

Mark 12:28-34  
October 31, 2021

## Along the Way

Whenever I am away for a week or two I always try to find a church to attend, with certain goals in mind, to be in the pew, to *hear* a sermon, rather than in the pulpit delivering one. I want to see how someone else does it. I am also interested in how other people worship.

I like to worship in churches that have historical significance of some kind. Or to look for grand buildings, beautiful old structures that feel like sacred spaces. Sometimes I attend ABC churches if I can find one, or I go with friends or family, if they are around. Since I have lived in Ohio, I have visited for the first time, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. There are many others to visit down the years, just to learn.

Over the summer I was away for two weeks and went to church with my sisters, both of whom have become Episcopalians. Out in California we went to a “west-coast” style Episcopal church with a jazz band and surfboards lining the walls. Then the very next week, in St. Louis a very traditional Anglican style church complete with a priest from England to give it full affect.

Last week, I found my way to Northampton, MA, to a dually aligned ABC/UCC church. It is also a continuously worshipping congregation since the 1650's. It is famous for being the church where

Jonathan Edwards served as the pastor during the First Great Awakening in the 1730's and 40's.

Edwards is studied in American Literature classes because one of his sermons is among the earliest examples of, well, American Literature. The sermon is entitled, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” It is actually a little different than it sounds.

An interesting aside, after Edwards left Northampton, he went out to Stockbridge in western Massachusetts, where there was a mission to the indigenous people, and served there as a missionary. One of his concerns was smallpox, which was a devastating disease that wreaked havoc on the people when it struck, killing many, scarring the survivors.

Edwards went on a campaign to get people vaccinated, strangely enough. Even though the smallpox vaccine was not as safe and effective as the vaccines we have now; it did lower the risk significantly, and would eventually wipe out the disease. Edwards himself, unfortunately, lost his life after receiving the vaccine. But that is for another time.

What is important for us is simply to take in the reality that no matter where one worships or how, or in what time period, every one of us is bound by this universal demand that we know as the Rule of Love;

“You shall love the Lord your God with all our heart and soul and strength (Mark adds mind),” and, “You

shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The first part comes from Deuteronomy and the other from Leviticus, which means that they are more ancient than Christianity.

The passage from Deuteronomy is interesting because it comes with a brief commentary:

“These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home, when you walk along the way; when you lie down, and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

In other words, be thinking about them all the time, continuously reminded that life comes with instructions. Needless to say, the world has changed dramatically since the time of Moses, since the days of the kings and the prophets of Israel. Theirs was an overwhelmingly agrarian world and that has powerful implications for the way people organized their relationships.

Our modern industrial world is quite different and also has powerful implications for the way we live our everyday lives. They spent more time waiting for nature to do its work, we spend more time doing ours.

But we still get up and lie down; teach our children; sit at home, and get out and go places. We still need reminders, habits of heart of mind as well as actions to

keep us mindful of the centrality of the commands to love, God and neighbor. The idea of talking about these commands along the way has always captured my attention. One of the great differences is that when we go somewhere, it is normally in a car rather than on foot, or on a horse.

I know that the “love” in this command might be connected with certain behaviors, truth-telling, generosity, sacrifice and service, things regarding citizenship, and personal relationships, and each could be the topic of a sermon, but I thought I might offer an activity intended to capture the gist of this commentary that suggests we talk about the command to love all the time. Only I hope to modernize the idea of walking along the way,” by calling it, “driving along the way.”

If you are so inclined, for the next week, whenever you get in a car to go somewhere, even if you are not the one driving, at the sound of the starter clicking the motor to life, say these words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and with all your mind,” and when you return, “Love your neighbor as yourself.

Listen to the words, they are from God to you; let them serve as a gentle but disciplined reminder to shape our inner lives, allow our inner lives to be directed away from all the distractions, and by habit, towards divine, self-giving love. And see what happens.

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