

The Law of Love
Sermon by Maria Cristina Vlassidis
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Long Long Wait

A couple who had been courting for ten or fifteen years died, and when they arrived at the gates of heaven they informed St. Peter that they regretted not getting married on earth and asked if they could get married in heaven.

“Well, you’ll have to wait a while” said St Peter.

So they waited a year and went back to see St. Peter again and said we really want to get married, and we don’t understand why we have to wait.

You’ll have to wait a while longer said the venerable saint.

They waited two years and then went back again and said we can’t understand why you are putting us off. We’ve come for an explanation. St Peter scratched his head and hemmed and hawed, and said “It’s like this. We’re waiting for a preacher, we expect one soon. Then he said, it’s a good thing you want to get married and not get a divorce. We don’t know whether or not we’ll ever get a lawyer!

By Rev. Tim Jesson, Kentucky.

There’s certainly an abundance of very bad jokes about ministers and lawyers alike, but I take them as an interesting social commentary on how people perceive us. For the most part, lawyers are depicted as money hungry “sharks” without scruples, and ministers as hypocritical spiritual tyrants. Being a lawyer in seminary, I was inspired by an article entitled “Imagining a Place Where People Become Better”, about a pediatrician who is currently attending Harvard divinity school. I began reflecting about the work we do, starting second and even third careers, the concept of “calling”, how our jobs shape our spiritual selves and life journeys, and how this affects the social justice causes we are passionate about.

It used to be the norm that seminarians and first year law students would be young recent undergrads. But today, more and more “middle aged” people like me, are entering second careers in law, or ministry. I entered both already “middle aged”. I became a lawyer to help immigrants like myself, find a voice and seek justice. I became a lawyer in honor of my grandmother, who was denied Medicaid, and died waiting for an appeal to go through.

After 15 years as a legal advocate, I became a seminarian for the exact same reasons: to speak truth to justice, and to honor my grandmother by accompanying those transitioning from life to death, with dignity and love.

During orientation week at Harvard, I was introduced to six other incoming students, who were also lawyers. We talked about our respective “areas of expertise”, and ended up sharing our experience of having been “called” to the ministry. Not all of us planned to be ordained. Some would return to their legal practices, hopefully, with a better sense of how to use their pastoral skills to handle painful divorce cases, death penalty sentences, and every day cases involving evictions, employment discrimination, immigration, and termination of parental rights. Those of us who aspire to be ordained, hoped to be able to bring our advocacy skills to our parish or community ministries. Being among this group, gave me an opportunity to realize that my new journey as a seminarian was not a different journey at all, but the continuation of a calling that went beyond my personal preferences. At the end of orientation week, I looked around and was amazed: in addition to us lawyers, there were musicians, doctors and medical students, graphic artists, community organizers, film makers, journalists, kindergarten teachers, psychologists and counselors, all looking for an opportunity to explore beyond the

established boundaries of our professions, in order to serve people better, and hopefully, to become better people ourselves.

Have you ever felt that a job has chosen you and not the other way around? Have you ever found yourself finally settled into a good and decent job, when this “thing”, this idea begins gnawing at you, and just won’t let you alone? Have you found that the limitations of your profession did not allow for space to consider the matters of the spirit? I believe most of us have. However, most don’t need to quit our jobs and run to mail an application to enter seminary. In my case, the “calling” came almost 15 years before entering seminary. It happened in an AIDS hospice in Roxbury. It was part of the Legal Services Center’s AIDS Law Clinic. I felt a deep spiritual connection to my clients, despite the restrictions imposed by the legal protocols. We found a way to work together that was infused with compassion, respect for different religious beliefs and practices, and a deep sense of the mystery that had brought us together under such dire circumstances. Little did I know then, that I was practicing for when I had to be a hospital chaplain this past summer: making people better, starting with myself.

Some of you have, in sharing with me the challenges and rewards of being a counselor, therapist, family advocate, or college administrator, also shared your passion for social justice, for more equitable laws, and left no doubt in my mind that you are indeed proficient in the art of ministering.

There are many lawyers I admire. One of them is also a nun. Her name is Digna Ochoa and she is a human rights attorney in Mexico. Most of her clients have been victims of torture and due process violations. “I studied law” she says, “because my father was unjustly jailed, tortured, and disappeared... this led to my determination to do

something for those suffering injustice, because I saw it in the flesh with my father. I am a nun who started life as a lawyer. I sought a religious community with a social commitment, and the protection of human rights is one of the things that my community focuses on. This has been a process of building a life project, from a social commitment to a spiritual one with a mystical aspect.” She says.

Despite the seriousness and tragic context of her life and work, Digna manages to laugh. She tells the story of filing a habeas corpus petition on behalf of a man, and discovering that he was being held in a military hospital. As expected, the authorities denied he was there and denied her access. She managed to sneak in between guard changes and find the room where he was. Taking a deep breath, she stormed into the room, and began shouting at the guards that she was his lawyer and they had to leave immediately. The guards were so taken aback, that they ran out. This gave her time to have the man sign papers proving he was being held illegally. A couple of minutes later, the police came back and tried to grab her. They didn’t expect her to assume the attack position—the *only* karate position she knew, “from movies, I suppose” she says. “Of course I don’t really know karate, but they thought I was going to attack. Trembling inside, I said sternly that if they laid a hand on me they’d see what would happen. And they drew back...”

She asks: “What meaning does your life have? What a shame I had to go through [all I had to go through] in order to discover my real commitment, the meaning of my life, the reason I’m here. I’ve found something positive in what was a very painful experience. Maybe I wouldn’t be working here. Maybe I wouldn’t have entered the congregation. Maybe I wouldn’t have learned that the world is a lot bigger than the very

small world that I had constructed. My horizons were broadened. Sometimes I say to myself: What a way for God to make you see things!”

In Digna, I find a role model for integrating the passion for justice, with the need to belong to a community of faith, which reaffirms and inspires my day to day work. She straddles two apparently opposing worlds: law and religion. The bridge is her love for humanity.

My best friend, and the first person who believed in my ability to become a lawyer is Fred Rooney. Freddie became a lawyer after being an ESL teacher and a social worker. When asked why he became a lawyer he says that it was because he saw the need to help people to have access to the legal system. He quoted a 1994 study that showed that 70% of New Yorkers had no access to legal representation, because they could not afford to retain a lawyer. 70% of the people were excluded from the American justice system. He says “What an irony that today the US is trying to implant in Afghanistan and Irak a system which only works at best, 30% of the time. Imagine buying a car that only worked 30% of the time! The systemic exclusion is astronomic and unconscionable”, he says.

But he also is inspired by the new wave of spirituality infusing lawyering. He is excited about people writing books and designing projects about how to transform lawyering. He considers lawyering a vocation which allows him the privilege to connect with others, and become a better person.

When asked about the spiritual dimensions of lawyering, he says of his clients: “Being at peace with yourself is difficult when you have all kinds of legal issues, no heat in your apartment, can’t get out of an abusive marriage; It’s really hard to maintain a sense of

balance, you need someone to help you out, and lend you a hand when in need. He has come to view “redemptive lawyering” as a kind of healing, both for clients and for himself. Like ministry, he says, redemptive, prophetic lawyering, can have a tremendous impact on human suffering.”

The motto of my law school is “law in the service of human needs”. When I decided to go there it wasn’t even accredited. But that motto, along with Dean, Haywood Burns, who had participated in the civil rights movements, and who had been invited to help in drafting the new South African Constitution, were for me the best accreditation in the world.

Like my friend Fred, I subscribe to the idea that what makes things work well is love. I never liked the adversarial nature of lawyering. I wanted to help people repair relationships, not perpetuate violence. So I became a mediator and community advocate. I found that approach much more akin to my personality and spiritual path. My clinical placement while in law school was in the immigrants rights clinic. At that time, people from El Salvador and Guatemala were seeking political asylum, and people from the Dominican Republic who were HIV positive were seeking humanitarian immigration waivers. My job was to interview them and to recording in detail, all the horrors they had survived. In those moments, I definitely felt a presence, an energy beyond the legal requirements and documents, an inexplicable sense that this was a sacred moment. From that training I learned that every interview was a spiritual matter.

Freddie remembers the time when he and his wife were in the process of a painful divorce. She attended a retreat and brought back a copy of Mariam Williamson’s “A Return to Love. “I had never read a self help book in my life” he says, “I also was not

religious. But this book presented the concept of a higher power, and something in my heart recognized this, and I embraced it, and it was a healing balm when I most needed it...this made me reevaluate the way I looked at the world... and so it also changed the way I practiced law. Every now and then, there's an opportunity to help people cope with trauma, for guiding people to a better space.”

Will we allow ourselves to be guided to a better place? Will we be open to hear the calling? Will we allow ourselves to expand our job descriptions to include the spiritual dimension? It is never too late...

Anna (Pauli) Murray attended Hunter College, worked as a teacher, became involved in the civil rights movement, and was jailed in 1940 for refusing to sit at the bus of a bus in Virginia. In 1941, she entered Howard University law school, inspired to become a civil rights lawyer. In 1944 she obtained a Masters in Law from the University of California. Thurgood Marshall called her book “States Law on Race and Color” the Bible for civil rights lawyers. In 1960, she was appointed to President Kennedy’s Committee on Civil and Political Rights. At age sixty-two, Pauli Murray entered seminary and embarked upon a new career. In 1977, she was the first black woman in the U.S. to become an Episcopalian priest. In performing her first Holy Eucharist at the Chapel of the Cross in Chapel Hill, where her grandmother, a slave, had been baptized, Murray finally believed that "All the strands of my life had come together."

She wrote: “Nobody gave me my freedom. I owe it to no political party or the goodwill of any group. I inherited it. Some of my forefathers fought for it at Petersburg, and Richmond. Others toiled for it in Carolina tobacco fields, paying

their masters dollar for dollar, and bought it. Others paid for it with their health, sanity, and their lives, jumping overboard from slave vessels or lying in swamps and crawling through the night into the shelter of the Underground Railroad. Others pulled a "mass strike" when the Union armies invaded the Confederacy and helped disintegrate the labor force of the rebellious South. The Proclamation of Emancipation which Lincoln signed in 1863 was but the historical and documentary recognition of an accomplished fact.

As an American I inherited the magnificent tradition of an endless march toward freedom and toward the dignity of all [mankind] sic people. And though my country has not always loved me, yet in the words of the poet, Claude McKay, "I must confess I love this cultured hell which tests my strength." Loving it as I do, I am determined that my country shall take her place among nations as a moral leader of mankind. No law which imprisons my body or custom which wounds my spirit can stop me."

Dear Friends, I too confess I love this country. I too love it despite the fact that it has not always loved me. But like Paulie Murray, I too am determined that it will allow itself to be transformed, like we have allowed ourselves to be transformed by love, so that it may hear the calling of its people wounded in spirit by its unjust laws. I too believe that no law can imprison my spirit or stop me from fighting against injustice. I believe there is hope that the law can become a vehicle for creating a loving and caring world. I hope you do too.

The recent news of our legislature voting in favor of writing in discrimination against same sex couples, tears at the fabric of our society, and at our hearts. Once

again, trampling upon the dignity of its citizens. This is a time to consider from whatever post we happen to be serving, that we not only want to be in a better place, but that we deserve to be in a better place. It is time to expand the definition of love, not outlaw it. It is time to return to the trenches, which may be a classroom, our home office, a hospital, a church, or a factory. We have inherited freedom. Not from a political party or legal doctrine, but from a higher, divine source. By the power of the law of love which states that we are all God's children. Yes, we are all God's children!

We are facing a new year filled with the hope of transformation in the election of our new governor. We are also facing the real possibility of turning back the clock of civil rights according to the recent legislative vote.

In this New Year, may we be open to return to love, again and again, until all the strands of our lives come together. Amen.