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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 25)
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Lectionary Year A: Matthew 22:34-46

People often don't speak well of a lot of professions, but no profession gets quite as much abuse as the legal profession. It's pretty common -- and, dare I say, acceptable -- to beat up on lawyers. In the popular imagination, lawyers are merely symbols of greed, of reckless and sleazy ambition, and of just about everything that's wrong with this country today. When you get to the bottom of the legal barrel, though, you will find the most despised species of lawyer -- the so-called ambulance chaser.

I first became familiar with the term ambulance chaser in college, when, in fact, I was strongly considering a career in law. As you might guess, an ambulance chaser is a lawyer who actively pursues ill and/or injured persons in order to talk them into suing someone for personal injury or malpractice. Of course, what makes this all so revolting is the fact that lawyers who do this have little or no concern for the ill and injured -- to the point that their presence at a victim's bedside becomes a case study in tactlessness and disrespect.

This hasn't gone unnoticed by our friends over at Saturday Night Live.

Many years ago, Saturday Night Live featured a spot-on parody of the ambulance-chasing wing of the legal profession. It was a commercial for Green and Fazio, a fictitious law firm specializing in personal injury litigation. This was right about the time when all those TV ads started popping up with an opening question like "Have you or a loved one been injured in an accident?" Well, not to be outdone, Saturday Night Live introduced us to the law firm of Green and Fazio, featuring the late, great Phil Hartman as Barry Green, senior partner of the firm,

who listed off a series of "litigation myths."

Take myth number four, for example: "You cannot file for an accident in which you were not involved." The answer? "False."

Barry Green continues: "We at Green and Fazio realize that when an accident occurs, it's not just those involved who suffer. That's why we've pioneered in whole new areas of accident litigation, including bystander trauma, phantom whiplash, and near-collision stress disorder. Why not come in for a free consultation and let us help you collect the money you didn't even realize you were entitled to?"

Green and Fazio don't even have to chase ambulances for their prey!

Leave it to Saturday Night Live to roast the lowest species of lawyer to perfection...

But the very reason why lawyers like these are so despised is the same reason why Christ himself stuck it to our lawyer in today's Gospel text. No one likes a person who is slick, manipulative, and tricky (unless one is an extremely desperate defendant), but, try as he might, this lawyer is nowhere near as slick, manipulative, and tricky as he thinks he is. Let me read again the first few verses of our text -- "When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] 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?'" (Matthew 22:34-36).

Oooh, boy, now you've got him cornered, counselor!

Now, if you're unfamiliar with the law of the Old Testament, this might be a tricky question. But keep in mind that Jesus is very conversant in Jewish law, so for him -- both as a student of the law and as a theologian -- it isn't as tricky

as that lawyer would like it to be.

Jesus would've known that there isn't just one commandment in the law. And, no, there aren't just ten commandments in the law. Actually, there are 613 commandments -- if you count them from beginning to end in the first five books of the Old Testament.

So, which one of the 613 commandments is the greatest? Well, the question probably tells us more about the lawyer's stupidity than about Jesus' brilliance, which, I'm guessing, is precisely the way Jesus would've wanted it! Jesus answers -- authoritatively and definitively -- "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and then he follows that with "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37, 39b).

The only way in which Jesus (technically) fell short of the lawyer's request is that he offered two examples instead of just one. But the content of these two commandments is what ultimately gives them their prominence. You see, they are about relationships, which is fundamentally what being a person of faith is about. We are always in a relationship of some sort or another -- as a child of God, as a brother or sister in Christ, as a neighbor to someone in our community. This is language that we cannot escape as we exist -- from the core of our very being -- in relationship (first) to God and (second) to our neighbor.

And none of us would've expected Jesus to answer, "You shall not wear clothing composed of mixed yarns." Indeed, that is one of the 613 commandments, too, but it's a no-brainer as to why that commandment would have a much lower priority. There's nothing in it that's relational. It has nothing to do with how you treat God or your neighbor. Today, a law like that has about as much applicability to us as laws that prohibit tying up our horses on Main Street. It's just there and changing times have made it irrelevant.

Bringing things back to Green and Fazio, what would Jesus have to say to them? Maybe he'd suggest that they should respect their Lord instead of demanding favors from him, and maybe, too, he'd ask them to help their neighbors out of the goodness of their own hearts rather than out of a reckless and sleazy desire to profit from them.

This story is recalled a bit differently in Luke's Gospel. There, the lawyer asks, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" While today's text doesn't contain this wording, it wouldn't be much of a stretch to say that both versions of the question are, essentially, the same. The reason why I say this is because there's an innate human desire for clarity and certainty -- to find out that one thing that I can do to be good, to be happy, to find meaning in life, or whatever.

If only everything were so simple...

Actually, Jesus passes up the opportunity to simply teach morality in favor of a much messier path; and that's what might get missed if we stopped reading at Matthew, chapter 22, verse 40. The story of Jesus, as we know, leads to the cross...and it is from that place that our relationship with God is built. Yes, we can know what the greatest commandment is, but that is useless if we do not know what God's greatest accomplishment for us is. That greatest accomplishment is Christ's death on the cross for our sins.

To look for that one thing you can do to inherit eternal life is to look for, ultimately, the wrong thing. When it comes to salvation, there's nothing we can do to earn it; rather, we inherit eternal life through the One who gave his life for us. Saying yes to that is the only thing we can do to be a child of God forever and inherit all the rights, privileges, and duties thereunto pertaining.

Apart from the cross, therefore, the lawyer's question doesn't make a whole lot of

sense. Loving the Lord your God isn't something you muster out of your own will and cunning; rather, it's simply what you do because of what God has done for you. And it's a safe guess that for as slick, manipulative, and tricky as that lawyer thought he was, he really didn't know the whole story. What we do comes out of who we are -- namely, people in a children-of-God relationship who are called to live in relationship with each other. Hence, love the Lord and love your neighbor.

As we think of how we can be stewards of the gift of this relationship with God, it follows naturally that sharing our gifts with each other is a way to express that relationship both interpersonally and as a Church. Remember, too, that what you give reflects who you are -- a child of God who cares about the life and ministry of your church. If you have not already done so, please fill out and return your pledge card for 2021; your generosity supports virtually everything we do together -- from Sunday mornings here to weeks at General Convention, and from gatherings of our youth at St. Anne's to the Episcopal Youth Event. "How do I love my neighbor?", you might ask. Well, here's one way you can...

And while Green and Fazio can get you the money you didn't even realize you were entitled to, our Lord Jesus Christ went infinitely further by getting you the relationship you could never earn. Lawyers can ask questions, but only Jesus holds the answer...and often it's right before us when he's not even saying anything. Look to the cross. Love the Lord. Love one another.

Sometimes, counselor, it's better if you just say "no further questions" and sit down.

Amen.