

Text: Matthew 22: 34-46  
Title: Knots and Nails  
Date: 10.25.20  
Roger Allen Nelson

Matt Cutler is the likable loquacious rabbi of the temple, “Gates of Heaven” in Schenectady, New York. He’s dark haired, bearded, robust, and over bagels and shmear his big booming baritone would fill up the deli. Never short on a story and always long on a laugh, his inflection is so Jewish and his Yiddish phrasing so delightful that our conversations often felt like Seinfeld episode. I knew him to be a gentle man of faith, with a passion for *shalom*, and a heart for God. Given longer I thought we could be good friends.

Every year we did a pulpit exchange. I’d go to the synagogue on Saturday; he’d come our way on Sunday. One year during a children’s sermon Matt drew our attention to his prayer shawl. It was white linen, with subtle stripes of gray that tastefully complemented his yarmulke. (Matt was a dapper rabbi.) The edges of the prayer shawl were lined with strings or tassels that were tied into a series of knots. He asked the children what the knots might represent. He was met with Protestant silence....

The 613 knots represented, reminded the wearer of, the 613 commandments of God in the Torah. One knot for every law.

Laws about food and clothes and conflict.

Laws about religion and gardening and personal hygiene.

Laws about sex and stonings.

Laws about money and marriage and mildew.

613 laws – 613 knots.

So, when, “an expert in the law, tested him with the question, “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” He was asking, “Which of the 613 is head and shoulders above the rest?”

Dear friends, our text this morning is the last of a series of questions posed to Jesus by the political-religious class. Matthew stacks them up like waves crashing on the beach. First, came the disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians, then the Sadducees, and finally the Pharisees themselves roll up with this question about the greatest commandment.

The word translated here as “test” is the same word used when Satan tempts Jesus at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel.

This is no friendly theological banter.

This is no *colloquium doctum*.

This is an exchange with everything hanging in the balance.

The Pharisees huddled together, selected their most distinguished legal scholar and crafted their clever question. They think they have Jesus cornered: If every law is from God, how would a mere mortal have any place to rank them?

Picture the Hungarian phonetician in “My Fair Lady” trying to discern who Eliza Doolittle was and where she came from. In Henry Higgins words:

*Oozing charm from ev'ry pore, he oiled his way around the floor.  
Ev'ry trick that he could play, he used to strip her mask away.  
And when at last the dance was done, he glowed as if he knew he'd won!*

The Pharisees think they've won. They think they have stripped Jesus down to some disposable size. But...

But what if this is more than just a tricky final exam question?  
What if there is more here than an attempt to trap Jesus?  
What if it gets at an honest human question?

As a high school teacher, I grew weary of the query, “Do we need to know this for the test?” Whether they were grade-grubbers or just looking to do the bare minimum it felt like a slap in the face of learning. And, I'd want to get on my high horse....

However, in a moral universe we want to know the standards and expectations. We want to know the height of the bar. And, truth be told, our working list of life's rules and regulations is often an amalgam of culture, family habit, religious tradition, and personal history....

In response to the question, “Will it be on the test?” The answer has ranged from and included:

No card playing or movie going.  
No lawn mowing or going out to eat on Sunday.  
No dancing, drinking, or dating girls that do.  
For some pacifism, for others enlisted patriotism.  
For some church twice on Sundays, for others 4:00 on a Saturday.  
For some heteros only, for others all are welcome.  
For some Christian education, for others the public sphere.

You get the idea. Our guideposts are a Bible-based-hodge-podge that's experienced or expressed through a particular cultural framework. That's not to suggest that they aren't true, worthy, or faithful, but they are also a unique function of culture and context.

And, therefore the question is a more than just a way to jam up Jesus. It is more than an idle rabbinical game. It's a crucial question:

What's the essence of what we are supposed to do?  
What's the greatest commandment?

Jesus responds with a startling simplicity. He quotes part of a prayer that every practicing Jew would recite each morning and every evening. He offers a portion of the *shema*:

*Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one....  
Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all  
your strength...*

And then for good measure, as you love God you would love that which bears the image of God, he tacks on a text from Leviticus 19 about loving your neighbor.

Now. There's really nothing earth shaking in the answer Jesus offers. In fact, in Luke's gospel Jesus poses a similar question to a lawyer, and he responds with the same answer. Jesus is not breaking substantial new theological ground here; he is not offering a radical reconfiguration of truth.

He simply hangs all the law on two nails: Love of God and love of neighbor. The formula is memorable and its simplicity appealing. Everything hangs on, is connected to, finds coherence, or has meaning in relation to those two nails.

I know a young woman who tends a bar – over-dyed jet-black hair, husky smoky voice, a few tattoos, a little rough around the edges. A few years ago she began to date a gentleman caller. She liked him initially. He was a good guy who had a job, treated her decently, and went to church – all the basics. She was hopeful. But, then he began to question and critique her decisions and patterns. He began to talk of God's displeasure with her. (It's worth noting that sort of thing does not go well early on in dating....)

She had second thoughts about him and began to avoid his advances and refuse his calls. Finally, he simply text-messaged her a text. She asked me about the text because she wanted to know what it said, but she couldn't remember what text. "It was either John 14:15 or John 15:14...."

I am not sure it would have mattered. John 14:15 reads, "If you love me, keep my commandments." John 15:14 is "You are my friends if you do what I command."

And, therein lies the rub! There are 613 laws in the Torah, and when Jesus answers the Pharisees, he doesn't undo any of those commandments or untie any of those knots. He simply says that they all hang on two nails. Pull one of those nails out and it all falls apart. In the words of John Calvin:

*Surely the first foundation of righteousness is the worship (love) of God. When this is overthrown, all the remaining parts of righteousness, like pieces of a shattered and fallen building, are mangled and scattered....*

So maybe Jesus was pointing toward the toward the dynamic tension between love and the law. For example....

You can't truly love God without loving neighbor.  
You can't truly love neighbor without loving God.

You can't truly express love without the law.  
You can't truly express the law without love.  
Law no matter how disciplined is sterile without love.  
Love no matter how passionate is impotent without law.

Now. Most good sermons would end there with the encouragement to go live in love by obeying the commandments. And, Jesus could have walked away leaving the Pharisees feeling sort of foolish, but instead Jesus turns the tables and asks about the Messiah.

Matthew – this most Jewish of gospels – includes this odd little exchange about the line of David and the coming of the Messiah as the last time in which the political-religious class tries to catch Jesus as some manner of fraud. They seem to have heard enough, now the plot moves to crucifixion.

But, what if this odd little addendum is also a way to say that this is what love and law finally and fully look like?

This is love embodied. This is the greatest commandment expressed in flesh and blood. This is the love of God and neighbor expressed not in pen to paper but in person. And finally, this is love hanging on two nails.

William Willimon puts it this way:

*Jesus will give definition to all of this, not standing before the temple and having a theological argument, but by stretching out his arms on the cross.*

Dear friends, may we proclaim this morning, in the glorious light of that mystery, that love hangs on, is connected to, finds coherence, or has meaning in God in Christ on the cross.

May our lives be modeled and marked by that love.  
May our lives hang on that that knot and those nails.

Amen.