

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

October 25, 2020

* *Please stand if you are able*

Prelude: "Tell Your Children"

Gathering

Welcome and Lighting the Christ Candle

Acolyte: May the Holy Spirit unite us in worship, point us toward Jesus Christ, and inspire us to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with God. Come, let us worship God.

* Liturgist: Lord, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations.

All: **Before the mountains were born you brought forth the whole world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God.** *Psalm 90: 1-2*

Liturgist: Come, let us worship the Lord, our God.

All Singing: **562 "We Will Extol You, God and King"**
Singing verses 1, 3, and 4

God's Greeting
Passing the Peace at a Distance

Reconciliation

Liturgist: Lord, have compassion on your servants.

All: **Satisfy us in the morning with your unending love, that we may sing for joy and be glad all our days. Make us glad for as many days as we've been afflicted, for as many years as we've seen trouble.**

Liturgist: May your deeds be shown to your servants, your splendor to your children.

All: **May the favor of the Lord our God rest on us.** *Psalm 90: 13-17 adapted*

Silent confession and reflection

All Singing: **"Trisagion"**

Holy God, holy and mighty, Holy Immortal One, have mercy, have mercy on us.

Liturgist: You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. *Romans 8: 15-17 NRSV*

* **All Singing:** **802 "Wash, O God, Our Sons and Daughters"**

The Baptism of Oliver Gerrit Philip

Minister: Having heard God's gracious promises to us in Christ, do you desire that Oliver Gerrit be baptized?

Parents: We do.

All: With joy we celebrate together the gift of God's grace in Christ!

Minister: In presenting your child for baptism, desiring that Oliver Gerrit be grafted into Christ as a member of his body do you receive the teachings of the Christian faith, which we confess in the Creeds of the church?

Parents: Yes! We trust in him as our Lord and Savior. We intend to be Christ's faithful disciples, trusting in his promises, obeying his Word, honoring his church, and showing his love, with God's help as long as we shall live.

Minister: Will the congregation please stand and with these parents proclaim your faith using the words from the Apostle's Creed.

All: I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, died, and was buried; he descended to hell. The third day he rose again from the dead. He ascended to heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty. From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.

Covenant Vows
Prayer of Thanksgiving
Baptism
Welcome

Minister: Some of us will have the privilege of encouraging Oliver Gerrit often, over the course of many years. Others of us may not be able to do so. Yet we all speak words of promise and welcome, speaking on behalf of Christ's whole church, in time and space, and committing ourselves to live lives of Christian encouragement wherever God calls us.

Brothers and sisters, we now receive Oliver Gerrit into Christ's church. I charge you to nurture and love him and to assist him to be Christ's faithful disciple.

All: With joy and thanksgiving, we now welcome you, Oliver Gerrit, into Christ's church; for we are all one in Christ. We promise to love, encourage, and support you and to help you know and follow Christ.

Duet: "Hallelujah" MaMuse

Every time I feel this way, this old familiar sinking
I will lay my troubles down by the water where the river will never run dry

Hallelujah, I'm gonna let myself be lifted
By and by, I will lay my troubles down by the water
Where the river will never run dry

It's been said and I do believe as you ask so shall you receive, so take from me
these troubles bring me sweet release where the river will never run dry

There is a river in this heart of hearts with a knowingness of my highest good
I am willing, I will do my part where the river will never run dry

Proclamation

All: Prepare our hearts, O God, to hear your Word and obey your will.
Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

Scripture: Matthew 22: 34-46

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?"

"The son of David," they replied.

He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says, "'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'"

If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Minister: The Word of the Lord.

All: Thanks be to God.

Sermon: Knots and Nails

* **All Singing:** 724 "You Shall Love the Lord"

Dedication

Prayers of the People

* **All Singing:** 946 "Go My Children with My Blessing"
Singing verses 1 and 3

* Benediction

Praying with Elders – If you have a concern or joy that you'd like to talk or pray about with an Elder, one or two will be available near the sanctuary entrance following the service.

Worship Leaders

Pianist/Vocalist: Erin Pacheco
Guitarist/Vocalist: Clay Carlson
Tenor Saxophone: Aaron Murawski
Duet: Mary Medema
Rachel Bykerk
Sound Engineer: Schuyler Roozeboom
Minister: Roger Nelson

9:00 AM Service

Liturgist: Kim Ottenhoff
Prayer: Dave Larsen

10:15 AM Service

Acolyte: Violet Brumirski
Liturgist: Annelise Latham
Prayer: Josh Larsen

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.