

SUM AND SUBSTANCE

Almost everyone likes a good joke. In this country we begin to learn them at a very early age. Knock-knock jokes. Elephant jokes. Some people know lots of jokes and tell them all the time. My wife's Uncle Sal is like that—he's always got a new joke for you. Other folks struggle to remember the punch-line. There is nothing more frustrating than having someone tell you a joke, only to get to the end and blank out!

Over the years I've personally grown very fond of jokes about parrots. Don't ask why, I don't know why. I just like them. And my all time favorite parrot story goes like this.

Old Aunt Alice lived all by herself, and was very lonely. So she decided she needed to get a pet. So she went to the pet store, and as she walked in the door, she was greeted by a parrot: "Pretty lady, pretty lady." She was so taken that she immediately bought the bird and took it home.

Well, Aunt Alice had a hard time remembering some things, and even though the clerk at the store had told her that the parrot needed to be fed promptly at noon, she forgot. Suddenly, about 12:15, the bird started to make a ruckus. "Where's lunch? Where's lunch?" And then, it let out a string of curses.

"I'll get your lunch," said Aunt Alice, "but don't let me ever hear those words again!"

Well, the next day, noon came and went, and Aunt Alice forgot again, and this time the bird let out an even longer string of curses.

"This just won't do," said Aunt Alice. "I'm going to put you in the freezer for five minutes to help you remember that I won't put up with such language."

So she did. But the next day, it happened all over again. So this time she put the bird in the freezer for ten minutes.

The third day, when it happened again, she told the parrot he'd have to stay in the freezer for fifteen minutes, but right after she put him in, the phone rang, and a friend invited her out to lunch. Aunt Alice was so excited that she forgot all about the parrot. But then, later, on her way home, she suddenly remembered.

She rushed in the house, ran to the freezer, and pulled out the shivering bird. There were little icicles hanging off his beak.

”So,” said Aunt Alice, “Do you think you’ve learned your lesson this time?”

“Yes ma’am,” said the parrot, “I’ll never curse again. But I’ve got to know something—what did that the turkey in there say that was so bad?”

Yes, jokes are lots of fun. We love to tell them, and we love to hear them. But another frozen turkey was in the news just this past week, that wasn’t the punch line to a joke. It wasn’t funny at all. In fact it was almost deadly.

Almost a year ago then eighteen year old Ryan Cushing and several of his friends were out joy-riding. They had stolen a credit card and had used it to buy several items at a supermarket near Lake Ronkonkoma on Long Island. Among their purchases was a twenty-pound frozen turkey.

Who knows what possessed them to buy the turkey in the first place, and more than that, why they decided to use it like some overgrown shot-put. But that is just what they did. For as they rolled down the highway, they decided to see what it would be like to chuck the frozen carcass out the window of the car in the middle of traffic. It was Ryan who actually threw the turkey from the back seat, and as it completed its arc, it crashed into the window of a car being driven by Victoria Ruvolo. The windshield was shattered, and so too Ms. Ruvolo’s face. When doctors examined her they found virtually every bone in her face had been broken and that she had sustained brain damage as well.

They operated, repairing the bones, and then induced a two week coma to allow her mending body time to rest. There were further surgeries, months of therapy, and a year later she still suffers pain and impairment.

Cushing and the others were arrested shortly after the incident occurred, and their cases began to work there way through the courts. And just this past week, after Cushing was found guilty in August, the judged passed sentence.

Cushing could have been given to up to twenty-five years in prison, but instead, the victim, Victoria Ruvolo, urged that he be given a more lenient punishment, and so, he received a six-month jail term, along with mandatory community service time, psychiatric counseling and five years probation.

Victoria Ruvolo is well aware of the seriousness of Cushing’s crime and she will probably take him to civil court. “I have not absolved you,” she said in her impact statement, “I expect you to take the consequences of your actions, both criminally and civilly.”

But Ruvolo also firmly believes that Cushing should be given the opportunity to redeem his actions—and that, she feels, can’t be done in prison.

“There is no room for vengeance in my life,” she said, “I know you are remorseful . . . I’ve stubbornly rejected the notion that you should be treated harshly. I truly hope that by demonstrating compassion . . . I have encouraged you to seek an honorable life.”

The judge, in passing down the sentence, told Cushing, “You’ve been given an extraordinary gift.” (New York Times, 10-18-05, B-1, 9) And so it is. One given because Victoria Ruvolo allowed mercy to temper justice. A gift given because Victoria Ruvolo saw an eighteen-year-old kid, who made an incredibly stupid and thoughtless choice, and decided that, his life shouldn’t come to a crashing halt.

As she told a television reporter the next day, “God gave me a second chance; I just want to do the same for him.

Victoria Ruvolo has put into action the commandment in our lesson from Matthew: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus had been approached by a group of Pharisees, those who held strictly to every tenet of the law. They wanted to put him to the test. “Which of the laws is most important?” they ask.

The six-hundred thirteen laws of Judaism were considered by many at the time to all be of equal importance. The Pharisees may have hoped Jesus would trip over their question. But he does not. Rather he provides a beautiful summary of the whole. “Love God with your whole heart, mind and soul,” he says, “and love your neighbor as yourself.”

Jesus doesn’t invent something new here. He takes the ancient commandment from Deuteronomy, to love God with heart, mind and soul, and couples it with another ancient command from the Hebrew Scriptures to love neighbor as much as self. How do you love God, who you usually cannot see or hear or touch? By loving your neighbor even as you love yourself. As Bruce Chilton writes: “Love of God . . . and love of neighbor . . . were basic principles embedded in the Torah. Jesus’ discovery was that the two were indivisible: love of God was love of neighbor and visa versa.” (Rabbi Jesus, 243)

If you want to truly love God, Jesus teaches, if you want to show your devotion to the Holy One, you had better love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. But that raises a question for most of us: who is my neighbor? Who is this person I am supposed to love with as much fervor as I love myself? Who is this person I am supposed to treat with the same care and respect as I expect from others for me?

Jesus answers that question several times and in a variety of ways. A neighbor may be a friend, he reminds us as he heals the man lowered down from the roof on a mat. A neighbor may be an enemy, as he tells us in the story of the Good Samaritan. A neighbor may be as close as a family member or as distant as a stranger from a

foreign land. A neighbor may be someone we know well, as a he tells us in the story of the Prodigal Son, or someone we hardly know at all, like the woman caught in adultery that he saves from being stoned to death. Taken as a whole, the gospel message seems clear: you and I are to see all people as our neighbors. Not just those who live next door. Not just those we know or like. Not just those who share our values or who come from our town or go to our school or cheer for our team. All people are our neighbors.

And further, we are called, commanded, to love each one of them all. Not like them, that's not required, but love them, treat them as equals, as persons deserving of our respect and attention, as sons and daughters of God. As a Christian you are called to place yourself in your neighbor's position and to ask what would I want, what would I need if this were me? You are called, as one Native American chief is said to have instructed, to walk a mile in the other man or woman's moccasins.

Naomi Ragen's novel *The Covenant*, begins in a small village in Israel. At one point she describes one of the underlying realities in the village: "If you saw someone's child in need of a band aid or a sandwich or a hug, you provided it, no questions asked. People did the same for yours. The Biblical injunction of 'love your neighbor as yourself' wasn't a saying, it was a lifestyle." (13)

That's it, sisters and brothers, that's it in a nutshell. We talk about the Golden Rule. We talk about the importance of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. But we must do more than talk about it. It needs to be more than a revered maxim; it needs to be more than a wise saying. It needs to be a lifestyle.

Imagine how transformed our world would be if we truly loved our neighbors as we love ourselves. Imagine how different our nation would be if we really followed the Golden Rule. Imagine what changes it would bring to your business or your school. Imagine how it could transform your family! And, imagine how it could transform our church. Sure, we are a friendly church, a loving church, a caring church, but how much more we could do if we chose to.

Imagine you are a newcomer to Saugatuck, a first time visitor. Some how or another you manage to find your way downstairs to Coffee Hour. You don't know anybody, you don't know the drill. You have all sorts of questions. Do people pay for the coffee? Do they have anything for kids? Will anybody talk to me? This morning put yourself in the shoes of a first-time visitor to Saugatuck—what would you want people to do?

Imagine you are the mother of a teenager who is struggling with his sexual identity. Imagine he finally works up the courage to tell you that she thinks he's gay, but he doesn't know how people at church will feel about it. There is no clear message from your congregation—will he will still be welcome? Will people affirm him as a child of God; will they affirm his gifts and continue to encourage his involvement in

youth group and on the board he serves? Put yourself in the shoes of the parent of a gay or lesbian teenager at Saugatuck—what would you want people to do?

Imagine you want to be part of the Sunday School program at church. You have experience as a teacher but you are physically handicapped and none of the classrooms, not one, are fully accessible. But what will happen if you address the issue at a Church Council meeting? Will people tell you nothing can be done about it? Will folks suggest it would be too costly to change things around? Put yourself in the shoes of a physically disabled parishioner at Saugatuck—what would you want people to do?

Imagine you are rather conservative and believe that abortion is wrong. Imagine that you are wrestling with the issue and want to be able to talk about it with other people of faith. But what will happen if you bring it up at church? Will people label you a fundamentalist? Will they just argue with you and try to change your position? Will they really listen to what you have to say, or will they judge you to be uninformed? Put yourself in the shoes of a conservative Christian at Saugatuck—what would you want people to do?

Every single week something comes up here at Saugatuck that could be changed, would be changed, if love of neighbor was more than just a saying, if love of neighbor was our lifestyle as well. It's not that we don't try, we do. Our membership committee does a fine job of greeting folks at the door. Our SOS program provides meals and rides for those who are shut-in or homebound. Our deacons regularly pray for the sick and dying. Our church school teachers warmly nurture our children. Our mission board makes it possible for us to reach out to the homeless, the hungry and those who are displaced. These are all ways of loving our neighbors.

Its not that we never get it right, we often do. But we could do so much more. We could be so much better at it. And I suspect the same is true in each of our families, each of our schools and businesses, even in our nation and our world.

Sisters and brothers, I do love a good joke. But *this* is no joke; in fact, it is as serious as it gets. For we are called to work for the day when we don't simply parrot this command of Jesus, but rather, make it our lifestyle—all the time, in all that we do.

Love God with your whole being; love your neighbor as yourself. "On these two commandments," says Jesus, "hang all the law and the prophets." (Matthew 22:40) They are indeed, the sum and substance of our faith.

Amen
John H. Danner

