

It's Not the Particulars!

By Rev. Joe Connolly

“You know the commandments: ‘No killing; no committing adultery; no stealing; no bearing false witness; no defrauding; Honor your father and mother.’” — Mark 10:19.

It feels like I have done a lot of traveling on church business in the last two weeks. I was twice in Homer, once in Binghamton for Susquehanna Association work and once in Syracuse for New York Conference business.

Obviously, the shortest trip on that list was Binghamton, an hour or so, depending on where in that metropolis you're headed. All in all, that's a lot of time in the car.

When traveling in a car alone some people listen music but some listen to a book and some prefer novels, some prefer non-fiction. I'm different. I listen to academic lectures, often lectures on history. I know— history: boring!!! Well, boring for most people. Not for me.

As I listen I always find out new information, new insights, new ways of looking at things. Indeed, I have often said to be a good theologian you need to be a good historian. Christianity is steeped, even based in history— Greek History, Roman History, Western History, Church History.

Our claim as Christians is Jesus was real, lived in history, at a specific time, in a specific place. Our claim as Christians is with the advent of the Christ God was in the world then, has been in the world throughout history. Our claim is God is in the world, our world— here, now, with us in our present history. (Slight pause.)

Well, I'm lectures to which I'm currently listening are *Foundations of Western Civilization*. It would be redundant to say the foundations of Western civilization contain Greek History, Roman History, Western History, Church History. They do.

In the last couple of lectures I've stumbled on information I'd not known before, new ways of looking at things. I even found out something about Upstate New York. To illustrate, I need to point out an obvious fact about Upstate.

Generally, this area was settled by Europeans between the late-1700s and the mid-1800s. What was going on in America in that era? Americans saw ourselves, America saw itself as inheritors, keepers, preservers of Greek and Roman tradition.

Hence, many names of places in this area come out of the history of Greece and Rome: Syracuse, Cicero, Vestal, Cincinnatus, Pharsalia— all of them out of that history. It's that last one— Pharsalia— that caught my attention when I heard it in a lecture. I knew those other names had Greek and Roman connections but I had not associated the name Pharsalia with Rome.

Pharsalia is the name of an epic Roman poem about a battle between an army led by Julius Caesar and one led by Pompey— Pompey— yes, another Roman name with a town name in this area. *Pharsalia* refers to the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 B.C.E. So Pharsalia is the name of yet one more place in this area

taken from the Greco-Roman tradition and affirms what was happening in the era of European settlement in Upstate New York.

Another thing I heard was more general but much more important. Despite the title of the famous book by Gibbon *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, the Roman Empire neither declined nor fell. Things changed but the Empire remained quite intact.

Indeed, in the era in which Gibbon claimed decline happened, Rome was led by two competent emperors— Diocletian and Constantine. They were competent because they foresaw and saw— anticipated and identified— change in the Empire. And they dealt with those changes, made structural adjustments in how Rome was governed.

Now yes, you may think that’s a boring idea. But anticipating and identifying what will and what is happening is important. Therefore, instead of getting tied up in details, concentrating only on right now, competent leadership looks at the whole picture.

And so it’s inaccurate to say the Roman Empire declined. The Empire simply changed, constantly changed. Of course, everything changes constantly. It’s a lesson we can and should learn from history. (Slight pause.)

These words are in Mark. “You know the commandments: ‘No killing; no committing adultery; no stealing; no bearing false witness; no defrauding; Honor your father and mother.’” (Slight pause.)

There are three conversations in this reading. I think we need to consider the three of them as one. Commentaries suggest the writer of Mark meant them to be seen as one and that insight could be a key to understanding the thrust of the whole passage.

But first, we need to grapple with the idea that what is said to the rich person is not a call to abandon the world. Neither is it a suggestion to become a wandering mendicant, a beggar.

The disciples left all to follow Jesus. Their future is described as more than ample. Therefore, we need to grapple with the idea that, we, the church, cannot flee the arena, the time and place in history through which and in which we are called to live and serve.

Further, the rich person, like the disciples, keep the commandments. We need to grapple with the idea this is not enough. The commandments are just details, particulars. We need to look at the larger picture.

Hence, this question needs to be addressed: what does the world look like, really? And how do we, how should we respond to the world, really? (Slight pause.)

There are two answers to those questions. First, yes the world is broken. If you think that’s not true, please listen to the news. What are we going to do about that?

Second, yes things change constantly, the world changes constantly. If you think that’s not true, please listen to the news. What are we going to do about that?

Well, this is what history suggests to me: the details do not matter as much as seeing the entire picture, envisioning the whole. Foreseeing and seeing are imperative.

Put in a more colloquial way, when we pay too much attention to the tree or to the trees, we miss the fact that a forest stands in front of us. That forest is waiting to be identified, inviting us to grapple with it. (Slight pause.)

Let me put that trees/forest concept another way. In my Church History Survey course the professor was painfully aware students needed to keep up with the reading. Fall a week behind, it's hard to catch up.

So each week there was a 10 question short answer quiz. The professor was generous. The tests were only 10% of the grade. One answer each week was "Sir John Free-be" so you would get at least 10% on each quiz without doing the reading.

This same teacher also said the importance of facts is to give context. But it is much more important to know and understand the broad sweep of history, the big picture.

Knowing Columbus sailed the ocean blue in 1492 is not as important as knowing the voyages of the explorers in that era are about the beginnings a new economic system called capitalism. The facts—the tree—that's Columbus. The broad sweep—the forest—that's capitalism. Which is more important—Columbus or Capitalism?

So a forest is a larger picture. Our Christian forest is not about specific rules but about how we live our lives. So living within the rules is good. Living out from the rules is our calling. Put another way, Scripture constantly asks: where is our heart?

Loving one another is not a rule. Why? A rule is static, immovable, a noun. Love is an action, a motion, a verb.

All that brings up another question about anticipation and identification. What is the purpose of this Church? This is a question with which this church shall be grappling in the next year and beyond the next year, a question with which this church should never stop grappling.

In order to faithfully grapple with this question we need to have foresight and sight—anticipation and identification. These have nothing to do with what programs we have, who the pastor is, even who the leadership is.

We all need to faithfully grapple with the question 'what is the purpose of this church?' And one way to work out that purpose might be that we all need to learn something from history.

Static, immovable does not work. Action, motion does work. Change is not easy. But it is inevitable. Success is not a goal. Being faithful is.

So let me make one suggestion as to what being faithful might entail. I maintain faithfulness means living out from the rules, living out from what is the reality of now into the reality of what can be, seeing the big picture, perhaps even seeing the way of life to which God calls us.

We therefore need to live out our lives, live out the life of this church in covenant love. And covenant love means growth. Covenant love means change.

And that, my friends, suggests what yet another step might be. And it is a really, really big step. We—all of us together— need to trust God— God who is faithful. Amen.

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ENDPIECE: It is the practice of the Pastor to speak after the Closing Hymn, but before the Choral Response and Benediction. This is an précis of what was said: “President Harry S. Truman said this: ‘The only thing new in the world is the history you don’t know.’ Author Michael Lewis says this: ‘Program management is the existential threat you never really imagined as a risk. But Program management is the innovation that never occurs, the knowledge that is never created, because you have ceased to lay groundwork for it. It is what you never learned that might have saved you.’”

BENEDICTION: The Word of God guides us and assures us of God’s saving grace, God’s healing love, God’s eternal promises. May the face of God shine upon us; may the peace of Christ rule among us; may the fire of the Spirit burn within us this day and forevermore. Amen.