

Wearing Hard Hats in Church: The Fourth Commandment

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson

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Not all that many years ago, now, though I find that memory and time are far more fluid than they used to be. What happened years ago seems like just yesterday, what happened yesterday seems like a long time ago. Physicists say that space is bent (it was Theodore Parker who said that the arc of the universe is curved towards justice; this was picked up by Martin Luther King Jr., who read Parker and Channing often and loved them) and apparently time is not a constant either. But we all know that.

Still, it was not so many years ago, though I can place myself so easily in that time, and re-sense those moments. You know what I mean, don't you? Those moments that linger, that bend and wind and find themselves in the eternity of our thoughts. Those golden moments, those moments of darkness or of light, those bits of time that are not time at all, but stuck as an eternal present in our memories and deeper in our spirits—an eternal sunshine of a spotless mind.

It started rather casually. A man came by the office one day at the church I served before finding this wonderful congregation, and asked about rental policy. He was looking, he said, for space for a meditation center. He represented a meditation teacher who was looking for space to teach meditation and he had heard the Unitarian Universalists were open to different expressions of religious practice, and, besides, we had a beautiful location. We walked around and he thought it just might do fine. We had the space and the times they wanted to meet.

He then asked me if I had ever heard of Thich Nhat Hanh. Indeed, I had, and told him that *The Miracle of Mindfulness* was one of my favorite books, one read a number of times and dipped into when I was feeling lost or stressed or ill at ease, when I needed some kind of "spiritual goose." You know those books, or that music, those bits of creation (Bach, Melville, golf, a garden, Thich Nhat Hanh, the Psalms); we all have them, or ought to have them—those things.

Well, he told me, it was Thich Nhat Hanh himself who was looking to open several mindfulness centers in the U.S. and hoped one would be where we were standing. He asked if Thich Nhat Hanh might come by the next day and look at the rooms and property.

Well, yes, I said. Here to stop: Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist who was active during the Vietnam War as a peace activist. He was head of the order of monks, several of whom burned themselves to death as protests in Vietnam during the war. He was exiled to France and only just returned to his homeland last year. Martin Luther King Jr nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize. He is one of the holy persons of the last 50 years.

So, on this next day, he came with several other monks and several nuns. I spent about an hour and a half with him. He asked if he could see the sanctuary, and we walked there. He walks very, very slowly. Each moment is a moment of grace revealed, he believes; he believes we are only alive in the present moment, only then, or I should say only now, this moment, this moment of grace, this moment of the holy looking to enter our lives. I mean this one right now. This is the only moment you are alive.

He paused at the entry doors, took off his shoes. We stand here on holy ground, don't we? Isn't this sacred space here, under our feet, this ground here? When you come into this room, each Sunday, with your hopes and your expectations, your hurts and your joys, your sorrows and triumphs, isn't this sacred ground for you? Isn't it here where we hope to meet what is holy?

So Thich Nhat Hanh and I walked into the sanctuary and went up to the front—much like here, different design but similar set-up—and we sat. He got up and moved over—as here—to a choir chair and sat. He sits with remarkable stillness and peace; it was as if time stopped when we sat. And after a while he got up and sat in one of the choir chairs—like here, they were up front. And he sat some more. After some time, how long, I could not say, it was so peaceful and powerful; he said "What a wonderful room for your community to be together in."

A little later we left the sanctuary (a sacred or holy place, a place of refuge or safety), and walked the grounds, again VERY slowly. We went back to my office for our good-byes. I gave him a book and he thanked me, bowed, and left.

His presence remains; those moments are still with me.

The book was *The Sabbath* by Abraham Joshua Heschel. I heard later that he thoroughly enjoyed the book and placed it on his shelf of holy readings. It is on my shelf of sacred texts. I hope you have yours.

The Fourth Commandment: Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. It is the only commandment that is not preceded by thou shall or shalt not. It starts "remember." "Remember." From "memory" which comes from the old Anglo Saxon meaning "being mindful." Thich Nhat Hanh again—mindfulness.

Remember. How important memory is. On the Sabbath, work ceases and it is a time for rest and for joy, for remembering what is most important. On the seventh day, God rested and created the Sabbath and named it holy. The creation was good but the Sabbath was holy. It is time that is holy. I mean like this hour we are together. This one hour each week we gather here hoping to create a beloved community. This sacred hour. In this hour, we might meet what is sacred. This can be dangerous, meeting what is holy. Annie Dillard suggests that we should wear hard hats to church!

Get it? Heschel says that the goal of all spiritual living is NOT to amass religious knowledge but to prepare for sacred moments. Faith has to do with time, not just space. Religion, faith, what we do here, is to prepare ourselves for sacred moments.

Most religions talk about the holy, about God, in terms of space. The last two Sundays here claimed that: the holy is in the world, in the creation, Kathleen said; Jim Scott said the same thing last week. God is in the world, in the earth, in our food, in each other. The sacred is imminent; there is an incarnation.

Do you understand what I am saying? The whole of western religion, and much of eastern as well, is about finding the sacred—those things we should remember and keep holy—in space, in things. We build cathedrals or sanctuaries; we go to Yosemite or Big Sur, to Joshua Tree, to find the holy. We read Emerson or John Muir, Mary Oliver. The sacred is in space, up there in heaven, in here in our hearts, in the earth, or wind, or sky, or wolf. or, or ...

And no doubt that is all true.

But Judaism, Heschel says, gave us the Sabbath, gave us sacred time.

Let me ask you a question: Would you rather have more things, more space, or more time?

More space or more time? We have less and less time. We work eight, ten, twelve hour-days and call that success. We work 350 hours more per year than Europeans do and report being less happy and fulfilled. Remember (that word again) when the concern was what we would do with all of our extra leisure time? We have about twice as many things (those things that occupy space) as we did 40 years ago; our houses are twice the size as then.

Does anyone here have enough things? Is any one here tired? Does anyone here feel they have enough time?

The goal of faith, Heschel says, is to prepare for sacred moments.

Here is a sacred moment: We left early, as we usually did, to beat the traffic and get there on time and have a good chance at picking the room we wanted. This was some years ago, and we, Kathe, Claire, Hannah, and I, were driving up to de Benneville Pines from Costa Mesa for a church weekend. We loved going there. The Costa Mesa and Long Beach churches went each year together in an early weekend in March.

We got in on Friday afternoon, ahead of traffic, and settled in. People trickled in that afternoon when it began snowing, then straggled and struggled in as it snowed in earnest. Some never made it, turned back by the snow. By late Friday night, there was a significant blanket of new snow, and we went to bed in the deep quiet of a winter's night.

I got up very early, just before dawn, and could see the sky turning just a lighter blue. The storm had passed, and the world was pure. Those tall ponderosa pines of de Benneville laden with snow, the sky turning a lighter and deeper blue, my girls deep in their sleeping bags sound asleep.

I got out my cross-country skis and went out that morning, that glorious sunlit white morning among the trees at de Benneville Pines. It was a perfect blue wax day, some of the best skiing you could hope for, and I skied through the trees, up the hill a bit and then down for over an hour, until finally I came to a little clearing in the trees. I stopped, leaned on my poles, and just looked around. There was silence, except for the intermittent "floop" as a load of snow fell off of a branch. The light glistened. There is a poem titled "The World Is Awash with Diamonds," and it was that morning.

Time passed, but I don't know how much. You may know of these moments—these moments when time disappears, when infinity seems to enter your bones, these times between something, when eternity is understandable, when your soul, or your spirit, or just you, says, somehow—this is it. Something special is here.

Annie Dillard writes about this in her great, great book—one of the most influential books in my religious journey—*Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, about how you can take a walk one day in the woods and see all the things around you and know their seasons and their particularities, but then you can take the same walk and the world is on fire and you scarcely know your own name.

She writes about how these sacred moments come unawares, and that all we can do is prepare for them, not cause them. The world's literature calls these moments religious experiences, mystical experiences, oceanic experiences, the kind of experience in which you seem to disappear, when ego dissolves, when you become the world, when time is gone. Or time is wholly present, a sacred moment.

Maybe you know this; maybe you do not. But that day, among the trees, I felt it.

Some time passed, how much I do not know—the moment was gone. And I skied back to the lodge, changed but not changed. Annie Dillard puts it this way: "I had been my whole life a bell, and until that moment, I did not know it, but I was lifted and struck." She writes about the fires dwindling, the lights disappearing, the sound being silenced, but she is still spending the power of that moment. I know what she means.

Something happened in the woods that day, among the trees. It was not something I created or caused, simply something I must have been ready for: the world came to me and I was open, ready to be turned to see or hear or feel or experience something, well, something very important. No amount of packing and repacking created that moment; it was a gift.

It was what Martin Buber calls an "I-Thou" experience. Buber says there are times when what he calls "true meeting" occurs. When the world, or something in it, meets us fully, and we meet it, both are subject, both equal—an I-Thou experience. Sacred moments.

This happens to all of us, Buber says. I remember when my girls were very little and I would go into their room at night to make sure they were breathing, and I felt it; or sometimes with friends, listening to some music, reading, being out in nature, with the person you love, maybe even in a worship service—those moments when you meet something fully and something mutual happens.

I don't pretend to understand this or even have very good words for it; there is an element of mystery here. This is where religion enters the world. Buber goes on to say that in an I-Thou relationship we catch

a glimpse of the Eternal Thou. This is God, or mystery, or whatever word we wish to use for that sense of that transcendence. It is what I experienced that day at de Benneville. It happens in time, not in space.

So how do we keep the Sabbath? Well, one obvious way is to come here every Sunday and wait for those moments. Keep this Sabbath. It was once said that space was the great frontier; it may actually be time. Conquering the time we wish we had.

But another is to bring the practice of the Sabbath into your lives. What would it be like if, for one day a week, you did not work or engage in commercial activity? Take Sunday, for example; what if on Sunday you did not work (no email, now!) nor shop. But instead you spent time with family or friends, or doing things of pleasure—walking, gardening, going to a movie, reading, listening to music.

I doubt that this comes as a surprise to anyone here. This notion of time and of sacred time, the idea that we need to rest and take time out from the commercial pressures of living, that we should spend time with family and friends, that sacred moments matter.

So this holiday season, prepare. We are in the season of Advent, and Hanukah begins next week, then comes the Solstice and Christmas. They are all elements of waiting and preparing: Advent preparing for Christmas, Hanukah about waiting for the Sabbath, the solstice for the return of the sun.

So remember the Sabbath, however you do it, and prepare for sacred moments. They will come—bring your hard hats just in case—and with those moments come blessings. May you be happy and may you be at peace.

Books used for this sermon:

Muller, Wayne: *Sabbath*

Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *The Sabbath*

Hanh, Thich Nhat: *The Miracle of Mindfulness*