

The Question On Which It All Hangs

Matthew 22:34-40

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I've told you this joke before, so when I get to the punchline laugh any way.

It was around the turn of the century, that the Mexican bank robber Jorge Rodriguez was making quite a name for himself by sneaking across the Texas border, robbing Texas banks, and then running back to Mexico. An outcry developed and the Texas Rangers sent a posse.

Well, sure enough, late one afternoon, one of the Rangers spotted Jorge wading across the Rio Grande at a shallow spot. The mission was to get the money back and not just to kill him, so he carefully followed Jorge to his village, where he went into this favorite cantina and began having a good time.

The Texas Ranger slipped into the cantina and got the drop on Jorge. He put his gun to the back of the bank robber's head and said, "Jorge Rodriguez, I know who you are. I'm a Texas Ranger. I've come to say that if you don't give back all the money you've robbed from Texas banks I'm going to blow your brains out."

But the problem was Jorge did not understand English and the Texas Ranger did not know Spanish. So here they were in the middle of this cantina, the Ranger with a gun to Jorge's head, but neither one understanding what the other was saying.

A boy who was watching it all stepped forward and said, "I'll translate. I know Spanish and English."

And so the boy translated the Ranger's threat.

A pall fell over Jorge's face. He said to the boy, "Please, please tell the Ranger that I have not spent a cent of that money. If you go to the town well, face North, and count down three stones, you'll find a loose one. There you will find all of the money I have stolen. I promise, all of the money is still there. Please, please tell the Ranger."

A wry look came over the boy's face. He turned to the Ranger and said, "Jorge Rodriguez is a brave man. He says he is ready to die."

It's not what we *know* that matters. It's what we choose to *do* with what we know that matters.

We *know* this passage. Maybe we *know* it too well. Even if we hadn't heard it read this morning, I'm guessing most of us could recite from memory what Jesus has called the two greatest commandments: love God and love neighbor.

But what have we chosen to *do* with them?

As Matthew tells it, the story begins with the Pharisees hearing how Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. The Greek word there, *phimoō*, literally means “to muzzle.” The Pharisees heard how Jesus had *muzzled* the Sadducees.

We have to understand that the Pharisees and the Sadducees were rival parties in first century Jerusalem.

The Sadducees were the wealthy elites within the Jewish faith. They had the privileged place of the priestly class, and with it the money. One major theological distinction between the Pharisees and the Sadducees that has always helped me remember who they were was that the Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, which is why they were sad, you see.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were not necessarily wealthy, nor were they part of the priestly class. Instead, they were the devout lay leaders of the Jewish faith. The Pharisees were known for taking scripture incredibly seriously and for their devotion to its practice. It wasn't enough to only practice the faith at the temple, but the devout Jew needed to bring the devotional practices of the faith with them everywhere they went.

I like the way Dale Bruner sums up their differing factions when he labels the Pharisees as “the Serious” and the Sadducees as “the Sophisticated.” In your mind's eye, you can almost see “the Serious” Pharisees scouring the scriptures in their morning quiet time, and “the Sophisticated” Sadducees having theological discussions over a hot cup of afternoon tea (pinkies out, of course).

So, the story begins with “the Serious” ones hearing how Jesus had muzzled “the Sophisticated” ones in public debate. So they gathered together and one of them — a lawyer specializing in biblical law — approached Jesus and asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Earl Palmer points out that “the lawyer may be trying to do any one of three different things in questioning Jesus.”

The first option, like the Sadducees, is that he may simply be showing his opposition to Jesus and trying to outwit him in public debate. If he can succeed, it's like a feather in the cap of *his* party, the Pharisees.

This is where that “test” word comes into play. He asked Jesus a question to *test* him (Matt. 22:35). The testing was based on the strict rabbinic conviction that *all* God's commandments were *equally* great. In that view, no one commandment could be greater than another, so he *tests* him by asking, “Which commandment is greatest?” The goal was simply get the self-proclaimed rabbi, Jesus, to admit that he didn't hold all God's commandments equally. That's the first option.

A second option is that the lawyer may have been trying to prove to the Sadducees — and all those listening in — that the Pharisees were smarter than those Sadducees. “If

those overly-inflated Sadducees were muzzled by Jesus, and we Pharisees could outsmart Jesus, then think about the message that would send to the general public.”

Human nature loves to see its opponents put down. If you don't believe that, let me remind you that we're less than two weeks out from the presidential election. In this heightened climate, we are more focused on how we differ than on what we share. We draw lines in the sand over what we believe and whose side we are on. But this behavior isn't new. It was clearly happening in the days of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and — this may shock you — it has even happened among us Baptists from time to time.

The New Testament Scholar, Marcus Borg, was fond of telling a story of when ice-making machines first made their way to North Carolina shortly after the Civil War. He said:

“A small town businessman from a remote community in the mountains of North Carolina went to one of the larger cities and there for the first time in his life, he saw an ice-making machine. Now, machines that could make artificial ice were a recent invention; he thought this was wonderful because it meant you could have ice all summer long. So he returned to his small community in the mountains of North Carolina and told his Baptist church about this great new invention. Within a month the church had split into ice and no-ice Baptists. The theological issue in this case: was it a violation of the natural order established by God to make ice out of season? The argument seems to have been that if God had wanted us to have ice in the summertime, God would have raised the freezing temperature of water” (from a sermon entitled, “What's Christianity all About?”, February 6, 2011).

So the second option was that the lawyer wanted his party to be victorious over their rivals (the Sadducees) by using Jesus as a prop in their petty theological argument. But, it backfired, because Jesus refuses to be used as a prop. There is, I suspect, another lesson altogether in that option for our political parties, too.

But, points out Palmer, there is a third option that we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss. He suggests that the lawyer may be genuinely seeking to discern what the law requires of him (*Feasting on the Word, Year A: Vol. 4, 212*).

Maybe what he'd heard had inspired him to believe that Jesus was able to answer the strongest question of his heart. Maybe he hoped that Jesus would help him cut to the chase, so to speak, of all these competing devotional practices, of all these competing theologies, of all these competing interpretations and denominations and affiliations. Maybe — like us — he needed something to guide his faith that could be as true today as it was the day he was born and as it would be the day he would die.

Maybe he needed something on which he could hang the entirety of his faith.

Jesus' answer wasn't from the fringes of the faith, but from the heart of it. "'You shall love the Lord your God,'" he said, "'with all of your heart and all of your soul and all of your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment" (Matt. 22:37-38)

It's from the *shema* in Deuteronomy, chapter 6. Faithful Jews — like this lawyer — prayed the *shema* every single day.

The lawyer had asked for *an* answer — *one* answer — but Jesus doesn't stop with one. He said, "*The second is like it.*" In other words, the greatest commandment is married, and you can't get one without getting both. "The second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matt. 22:39).

Love your God and love your neighbor. And then Jesus said this: "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40).

Do you remember before when I said that in Jesus' day, there was the conviction that *all* God's commandments were *equally* great?

The image of God's word, then, was like taking the Bible, opening it, and turning it face down, so that — held by its covers — all the pages hung down equally; each commandment coming down to us as equal revelation.

But Jesus turns that image on its head. Instead of holding the Bible face down to let all the words rain down on us equally, he grabs the two pages with the two great commandments from Deuteronomy and Leviticus, and hangs all of scripture from their sturdy words. He says all of it — all the stories about us being made in the image of God, about us being delivered from sin, about how we are to live in the world, about how we are to worship — *all of it* is completely and utterly dependent on us always listening, speaking, and living from a posture of love, love for God and love for our neighbor.

And here's the thing: we *know* that. We *know* that we are a people called to love God and to love neighbor. But, it's not what we *know* that matters; it's what we choose to *do* with what we know that matters.

We can know every word of scripture, have memorized every word of the book of Romans, be able to read the bible in the original languages, be state Bible drill champs — Wyoming, 1999 — but if we do not love, we've completely missed the point.

Paul said it like this: "If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor. 13:1-3).

Without love, this whole faith is pointless. Without love, the whole thing collapses.

When I was younger, I was an aspiring guitar player. I wanted to be a song writer, I wanted to play in a band. There was only one little problem: I just wasn't very good. I'd miss chords. I'd fall out of rhythm. I didn't have the ear or coordination to solo. And for the life of me, I could never get the B string in tune.

When I'd get really frustrated, I'd start to blame my failure on my cheap, old, hand-me-down guitar. After all, it's strings were a mile off of the fretboard, which meant you had to have the hand strength of Hercules to make a chord. It couldn't hold a tune for more than three minutes, which meant I had to play only really short songs. It was just a piece of junk.

So I convinced myself that my guitar was the issue. It was holding me back. In order to become the guitar player I wanted to be, I needed a new guitar — one with strings closer to the frets, one that could hold a tune, one that made me feel like a real guitar player. The problem wasn't me. It was the guitar!

So I saved up until I could buy a Martin guitar — makers of some of the best sounding acoustic guitars on the planet. The day came, and the guitar arrived. I opened it up and grinned from ear to ear as I held it for the first time. The strings were so much closer to the fretboard, and I was willing to bet it could hold a tune for weeks! I was so excited. I picked up my guitar pick in my right hand and made a chord with my left... and do you know what happened?

I became a preacher. That's what happened. That should tell you everything you need to know. It turned out that I'm just not a good guitar player.

Then this week, I came across a video of guy named Clay Shelburn. I know nothing about the guy — don't know where he lives or what his background is — but in this video, he's standing in the toy aisle of Wal-mart at 2:30 in the morning holding a \$25 Disney *Cars 2* toy guitar, and he's playing Stevie Ray Vaughn's "Pride and Joy." And, dadgumit, it's incredible. It's mind blowing, actually, how he gets that little plastic red guitar to sound so much better than most people can make a \$1000 guitar sound.

There's a saying that goes, "It's not the guitar, it's the player."

It's not about what we know. It's about what we are able to *do* with what we know.

Love God, love neighbor — everything hangs on these two. Now, what will you *do* with what you know?

It's that simple, and it's that hard...

Amen.