

“Jesus, Lawyers and Lost Sheep”

Lectionary Text: Luke 15: 1-10

I want to preface my sermon today with a few disclaimers. First, I am not a trained minister. Second, I will make references to pop culture during the sermon. If you are not familiar with those references, feel free to ask me about them after the service. Third, I am in the unenviable position of preaching after Guiherme Almeida and Mandy McMichael, and the week before Nathan Stone, all of whom are excellent preachers. So please don't judge me too harshly by comparison.

As Guiherme mentioned in his sermon two weeks ago, in the New Testament the Pharisees and scribes are frequently portrayed as trying to trip Jesus up and as laying traps for Jesus regarding his interpretations of Jewish Law. Throughout the Gospels, the Pharisees and scribes cross-examine Jesus with tricky questions and deliver not-so-veiled criticisms about his association with both social outcasts and sinners.

But who were the Pharisees and scribes that were always giving Jesus such a hard time?

The Pharisees and scribes were men who had studied the Jewish Law. Many Pharisees, and all scribes, could draft legal documents, such as contracts for marriage, divorce, inheritance, mortgages, sales of land, and other legal papers. They debated and pontificated about how the Law should be applied in various everyday situations. They pronounced their judgments on what they thought to be right and wrong according to the Law. So, basically, you know, they were lawyers.

This is interesting to me personally because I have been a lawyer for the past 18 years.

Lawyers in modern times don't exactly have the best reputation. This is frequently evident in pop culture. For instance, in 1997, the same year that I decided to go to law school, two movies came out that weren't particularly kind to lawyers. In the first movie, Liar Liar, Jim Carrey plays the part of a dishonest attorney whose devotion to his work gets in the way of his family relationships. At the beginning of the movie, his son is asked by his teacher at school what his father does for a living. He responds by saying, "My Dad is a liar." The teacher seeks clarification, and then he says, "He wears a suit and goes to court and talks to the Judge." The teacher says, "Oh, I see, he is a lawyer." In response, the boy shrugs his shoulders – as if to say, "yeah, it's kind of the same thing."

In a somewhat more sinister movie that came out later that same year called The Devil's Advocate, lawyers are portrayed as demons in human form, and Al Pacino plays the part of Satan, who in the movie has set up shop as the head partner at a big law firm in New York City. In the final, climactic, and highly entertaining scene of the movie, Pacino's character reveals that lawyers are a key part of his plan for an ultimate confrontation against God for universal domination.

Needless to say, these movies takes a pretty dim view of lawyers.

And of course, there are a ton of lawyer jokes. Like, "Q: How can you tell when a lawyer is lying? A: His lips are moving." Or the one about the father and child walking through a cemetery. They come across a headstone that says, "Here lies a lawyer and a true Christian." The child

looks up at the father and asks, “Daddy, why are there two people buried in one grave?”

While scriptwriters and others have had a lot of fun at lawyers’ expense, the New Testament also doesn’t have much good to say about the lawyers of Jesus’ time. One source I reviewed says there are at least 63 references to lawyers and teachers of the law in the New Testament, and none of them are positive. Indeed, lawyers often serve as literary foils for Jesus in the New Testament, presenting him with numerous opportunities to reveal Truth. For their part, the lawyers hide behind technicalities and the letter of the law in order to avoid helping their neighbors and to justify their own narrow-minded prejudices. They are legalistic and judgmental to the point of not being charitable, kind, or compassionate, and so they are repeatedly called-out by Jesus for these shortcomings.

In the scripture passage from today’s lectionary, the lawyers are “grumbling” – which in my experience, is a very lawyerly thing to do – grumbling about the fact that Jesus welcomes and breaks bread with social outcasts and sinners.

Jesus responds to the grumbling lawyers by telling them the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin, in which a sinner who repents is compared to a lost sheep that is found by a shepherd, and a lost coin that is found by a woman who is cleaning her house looking for it.

I think we can understand these two parables in the context of the scripture passage as stories about Jesus confronting overly judgmental people with their unwillingness to welcome and break bread with other human beings that society had defined as outcasts and as unworthy. Jesus’ actions and parables reaffirm that welcoming and providing love,

physical support, and care to outcasts, exiles, and the socially undesirable has always been an important aspect of our tradition that the Pharisees, both then and now, have deliberately chosen to ignore.

For instance, Leviticus 19:34 (which is cited on a protest sign hanging in Megan's office) says "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." Offering hospitality, refuge, and protection to foreigners, strangers, and social outcasts is fundamentally important in our faith tradition. And, believe it or not, there are some lawyers in our own society who do this type of work full-time, such as Anali Looper at American Gateways here in Waco, whom many of you know.

Now the other way to understand these two parables may be a little more difficult to talk about because it requires talking about "sin." In explaining the Parables of the Lost Coin and the Lost Sheep, Jesus clearly talked about rejoicing over the repentance of even one sinner. The concepts of "sin" and "repentance" are not something we talk about all that much at Lake Shore. Possibly, this is because we are uncomfortable with some of the traditional definitions of sin. While we would all agree that serious crimes like murder and rape are sins, I think many of us come from traditions or churches where "sin" allegedly included a whole host of behaviors and actions that are not, in and of themselves, sinful. For instance, the traditional Southern Baptist view on dancing was very negative, but as my daughter Maddy will tell anyone in this room, dancing is certainly not a sin, and in fact, it can be a beautiful way to worship and glorify God.

So, we need some way to reframe our conversation about sin and repentance. I think it is helpful to look at another story involving Jesus and \*surprise\* a lawyer.

There are three Gospel accounts regarding a lawyer asking Jesus what is the greatest commandment in the Law. The first two of these are found in Matthew and Mark, but I like the version in Luke Chapter 10. A lawyer asks Jesus which is the greatest commandment, and Jesus, like a good law school professor, turns the question around and asks the lawyer, “[w]hat is written in the Law? How do you read it?” The lawyer responds, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And Jesus says YES! A+ You get a Gold Star for today!

So the lawyer gets it right, right?...well, sort of...

Being a typical lawyer, he has to ask Jesus what should be the totally unnecessary follow-up question: “[w]ho is my neighbor?” The lawyer, like Heidi Klum on the TV show Project Runway, is really asking Jesus, “Who’s In?” and “Who’s Out?” Who is my neighbor and who am I free to ignore?

Jesus responds to the lawyer by telling the story of the Good Samaritan in order to illustrate that: A) Everyone is your neighbor, no exceptions, nobody has to leave the runway; and B) the lens of your perception is clouded and flawed if you have bought-in to society’s judgments about “who’s in” and “who’s out.”

But, going back to what I was saying earlier, how does this discussion between Jesus and a lawyer regarding the Greatest Commandment relate to the concepts of sin and repentance in today's parables?

First, I think when we fail to love God, or when God is not at the center of our lives and has been replaced by something else, then we are straying and we have lost our way.

Second, when we fail to accept, forgive, and care for the people around us, for whatever reasons, we are forgetting God's commandment about loving our neighbors. And that love for our neighbors necessarily must extend even to those that we don't think are worthy of our love and those that we would rather treat as outcasts.

Third, when Jesus talks about the sinner who is the lost sheep or the lost coin, he is really talking about all of us at some point in our lives. All of us, you and me, have fallen short of the glory of God at various times and in various ways. Sometimes we fall short in big ways, and sometimes in small ways. But, all of us have lost our way at some point and need to be found again. We all from time-to-time need help re-focusing our minds and our hearts on what actually matters.

All too often we focus on things other than God and other than our neighbor. It is easy to do. There are so many distractions. We live in a plugged in, wired-in, wireless, streaming, mobile, texting, posting, tweeting, 24-7, on-the-go world that focuses on "me" and not on God and certainly not on other people. We experience FOMO – which is the fear of missing out on fun and exciting activities and experiences, when we should be afraid of missing out on opportunities to worship God and serve other human beings.

We focus on ourselves and on our own concerns so obsessively that we are unaware of our neighbors' pain and suffering. We fixate on becoming more financially, emotionally, and physically fit, and neglect those around us who are in need, forget to visit those who are sick, and fail to befriend our neighbor that is depressed and anxious. We do not give others the space to tell us what they need or how their lives are going.<sup>1</sup> In our mixed-up, over-scheduled, chaotic, self-centered lives, there is little time, attention, or energy left for God or our neighbor.

Sometimes we harbor grudges against people who have hurt our feelings in the past, not realizing that the person we are mad at is hurting too and just needs a kind word. Like the Pharisees, we are judgmental, self-righteous, and full of pride. We don't want to forgive, and we definitely don't want to break bread with people who are in the "other group" or who just don't act like us or think like us.

Like the Pharisees, we fall victim to prejudicial thoughts that are the unfortunate baggage of our past without swiftly renouncing and rejecting those destructive thoughts when they arise. We are not always aware of our privileges, and even when we are, we frequently fail to use them to support, defend, and uplift those who are less privileged.

We let the depressing news of current events and all the evil that we see on TV and the Internet overwhelm us and drive away our joy. This destroys our ability to work for what is right and good. We allow our own hurt and our pain about the unfair blows that life has dealt us cause us to become angry at God, to reject God.

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<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion about giving people space, see Bob Baird's article entitled: [The great gift of space and quiet to understand one another](#) which appeared in the Waco Tribune Herald this morning (September 15, 2019). This is a reference to Bob's article.

We are the lost sheep. We are the lost coin.

My friends, the Good News, according to Jesus Christ, is that there is a God that is seeking us, each of us. The universe that we inhabit has sharp edges and dark places. There is no denying that. And there is no denying that many of us have lost our way. But God is seeking us out, even in the middle of our pain, our sin, and our despair. And we all, each of us, have the ability to repent – which literally means to change our minds and hearts. Instead of turning our backs on this world and those around us, we can choose to turn back toward God and to go back to the work of loving our neighbors. It is never too late to make these changes.

As Edmund Spenser wrote, “Nothing is lost, that may be found if sought.”<sup>2</sup> God is seeking us, so we are not ultimately lost. This is not just the Good News, it is great news! Jesus says in these two parables that each one of us is loved and each one of us is of such amazing, stunning, great value – to the extent that the King of the entire Universe seeks after us like the shepherd that is looking for his one lost sheep; so much so that the Queen of the entire Universe seeks after us like the woman who cleans her whole house from top to bottom to find just one lost coin.

Our great hope and faith is that each and every one of us will be found by God’s love and grace every time that we lose our way, that each of us will finally recognize and internalize that there is a seat for each of us, and for each of our neighbors, at the table where God’s banquet feast is spread, and that someday we can all join together in giving

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<sup>2</sup> The Faerie Queene, by Edmund Spenser



voice to the words of John Newton's hymn, "what once was lost, now is found."

And who knows, maybe, just maybe, there's even hope for lawyers too? 😊