

Today's gospel reading said that the man questioning Jesus was "a scholar of the law". I am going to simplify this man's job title and call him a lawyer. Lawyers have a certain reputation, and it's not a positive one. I don't want to offend anyone who may know a good honest lawyer like my wife's brother Adam Huffman, but in general they are known as people who will say or do anything to get what they want. George Kardashian was famous for his line "If the glove doesn't fit, you must acquit." We don't know if he knew whether or not his client O.J. Simpson was guilty. Some defense attorneys tell their clients "don't confess your guilt to me, I can do a better job defending you if I think there is a chance that you may be innocent." In defense of defense lawyers everywhere, they are just doing a job, and like soldiers and executioners, it is a perfectly legal job even if the means or end result may be immoral. Every superhero needs a villain, an every prosecuting attorney needs a defense attorney as their foil.

The deeper truth is that there is a little bit of lawyer in all of us. Every new school year as a teacher I try to establish some ground rules for my classroom. Students know that they need to follow all of the school's rules while in my presence, but each teacher is also allowed to add additional rules for students to follow in their specific rules. This may have to do with specific expectations that I have for them regarding how they do their classwork, or tests, or final copies of written essays or even my policies on late work. We usually use this as a teaching moment and explain that school is not a democracy. Students don't get to vote on things like dress code, punishments for bullying, or when the first and last days of school will be.

We have been told that students are more likely to follow rules that they had somewhat of a say in creating, so I usually try to involve them in making the specific rules for my classroom. Before we begin, I usually tell them that my #1 rule is respect. I expect them to respect 4 things. The Teacher, Others, Yourself, and Stuff. I use the word stuff rather than school property because when you take the first letter from Teacher, Others, Yourself, and Stuff it forms the word TOYS, which is a mnemonic device to help them remember. So I usually have a poster in my class saying remember to respect T.O.Y.S. with the 4 words going down or across from the acronym.

But every year I will have a few "future-lawyers" who love to argue with me. One who was caught misusing the internet might say "I was not disrespecting stuff, because the internet isn't stuff, its information." Or a student caught plagiarizing might say "I wasn't disrespecting myself with academic dishonesty. I was trying to help myself learn the material by looking at an expert's perspective." I even had a senior girl arguing with me about the definition of plagiarism. She insisted that she wasn't plagiarizing because she didn't copy the words exactly, but changed them around a bit. I told her that 90+% borrowed words with just a few synonyms of your own tossed in does not constitute original work that doesn't need to be cited. So as you can see, we humans like to look for loopholes to try and justify our own unethical behavior.

When humans ask Jesus “How should we behave?” He replies “Love your neighbor as yourself.” This is a pretty clear and straight forward answer, don’t you think? But the lawyer in us says “Who exactly is our neighbor?” I will now interrupt my sermon to tell a funny story and possibly embarrass my kids. You all know that younger children tend to take things very literally, right? A few years back I mentioned to a friend that I lived in Kansas and went to St. James Church. The person said, “Oh, you probably know Ann and Ron Zoller then.” I replied, “Yes, they are my neighbors.” At which point one of my kids interrupted and said “Their not our neighbors, Jan Paxton is our neighbor.” They took the very narrow interpretation that a neighbor is only the person who lives right next door to you, not someone who lives 8 or 10 houses down from you. A similar difference of interpretation can be made when someone says “Who is your brother?” I would answer that “Eric McGinnis is my brother” but Jesus would say that we are all brothers and sisters to each other.

The “scholar of the law” in today’s gospel is cross examining Jesus in an attempt to find loopholes so that he can get out of the mandate to love “all of his neighbors”. Can’t I just love my Jewish neighbors? Or just my Gentile neighbors? Or just my next door neighbors? Do I really have to love all of my neighbors? Does that include the ones that I don’t know? Even the ones that live outside the borders of my country south of the Rio Grande? Jesus would say “Yes. I put all human beings on this planet for a purpose, and the silly reasons that you humans use to justify not having to love each other like differences in skin color, political or geographic boundaries don’t change a thing to my mandate to you love others.

There are lines in the Bible that say “I was a stranger and you welcomed me”. How much stranger could a person be than one from different culture, who speaks a different language? But there is a universal language that all humans speak and it is the language of love. Jesus tells us that if there is a person out in the world who is suffering, it is our responsibility to reach out and help that person. As people, we are good at making excuses. Our church focuses on helping our local community first, because the rest of the world is too big a place and the problems are too many.

A lot of people would like to see America put America first and stop helping other countries with foreign aid until we have all of the problems here at home sorted out. That is a fine political statement and may get some extra votes for a politician who espouses these views. But if you are honest with yourself is that really WWJD? He didn’t say “Americans should love their American neighbors, and Mexicans should love their Mexican neighbors.” He said that we should All love All of neighbors regardless of what nationality they are.

He even told us in a gospel a few weeks back that we were to love our enemies because even Gentiles love those who love them. Be he calls on us Christians to love the unlovable, the students who are pains in our rear, or thorns in our sides. The people who get on our nerves and are unappreciative for all that we do for them the entitled spoiled brats. We are to love them all unconditionally as God loves us even when we don’t deserve it.

