

Homily for Friday in the Twelfth Week after Pentecost August 21, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

Year 2, Proper 15: Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 107:1–8; Matthew 22:34–40

In the 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell, a conservative Scottish Presbyterian, refused to run a race on a Sunday during the 1924 Olympics. Instead, he ran a race on a weekday that he was not expected to win and won.¹ It turns out that I have something of an Eric Liddell in my own family, not a runner, but an Anglican priest who became a congregationalist clergyman, a Puritan. He's the only eleventh great-grandfather whose name, John Lothrop, that I know.

He was a graduate of Cambridge. It turns out that one thing, but not the only thing the Puritans were very strict about was the fourth commandment, “Remember that thou keep holy the Sabbath-day.”² *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* says, “[The Puritans] demanded express Scriptural warrant for all the details of public worship, believing that all other forms of worship were popish, superstitious, idolatrous, and anti-Christian.”³

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eric-Liddell>, (accessed 21 August 2020).

² *Ibid.*, 68.

³ *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, (ODCC) 2ed. (New York: Oxford University Press 1978), s.v. Puritans, 1146.

In 1632, Archbishop William Laud sent Lothrop and his congregation to prison, for what turned out in Lothrop's case for two years. His offense was conducting congregational worship in a home. Before he was released in 1634, his first wife, my eleventh-great grandmother Hannah Hawse, died. As a condition of Lothrop's release, he agreed to move to the Colony of Massachusetts, which he did in 1635. He served congregations in Scituate and Barnstable. He died in 1653.

Today's gospel lesson became very familiar to me when I began worshiping in the Episcopal Church and even more when I served at the Church of the Incarnation in Dallas for the first two years after being ordained. The 1928 Prayer Book was in use. Holy Communion started with the Collect for Purity followed by the Summary of the Law:

*Hear what our Lord Jesus Christ saith. Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.*⁴

⁴ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1928), 69.

Matthew and Luke follow Mark in telling today's gospel story.⁵ In Mark and Matthew, Jesus and his disciples are in the temple, near the end of the last day he will teach publicly. Luke uses the narrative earlier in his gospel. Interestingly, Matthew and Luke frame the question as a test from a lawyer. As in Mark, Matthew's Jesus answers. In Luke, Jesus asks the lawyer, "What is written in the law? How do you read?" The lawyer responds with the summary.

In Mark, it's not a test. A scribe asks Jesus the question, "Which commandment is the first of all?" He does this because he had heard Jesus responding to a question about a woman who was married in turn seven brothers as a brother died. It's the occasion for Jesus to reply, "As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the passage about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."⁶ Mark begins his story this way, "And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, asked him, "Which commandment is first of all?"⁷

⁵ Mark 12:28–34; Luke 10:25–28.

⁶ Mark 12:26–27.

⁷ Mark 10:28.

I confess I do miss a great deal of the language and piety of much of earlier traditional language worship. When the Decalogue was used, the congregation responded to the first nine commandments, “Lord, have mercy upon us, and incline our hearts to keep this law.” After the tenth, the response was, “Lord, have mercy upon us, and write all these thy laws in our hearts, we beseech thee.”⁸

May our hearts always have more room for God’s words and the Word, Jesus Christ.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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⁸ *BCP* (1928), 68–69.