

SAINTS AND LAWSUITS

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Arthur M. Suggs
Preached on Sunday, May 4, 2014

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I. THE LAWSUIT

Wedding Transgressions Without a License

Last week, the United Church of Christ, the parent denomination of this congregation, sued the state of North Carolina. The gist of the suit is that the state passed a law that says you can't perform a marriage service without a license. The intent of the law was to prevent gay people from getting a marriage license, and so it also prevents the clergy, and in fact criminalizes the clergy, from performing a marriage service for a gay couple.

I've taken an interest in this lawsuit, more than most others, because of another detail. I've done four same-sex marriages here, safely in the state of New York, where I haven't even had to look over my shoulder.

There's another reason: I like doing weddings; I've done a lot of weddings. But I have in theory disobeyed that law. Had such a law been on the books in New York State, I'd have been in jail more or less forever. Another of my transgressions is that I have done between a dozen and twenty or so weddings for young people who were already married.

What Happens in Such Cases . . .

. . . Is that a couple fall in love. One is, say, a year older than the other, has graduated and has a job with benefits. Now, if they marry, the benefits will apply to the spouse. And so they do a quickie with a Justice of the Peace, and then I do the religious church wedding at another time. That way, they can still have a party, they can still have their friends and family around, and they can still ask the blessing of God on their wedding. In the eyes of the state, however, they are technically already married, and that would be illegal, yet I don't feel it's immoral.

The other end of the spectrum is also fascinating for me in that I've done three or four weddings for older people, retirement age and older when they fall in love and want to get married, but not in the eyes of the state. They want to get married in the eyes of the church *only*. And it's basically for tax reasons, pension reasons, and financial reasons. So when they ask if I would marry them but just not do any of the paperwork, that also would be illegal.

Thus, the law criminalizes clergy who perform marriage services without a license from the state. And so the gist of the law and the gist of the lawsuit is that the state is dictating to

religious leaders what kind of services they may do and what kind of services they may not do. That's the essence of the lawsuit by the United Church of Christ.

As is typical of lawsuits, there are very strong opinions totally for it and some totally against it. We'll see how the suit shakes out over time, but I wanted to let you know that this is what the denomination has done. It's really unprecedented. Time will tell.

Okay, that's number one. I just wanted to do an FYI on that one.

II. A QUOTE FROM ST. CATHARINE

Doing Good Proves Love

A talk was given here about two weeks ago on Saint Catherine of Sienna, one of the saints from hundreds of years ago, an Italian woman. Here's a quote from her that I came across and that is important to me:

“The everlasting God said, ‘Doing good to your neighbors proves your love for me.’ And there's more, ‘The virtue of patience in you is tested when your neighbors insult you. Your humility is tested by the crowd. Your faith is tested by the unfaithful. Your hope is tested by the person who is hopeless. Your fairness is tested by the unreasonable. Your compassion is tested by the cruel. Your gentleness and kindness are tested by those who rage. Your neighbors will test your goodness, and through these tests, your virtues will be borne and strengthened and grow.’”

And so I offer you that kind of thinking going into the context of the lawsuit.

That's one and two.

III. HOW WE ARE SAVED

“We Are not Saved Alone”

Last week we had two speakers who came to our church. John Mundy was the talker on Tuesday night, and he spoke on the spiritual teachings that come from “A Course in Miracles.” This church is one of the host sites for the “A Course in Miracles” study group, one of three that take place in the county.

On Thursday, we had another speaker by the name of Kim Bobo, out of Ohio, who talks and lobbies on behalf of fair economics. As we know, there are some pretty unfair economic practices that go on in our country.

That was the second talk.

John Mundy, however, said something that intrigued me: “We are not saved alone.” I’ve been thinking about that since Tuesday because it is exactly the opposite of what I was taught. I was taught to respond positively to the question: “Art, are you saved?” I was taught that kind of language over and over again, and it didn’t matter if this person over here or that person over there was saved. It was “Art, have *you* been saved?” And God adds to the kingdom one at a time. All right, here’s the guy saying, you know, “We’re not saved alone.”

Then he went on to illustrate – picture your stick-figure kind of drawing of a human being – and he said, on this side you are holding hands with that crowd of people, that great number of people who are saving you. On this other hand, you are linked to that great number of people that *you* are saving.

There Might Be a Few of These in the Crowd

These people saving you – here’s where it goes back to lawsuits and Catherine of Sienna. Mundy said, probably first you will imagine that these are good and wise and righteous people. Here are the people who steer you in the right way and have the right words to say to you at the right time. They give you models by pointing out exemplars for you to emulate – justice and righteousness and goodness and peace.

But Mundy says, “Oh no, there might be a few of those in the crowd but generally not.” No, these are the people who piss you off. These are the people who test your compassion, who test your humility, who test your fairness by being unreasonable. These are the persons who then force you to upgrade your virtue by dealing with them. And there are a few of them in our church.

And then something similar on this side. You are helping others by your wisdom, your righteousness, your goodness, your exemplary life, and also your stubbornness, your unkind words at a vulnerable time in their lives, and so forth. And so the teaching, which I found sort of deep, actually. If we’re not saved alone, we’re linked to this group, and we’re linked to that group.

So that’s three: A lawsuit, a quote from Saint Catherine of Sienna, and an interesting take on how we’re saved.

IV. A SLAP IS THE SPACE BETWEEN REVENGE AND FORGIVENESS

The Victim’s Mother Climbed the Gallows

Now I want to show you some pictures. If this were a TV show, at this point, I would have a disclaimer that says, “Be careful of your viewership.” If you’ve got little kids, you might not want to show them this stuff, and I’m serious. It’s a little bit rough.



Balal was to be hanged for murder Pic: Arash Khamooshi /Isna

The 18-year-old victim's parents were expected to kick away the chair supporting the condemned man, named as Balal, at the public execution and send him to his death.

But once he was blindfolded and the noose put around his neck, she instead slapped his face and said she forgave him.



Pic: Arash Khamooshi /Isna

As she climbed up to the gallows, Samereh Alinejad asked the large crowd that had gathered to watch the execution whether they knew "how difficult it is to live in an empty house".

The father of the victim, Abdolghani Hozzeinzad, then removed the noose from around the man's neck as the convict's own mother ran up to embrace the woman who had saved her son.



The victim's mother slaps the killer Pic: Arash Khamooshi /Isna

The two women stood and sobbed in each other's arms.

Mrs Alinejad told Shargh newspaper: "I am a believer. I had a dream in which my son told me that he was at peace and in a good place.



The victim's parents remove the noose. Pic: Arash Khamooshi /Isna

"After that, all my relatives, even my mother, put pressure on me to pardon the killer.

"The murderer was crying, asking for forgiveness. I slapped him in the face. That slap helped to calm me down."

In Iraq, there had been a street fight in which a young man, he was only 18, was stabbed to death. The stabber, the killer, was caught and was sentenced to death by hanging. The victim's parents had a particular role in this execution because they were given the right, the honor, the privilege, whatever you call it, to kick away the chair supporting the condemned man, whose name was Belah, at a public execution and send him to his death.

Here's the important scene: As she climbed the gallows, the mother of the victim asked the large crowd that had gathered to watch the execution whether they knew "How difficult it is to live in an empty house." But once he was blindfolded and the noose placed around his neck, she instead slapped his face and told him that she forgives him. The father of the victim then removed the noose from around the man's neck as the convict's own mother ran up to embrace the woman who had saved her son.



Injustice Is an Opportunity

The two women stood and sobbed in each other's arms. The mother of the victim told the newspaper, I am a believer. I had a dream in which my son told me that he was at peace and in a good place. After that, all my relatives, even my mother, put pressure on me to pardon the killer. The murderer was crying, asking for forgiveness. I slapped him in the face. That slap helped to calm me down. The father explained more about the dream. "Three days ago, my wife saw my elder son in a dream, telling her that he is in a good place and for her not to retaliate." The mother said that the slap "is the space between revenge and forgiveness."

So four things: a lawsuit, a quote, a teaching, and an example:

1. Be sensitive to injustice, whether it's economic, whether it's in church, be sensitive to injustice. Nothing is worse than being complacent when somebody else is being treated unjustly.
2. Realize. I love this word "realize" because what it does is to take it out of theory and put it into practice. Make it real. Realize that both injustice to you and to another person can still be a blessing, as in the Catherine of Sienna quote. Realize that injustice is an opportunity.
3. Realize that we truly aren't saved alone. We are linked – indeed, I think it's more like we're handcuffed – we are in the same lifeboat with those saving us and those whom we are saving.
4. Feel it, think it, and then do it like that Iraqi woman.

Amen.