a dinner party. A woman approached the two of them and asked the doctor for advice regarding her husband's cold symptoms. The doctor made some recommendations. She thanked him and left. The doctor turned to his lawyer friend and said, "I never know what to do in that situation. I feel uncomfortable giving advice but think it would appear rude if I didn't. I wonder whether I should send her a bill."

The lawyer responded, “Of course you should. This is your livelihood and you have to pay for malpractice insurance to protect your practice.”

The next day, the doctor sent a bill to the woman and the lawyer sent one to the doctor.

One more: Do you know why they bury attorneys in graves 20’ deep? Because deep down they’re really nice people.

There’s no question that sometimes lawyers don’t come off too well. Now, that’s not true of any of the lawyers in this church, but the behavior of some has earned for the lot the honor of being the brunt of such joke telling. The lawyer in today’s reading according to the familiar 10th chapter of Luke is one such questionable legal person.

The first thing we observe is that the lawyer wanted to test Jesus – to see if Jesus really knew the faith and the law on which it was based. And so he posed this question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus preps the lawyer and the rest of those listening in for his radical answer – that is, he sets the stage for his interpretation – by asking the lawyer to share what he knows from his field of expertise – the law: “Well, sir, tell us, what is written in the law? How do you read what the law offers? What do you already know?”

Jesus gave the lawyer an opportunity to parade his own knowledge before the audience. He allowed him the stage to expound on what he knew. And the lawyer, having failed to entrap Jesus, decided to go for it – for the praise, the recognition, and walked onto center stage and waxed eloquently: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself.”

It’s important to note that by this time in history Jewish scholarship and tradition had distilled the 613 points of the mosaic law into these two commandments from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. The lawyer showed he had paid attention in the Law of Moses 100 course. He’d remembered the dean of the law school talking about “...loving the Lord with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind” as being sort of a shorthand way of arguing that all that makes up our humanity must be involved in loving God. Likewise, he’d been paying attention the day in class when his brilliant instructor argued that out of this tangled, all-consuming love of God, which was the ultimate commandment, grew the second and inseparable one which stated that this included “loving your neighbor as yourself.” “Loving God includes loving yourself and your neighbor.” “Loving God includes being concerned about one’s community.”

The brilliance of his answer gained the lawyer the recognition he perhaps hoped he’d receive as Jesus said to him: “Correct. Well done. If you live according to these teachings from the law, you will live.”

It was then the lawyer showed the stuff of which he was really made. He wasn’t satisfied with Jesus’ blanket acceptance of his summation of all Jewish law. He either thought he had Jesus on the ropes and continuing would finish him off, or, he thought Jesus had won the first round and he needed to try again. He had no problem with the loving and obeying God part, you understand, but that part about loving the neighbor – well, he had always thought that a little farfetched. He remembered some pretty good discussions in law school about this idea. One of the issues often debated was who met the qualifications of being a neighbor. The lawyer wasn’t out for a little recreational argumentation though. It’s believed that what he really wanted to do

was justify himself – you know, justify the way he lived out this aspect of the law as the norm. “I have a little problem with this neighbor part, Jesus, and I was wondering if you could tell me, Jesus, “Who is my neighbor?”

The lawyer’s question is a common one. It’s one I sense in my life – maybe you do too once in awhile. When we think of the demands others make on our limited resources of time, energy, and money – when we think of the hundreds of thousands, the millions we hear about that are starving or at best leading impaired lives because of malnutrition and other disadvantages – doesn’t it cross our mind that it would sure be helpful if someone would narrow the field of those we should be concerned about? Aren’t there times when we wonder if there are some who deserve our compassion and some who don’t? Don’t we wonder at times if there’s a difference between the compassion we should offer for babies with AIDS and adults who practice risky sexual behavior? Don’t we wonder if some are deserving of our compassion and others of our condemnation? Are there not times when we turn to Jesus for justification just like the lawyer did and ask: “Who really is our neighbor, Jesus?” We’re hoping for some interpretation that will allow us not to feel guilty about all these situations so we can set some persons outside those for whom we need to have a neighborly concern.

Jesus obliged the lawyer by telling one of the most beloved stories in the New Testament – this story of the Good Samaritan. It’s a parable that pushes the definition of neighbor beyond boundaries of area or race or age or religion or politics or ideology or class or sex and creates this new understanding defined as those in need and those who meet the needs.

The setting and the characters Jesus used in his short story were familiar to his listeners. The Jericho Road was a busy and dangerous one – bands of outlaws hid out in the rough terrain and preyed upon the constant flow of travelers. The priests and the Levi were committed, learned, observant and obedient people of Jesus’ day. They were clearly identified as “moral” and “upright.” They should have been motivated to help the wounded traveler out of their understanding of the law and their religious positions.³ To be fair we probably should have started this sermon with a few jokes about clergy types also. There’s plenty such material out there about us as well – and just as deserved.

The persons listening to the parable probably had no problem with the “religious” and the “righteous” and the “establishment” being used as the “bad guys” in Jesus story. But you can be sure, they winced when Jesus introduced the Samaritan as the hero. Words like “good” and “Samaritan” were impossible to think of together.

“To the attorney, Jesus said, ‘Which of these three do you think proved a neighbor to the vagrant?’

“The lawyer said, ‘The one who had compassion.’

“And Jesus said, ‘Go and do likewise.’”

And the attorney knew he’d been had – that he’d lost the battle.

A Chicago minister was riding the subway one bitterly cold winter day when an old woman shuffled aboard the car in which he was riding. Her clothes were ragged and certainly lacking for the weather. Her hands were white, cracked and bony. She clutched a worn shawl tightly around her. The minister looked at her with both wonder and pity.

An energetic young man got on at the next stop. He was dressed quite a bit better and especially warmer. The minister couldn't help but notice that his eyes lingered briefly on the woman as he found a seat. The young man got up to get off three stops later, and as the train slowed, he glided by the woman to the other door and disappeared into the tunnel.

On the woman's lap lay the young man's brown leather gloves. The minister noted, "I don't know if he was a believer in Christ or not. But I do know this: He saw her need and responded with compassion – while I just sat there. It never occurred to me to give her my gloves. That young man showed compassion in a way I'll never forget."⁴

When we hear the Good Samaritan parable we need to hear it with fresh ears with a message for us in our day. We need to hear it as more than simply a Boy Scout good-deed story. Robert McAfee Brown suggested a few years ago that we Americans perhaps should hear it as a "Good Russian" parable – you know, an undocumented worker gets mugged and left for dead in the area on the east side of High Street in the campus area and a United Methodist minister in the area hurriedly walks by because he's late for a social service agency meeting and a University area commission member does likewise because an important vote is being taken about zoning in the neighborhood. And finally, an atheistic Russian woman stops and plays the Good Samaritan role.⁵ Perhaps you're starting to get the picture that the words Presbyterian and Arab in the sermon title were only placeholders.

The question is not who our neighbors are, but whether we are neighbors. Neighbors are not defined by race, by religion, by economics, by sexual orientation, or by geography. The "good neighbor" is the one who has mercy – shows mercy – sees with eyes and heart – is moved with compassion. "The priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan all travel the same road, only the Samaritan sees. He sees not a Jew, a Muslim, a Christian, a Hispanic, a protestant, a catholic, a straight, a gay; only a (person), a (person) in need."⁶ It's about the action of the individual – the act of showing mercy – that determines who is a neighbor to another - not the culture, the neighborhood, the nationality, the age, the sex, the social standing, the club, the school, class or salary made or not made. It really is possible to be a good Presbyterian, a good Arab, a good United Methodist, a good Lindenite, a good University of Michigan grad, a good republican, a good democrat, a good liberal, a good evangelical. And when we believe it and live it, we surely will be channels of peace in this world. Judy.

1. Alex Ayres, editor, The Wit and Wisdom of Mark Twain (New York: Harper and Row, 1987).
2. Charles M. Sevilla, Disorder in the Court (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1992),
3. Leonard I. Sweet, "What Is a Good Samaritan?", Homiletics, July-September, 1995, p. 11.
4. Our Daily Bread, February 6, 1997, quoted in The Abingdon Preaching Annual, 2001, p. 263.
5. Robert McAfee Brown, Unexpected News: Reading the Bible with Third World Eyes (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984).
6. Dr. J. Howard Olds, "Radical Love in the Neighborhood," Faith Breaks: Thoughts On Making It a Good Day (ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., 2008), 0-000-3398.