

Bad Drivers and Loud Chewers **January 30, 2022**

This morning, I'd like to talk about a scourge on our communities. There is a population of people who are ripping apart the fabric of our society. The rules that we all abide by are being willfully disregarded by these individuals. And nothing short of chaos will ensue, if they continue unchecked.

The people I speak of are the jerks who drive at snail's pace in the left-hand lane of the road. I have read articles, researched studies, about how driving slowly in the left lane is more dangerous and more likely to cause an accident than speeding. And so some police departments have started ticketing drivers who are moving too slowly in the fast lanes.

Joseph Stromberg, "Why you shouldn't drive slowly in the left lane," *Vox*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.vox.com/2014/6/16/5804590/slow-left-lane-driving-rules-us-traffic-illegal>.

Those drivers are a menace to our society.

Almost as bad are the folks who speed in the right-hand lane. If I'm in the right-most lane, I'm enjoying a nice morning exploration in my automobile. I have indicated by my location that I am not interested in getting anywhere fast. And yet some drivers feel it is their duty to tailgate to let me know that I am going too slowly for their liking.

The problem is, of course, that there's often a slow driver in the left lane, and the whole system collapses. Slow drivers in the fast lane, and fast drivers in the slow lane. Ruining the foundational laws of driving, and causing anarchy.

You know, I would go so far as to say, those drivers are beyond help. They have no redeeming qualities. They're probably terrible people. We should just take away their licenses.

And while I'm at it, do you know who else are terrible people?

People who bite their nails. It's the 21st century. We have nail clippers; they cost 50 cents at CVS.

You know who else?

Loud chewers.

And people who use 57 coupons at the grocery store.

And people who talk during movies.

People who leave the toilet seat up.

People who use the stylus on their touch-screen cell phone.

People who hold up their tablet in a crowd to take a picture.

All those people? Beyond help. They are making the world a worse place. I'm gonna go out on a limb here... I don't think God loves them.

It's so satisfying, isn't it, to complain about people? It's not good or healthy, but it's satisfying. I'll confess, I'm a coupon user and a loud chewer, much to my wife's dismay. If you ever see me walking down 422 with my possessions on a stick, you know that was the day I brought home extra crunchy kettle chips. But Becca's a nail biter, so we'll call it even.

It feels sinfully good to look down on people. It's part of human nature, I think, to want to look down on a population. And it's been a part of human nature for a long time. For the Jewish community in the 1st century, it was the Gentiles who they could look down on, those who were outside the bounds of God's grace. For Gentiles then and today, the Jewish community was viewed with suspicion and seen as an insular community, sometimes with nefarious goals.

We hear the results of that cross-community suspicion (and even dislike). And it comes up in Jesus' visit to the synagogue in our Gospel lesson.

Jesus has just announced his mission statement, from the book of Isaiah – to bring freedom and healing, and to proclaim God's favor. The Jewish crowd there (understandably) thinks that God's favor is being given to them. And Jesus points out that no, God's love and favor is for everyone, not just religious folks.

To illustrate his point, Jesus references two stories from Scripture, what we call the Old Testament.

The first story is about the prophet Elijah. Where there was a famine in the land, Elijah went to a widow and asked her to make him some food. The widow responded that she only had a tiny bit of flour and oil, and she planned to use it to make one last meal for her and her son. Elijah told her, "Don't worry; your flour and oil won't run out until the famine is over." And miraculously, he was right. That tiny bit of oil and flour fed Elijah, the widow, and her son for years. That widow, as it turns out, was a Gentile.

The other story is about a military commander named Naaman. Naaman had leprosy, and at the advice of a captured servant, he sought out Elisha the prophet. Elisha told him to go and wash in the Jordan River seven times, and when he did, Naaman was cleansed of his leprosy. Now Naaman was a Gentile, and not only that; he was a leader in the army of Aram, which was Israel's enemy!

The protagonists in these stories, the faithful ones who listened to God were Gentiles, non-Jews. Jesus points to them to say, "God could have chosen an Israelite to be the good guy, but in those instances, God chose an outsider." In modern terms, the hero of the story is a left-lane-slow-driver or a loud chewer.

The crowd is peeved, understandably. Really, they're more than peeved. If a random traveling prophet had given them this news, they'd be peeved. But this is Jesus. They know him. They raised him. If anyone should deliver good news of God's love to them, it's Jesus! But instead he tells them that God's favor isn't just for them; it's for everyone, nail biters and all.

The people in the crowd are so angry, that they also execute Jesus. And whether cooler heads prevail and the fervor subsides until Jesus leaves, or whether Jesus sneaks out, or whether Luke is just exaggerating to give us a preview of Jesus' fate, we're not sure. What we know is that Jesus somehow leaves the angry crowd and continues on his way.

Our narrative then follows Jesus on his journey. I wonder, though, what did the crowd do next? Hopefully they dispersed. Did they harbor some bitterness towards Gentiles? Over the next several days and weeks, did the men gather in the market and whisper about Jesus and his offensive words? Did the women chat with one another about how he came to be such an embarrassment to his hometown? We don't know.

Jesus' point is one that hopefully we can wrap our heads around. God's love, God's favor, God's chosen-ness is not limited to one group, but it is for everyone. Coupon users, tablet-picture-takers, nail biters alike.

What sticks with me more, what needles me occasionally, is whether we're more like that crowd in Nazareth than we'd like to admit. We might not distance ourselves from Gentiles, but we still do look down on certain segments of society; we view certain groups as the "other."

Now, are all forms of behavior acceptable? No, absolutely not. We need to have hard conversations. We need to talk about what is best for our society, our leaders, our children. But we also need to do it with the understanding that these are our brothers and sisters.

I say this having lived and worked in Northern Ireland, where there was a very strong sense of "this is my community, and they are the Other;" Catholics vs. Protestants. The work being done over the past 20 years or so has been to see Catholics/Protestants not as the "other" people, but as people – people with differences who are also residents of my community. That doesn't negate crimes, wrongdoings. To treat someone as your sister or brother does not mean you approve of what they have done or do.

But there cannot be healing if they are the Other.

So it's good to be careful when we find ourselves getting angry about someone else (nail-biting aside). There can be healthy angry – at injustice, at wrongdoing, because that anger works for change and betterment. Healthy angry is what led Jesus to flip over the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, because they were breaking the law and cheating people out of their own money.

There is also anger that is born out of fear: fear of the Other and fear of change. That anger is what the crowd experienced in Nazareth, when they heard that Gentiles were their equals. That's an anger that is dangerous because it leads to division and even violence.

So if there's a challenge from this story of Jesus in Nazareth, it is that it's good to be cautious about anger. It's good to be cautious about viewing someone else as the Other. It's good to remind ourselves that God's chosen-ness is for you and for me; for stylus users and bad drivers; for everyone.

Amen.

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