

November 3, 2013

The National Presbyterian Church

TEN COMMANDMENTS

“Honoring Parents in Every Season”

Luke 2:41-52; John 2:1-11; John 19:25-26; Matthew 12:46-50

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In our sermons through the fall we are looking together at the Ten Commandments, the commandments given by God to his servant Moses after the people of Israel had been in slavery for 400 years. They had been set free, they'd crossed over the Red Sea, they were on their way to the land that God had promised and they did not know how to live together with each other. They'd never had control over their lives before, so God gives them these commandments as if he were giving them the “rules of the game,” the “rules of the game of life”. How were they going to live with each other without devouring each other? Well, here were the ten principles, ten “words” (a “decatalogue”) by which they were to live.

These are words which were not only for them but they're for us too, recorded in scripture in the 20th Chapter of Exodus and the 5th Chapter of Deuteronomy. They've been handed down from generation to generation. Our Lord Jesus Christ embraced these commandments, taught the commandments to his followers, and Christians have held the commandments, treasured them from that day to this. Indeed they have been part of the foundation of Christian society all through history from those days 3,500 years ago with Moses, to 2,000 years ago with Jesus, to our own day and age.

Two of these Commandments are explicitly concerned with family life. All of them in a sense affect family life and community life. But two of them explicitly are about family life. The fifth commandment and the seventh.

- The seventh Commandment is about adultery – *you shall not commit adultery*. We looked at that Commandment a couple of weeks ago.
- We come this morning to the fifth Commandment: *honor your father and mother*. It's appropriate that we look at it on this day, which we call Communion of Saints Day, or All Saints Day, a day in which we're thinking not only of our families (though some of us are because we still grieve some who are dear to us), but we're thinking as well about the family of God, the bond that God gives to all of us within the family of God, within the family of Jesus Christ.

So we're looking at this Commandment, this fifth Commandment today which summons us to honor father and mother – to honor our parents, those who gave us life, those who have led us along the way, those who have gone before us.

When I hear this Commandment – “you shall honor your father and your mother,” – to begin with I tend to think of parents with young children as if they are the ones really in prime view. In fact, if you look at it that way, it's a great tool in the hands of parents, especially when our children are not exactly doing what we want! It's wonderful to be able to say “You must obey me because God tells you to do so!!” So here's the strong arm that we can bring on down on our children when we need some help in order to raise our children: “Honor your father and mother!”

But to assume that this commandment is directed primarily at families with young children is to move a little too quickly. If you pause a moment, what you'll notice is that the Commandment doesn't, in fact, say “obey” your father and mother – though the scriptures when they expounded on this Commandment certainly understood that in some cases that is definitely involved (see Ephesians 6:1). Obedience is involved. But the word that is used there is “honor” and that's different from obedience. It may include obedience, but it's bigger than obedience. It means that this is a Commandment not just for parents of small children but for people at every stage of life. And as we move through those stages in life the way we honor is going to change. It's going to vary. So what I want to do this morning is to explore this commandment while thinking of three different principles, three different issues.

- The first is simply to remind us of different stages of life, in a sense to carry us through those stages in our own lives so that we think about life in terms of stages.
- The second thing I want to do is to think of honor in different ways, how it can change with time, how it does not always mean by any stretch of the imagination, “obedience,” (“children, even adult children, you do what I want all the time!”). There's far more to it than that.
- And then, in the third place, I want us to realize that as parents we have a responsibility too to live lives that are honorable and that encourage the honor of others.

And when I speak to you as parents I don't mean just those of you who have children physically. All of us in the church who have ever taken a baptismal promise to raise the children of this church have become parents in faith of all our ‘church children.’ We are their parents by faith, and we are to live honorable lives before them so that they would not only “honor father and mother,” but honor you, me as well, and ultimately would be led to honor their Father in Heaven – even through us, all of us. That is the goal.

So we're going to look at these issues one by one: (1) the stages of life, (2) ways to honor that vary over time, (3) and living an honorable life that encourages the honor of those who are younger and who look up to us.

We're going to look at these different issues and we're going to do so with the help of the scriptures that we read in Luke, John and Matthew, which reflect on Jesus' life and his relationship with his parents.

It's remarkable that in scripture along with all the "serious stuff" – Jesus teaching people here or there and going to the cross to die for us – we are given these vignettes of Jesus' personal family life: his relationship with his parents and especially with his mother. We're going to reflect on these stages of life with the help of these passages of scripture.

And I'm also going to share with you along the way a little bit about my own life and the stages in life that I have followed: not so that at the end of the sermon you can say "Oh now I know about your life!" (Though I presume you will know a little more), but so that you can reflect on your own life, where you are in each stage of life. So, in some areas as you hear the Scriptures and my story, you'll say "yes, that's me. In others you will say "No, never been there, never done it that way. My life is quite different! This is what happened to me at this stage of life."

In some ways I'm actually giving you permission to allow your minds to wander during this sermon. I don't want to do that very often! But allow yourselves by the Holy Spirit to wander through your life and see where you are in these stages.

And I would encourage you afterwards, perhaps today, perhaps this afternoon, if you've never done this before, to write down what your childhood was like and your young adulthood. What it was like and your relationships with those who have gone before whether they are natural parents or mentors in your life. Not only for your sake but for your children's sake. But for our sake take it and turn it into a prayer. Many of our Psalms are precisely that, reflections on some stage in life turned into a prayer and recorded for us in Holy Scripture.

So: the stages of life, the ways that honor varies, the responsibility we have to live an honorable life, reflecting on scripture and to a certain extent on my life, and hopefully on your life as well.

If I were to describe my childhood I would describe it with one word. I would say that I was *blessed*. In a world in which there are many children who suffer, who face enormous difficulties, whose relationship with their parent is strained and difficult, I was *blessed*. I have one sister. I had one dog, one cat, and I had two parents who loved each other, who cared for each other. That didn't mean they didn't sometimes fight, and in our presence sometimes they did fight and some of those fights were fierce and tough. But I never for one moment doubted that they loved each other or that they loved me.

I knew this, even though I grew up in a time and in a country (in Scotland) where men especially did not show affection (for both men and women, you did not wear it on your sleeve) and my father, as far as I can recollect, never ever told me that he loved me. I never heard those words from his lips. But still I always knew it, and never doubted it, and in this I was enormously blessed.

So respecting and obeying were not hard for me to do. As I moved from childhood to adolescence there was no great rebellion, though there was a distinct and ongoing work of what

we might call *self-differentiation* (as a psychologist might put it), saying to myself, “*these are my parents but I am not them. I have not been called by God to be like them but, for all that, they are still my parents.*” And in that self-differentiation there was a tussle, a very strong tussle to follow what I thought my Heavenly Father wanted in distinction with what my earthly parents wanted.

This tussle is not unusual. Indeed it’s actually absolutely essential if we are to become “God’s person.” And we see it graphically portrayed in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, especially in the story that we have in Luke Chapter 2.

Jesus is in the temple. He’s age 12. He is brought to the temple in Jerusalem from up north in Galilee. He comes to the big city with his parents precisely because in that culture he had begun to enter the age of maturity. This was the age of his “bar mitzvah” he was a “son of the covenant,” and his parents were treating him as if he were one of them. He was becoming an adult. But guess what happened when he actually tried to be an adult? His parents weren’t too happy with that. They wanted him to grow up, but then when he did, acting ‘adult’ by entering into a discussion with some Jerusalem ministers, and staying with them overnight, well, his parents were upset! They come to him and ask ‘Where have you been?’ ‘What have you been doing?’ And Jesus responds, “Don’t you know that I would be here in my Father’s house?”

Was Jesus not honoring his parents at that time? Was he not just in that period of struggle where honoring is not merely obedience by itself but is a matter of discerning what the will of God is within our lives? I don’t know any parents who really want their children just to remain children. We want them to grow up. Though sometimes, indeed, often, we have a struggle letting them, or knowing how to let them go.

“Honor” and how it is to be expressed is difficult to define at different stages. It’s difficult when our children enter adolescence, for them to know how they are to honor us, and for us as adults to know how we are to honor them by letting them go (and still be sure they are safe) to become the people, the adults, God wants them to be.

And it can remain difficult even as we move into young adulthood. Leaving home as a young adult was difficult for me, and there was a particular moment when it was especially difficult and painful. Of course you realize that I am here, having come from another country, over 40 years ago now. There was a moment, though, at the beginning, when I was 20 or 21 when I realized that I would never live close to home again. And it was painful.

To begin with the idea was filled with adventure. But then there was this terrible thought for a period of two weeks or so, that somehow I was betraying my father and my mother. That I was not honoring them. And the thought was that I had to go back, I had to return. This struggle was painful. In this specific two week period there were many tears, day and night, and they were ultimately only alleviated by my mother who set me free, and whom I have always wanted to honor as a response to what she did for me.

She told me a story about her own young adulthood (and this is one reason why it is good for all of us to reflect on our growing years, and the ways in which God has led us), about the

time when she herself left home. She and her brothers left home in World War II. And they were scattered around the world. One brother was in Singapore, one brother was in Palestine, she was in Malta and in North Africa during World War II. And her father she said, felt as if he had lost all three of them. Remaining at home was one sister, my Aunt Anne, who had brain damage from birth. But my grandfather wrestled through his sadness and spoke to her, to my mother, and said to her, *“You know, I’ve struggled with this but what I’ve decided is this. That with my children scattered around the world, instead of moping and moaning, God has given me an interest, a deeper interest in the whole of the world which God created and which God loves.”* And that transition in his life which he shared with her, changed not only her life, but through her passing it on to me, changed my life as well. In fact, the freedom which she was given she returned to her father and mother in later years when both they and her sister, my Aunt Anne came to live with us (she could not live alone).

Jesus’ own mother struggled with this issue not only in Jesus’ childhood, but even when he reached the age of thirty, and entered into his public ministry.

It was when he was in his 30s that Jesus went to the wedding in Cana in Galilee that we read of in the 2nd Chapter of John’s gospel. At the wedding, the wine runs out, and Jesus’ mother enters into the picture and she wants Jesus to fix this situation. She knows that her son can do this. So she turns to those around about to try to solve this problem. And if we were to actually translate Jesus’ response into our vernacular and tone of voice, this is how I think his words would have sounded: *“Mo . . . ther!”* With that tone! *“Mother! Back off. My time has not yet come.”* In other words, *“My job at this stage in my life is not just to do what you want. It is to do what God wants.”*

Was he honoring his mother at that time? I think so. But honoring ultimately his Father in Heaven saying, *“Wait a minute. There’s a difference here! And I cannot be the person you ultimately want me to be if you keep on interfering with my life. You need to let me go.”*

This was not easy, and it was repeated later in his ministry.

In Matthew 12 we are told of the time when Jesus’ ministry is exploding, and people are coming from all around to hear him teach. And the crowds are around about him, and the word is out that he’s gone overboard – he’s gone mad; he’s taking this whole ‘ministry business’ far too seriously. Jesus’ mother comes, and his brothers come. And word gets to Jesus through the crowd: *“your family’s here, and they want to take you away.”* And Jesus turns to the crowd and says *“Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Who are my sisters?”* As if to say, *“I’ve got two families. I have two families. There is my natural family and there is my spiritual family and I now live in tension with these two.”* It must have been awfully hard for Mary to hear this. It must have felt like rejection. But nevertheless that break was absolutely essential if Jesus was to be the person God the Father had called him to be.

And that break is essential in our lives too.

Sometimes when I talk to people about their marriages, when marriage is hard and difficult, I discover that one of the reasons is often this, that one partner or both (but often

just one) *has never made that break*. The scriptures tell us that marriage is about “leaving and cleaving” (Genesis 2: 24). Not just “cleaving to one another” but “leaving”: making a real break with home, and realizing that this new person is now the unquestionable first priority. When parents present a bride in a traditional wedding service, the break is going on there, at least symbolically. When that break does not happen in reality, there will almost always be tension and difficulty in the years that follow.

Jesus’ ministry was fulfilled because he wrestled with this relationship with his mother especially, and made the break. But it was not a rupture, it was not a rupture.

The final story which we read of Jesus and his mother in the pages of the gospel is one of the most touching stories of all (John 19:25-26). Jesus is now fulfilling his Father’s will (to die for our sins), suffering in a way that no mother would have wanted for a child. He is suffering and dying on the cross for your sins and mine, and there, in excruciating pain, he cares for, he honors his mother.

The men have left, run away scared. There’s only one man left, a disciple who is described as “the disciple whom Jesus loves.” We don’t know who he is. Perhaps he was John who wrote the gospel. And then there are some women who have the courage to be around Jesus when he died; and amongst them, Jesus’ mother. And from the cross Jesus keeps this commandment. He looks at his mother and he looks at this man whom he loves, and he says “Mother, behold your son!” And “Son, behold your mother!” He cannot care for her as he would want, but he knows that there is somebody else there and he honors her by bringing them together.

My parents died when they were quite young. I never had to care for them through a protracted illness. Their illnesses were devastating but mercifully short. But I remain amazed as I look at those whom I have met in the congregations I’ve served, who have cared over the long haul for father and mother and sometimes for spouse, caring with the most remarkable care that comes, I think, from God alone, and which is a reflection of this Commandment to honor parents – indeed to honor anyone whom God has given us within our lives. I’ve witnessed remarkable love, and feel humbled as I remember faithful followers of our Lord Jesus Christ giving their lives to others.

On one occasion I repeated an adage to someone that you may have well heard of before. It’s the old adage which says that *as our parents age they tend to become more like children, and we tend to become more like their parents*. I shared this with a friend of mine some years ago and she thought about it and she said that this was only partly true. She said, “They may become child-like, but remember they are not children. They have been and always will remain parents and we honor them, we dignify them and we must never forget that.”

So life passes through different stages. Where are you in this life? What stage are you in? For some of us the stage is clear, for others of us it’s confused. We’re caught, we’re sandwiched in the middle. *Are we a child? Are we an adolescent? Are we a young adult? Are we a parent? Are we both a parent and a child, or a child needing to care for a parent?* God knows us and loves us

where we are, and asks us to think carefully about where we are: it will determine how best we honor those we love, *whether it's through obedience or whether it's through questioning; whether it's through breaking apart or whether it's through caring.*

And what we do as parents whether it's as natural parents or as parents in the faith, will either work for or against those who are younger choosing to honor us, and ultimately through us, choosing to honor our Father in Heaven. And this is the ultimate goal. Our job as parents of all kinds – natural or spiritual is to take our children entrusted to our care and then pass them on into the hands of another who can care for them, and who will honor them, more than we ever could do ourselves.

Let us bow before God in prayer, let us pray. Holy God, you lead us on a pilgrimage through life as you led your people through the wilderness. You guide us, you give us principles to follow. Some of them are so clear we know what to do. Others at times are clear and at other times are murky. Help us to know how best to honor those who have gone before us whether they're our natural parents or others who have been a source of your blessing within our life. So look down upon us. May we be faithful to you our Father in Heaven. Amen.

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