

The Art of Living Well: Continuity of Care Exodus 20:12

As you well know, this week our area was hit by a record-setting blizzard, which dumped up to two feet of snow and caused power outages and kept people huddled in their homes. I heard a story of one person who went and picked up her 90 year old mother and brought her to stay with their family during the storm. She said, “We brought Mom to stay with us during the blizzard. Unfortunately, the blizzard lasted too long.”

This week we’re continuing our series, “The Art of Living Well,” and we come to the fifth commandment: honor your father and mother. Before we get into this commandment, I want to recap quickly the other commandments, because this one marks a significant shift. The first four commandments are all vertical; they all teach us how to develop a loving relationship with God; in the first two, we learned to trust God and trust God completely; in the third, we learned to remember and hold onto his name; and in the fourth, we learned to set aside time to develop a relationship with him. These four commandments form what is called the “first table,” or tablet of the 10 commandments. The next six commandments are the second table, and they are horizontal; they focus on our relationships with others. The bridge that moves us from God to others is the fifth commandment: honor your father and mother.

Of all the commandments, this is the most deceptively simple and potentially dangerous. It is deceptively simple because the relationship between parents and children are unbelievable complex and deeply rooted, as many of you can attest. Given all the dynamics of parent/child relationships, there are no easy answers for how to honor your father and mother. So this commandment is deceptively simple. And it is potentially dangerous because misuse of the commandment can and often had led to abuse. One pastoral theologian and counselor wrote, “*From my own experience and observation, no text has done more damage to abused children than the words, “Honor your father and your mother . . . I know that these words tormented me as a child, and I believe they tormented others. . . . From my . . . work with the Hebrew of Exodus 20, two facts are clear to me: the first is that honor is not a synonym for obedience, and the second is that the [Ten Commandments are] not addressed to children.”*¹ So let’s be clear at the beginning: this commandment is addressed to adults, and honor doesn’t mean simple obedience.

So what does this word honor mean? The Hebrew word that is translated in our Bibles as “honor” is *kabbed*, and has the literal meaning to “make heavy;” to treat someone as a “weighty” person, or a person who deserves respect. In fact the word is close to the word *kabod*, which we use to describe the “glory” of God. To honor someone is to give them glory; the way we honor soldiers who come home from war, or pilots who crash-land their planes in the Hudson. We honor them and treat them as weighty persons, worthy of respect. The commandment teaches us to honor our father and our mother as their adult children.

1. Patrick D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 168.

Now I'd like to talk first about how we honor our parents, and then a little about why we honor our parents. When the scripture says to honor our parents, the most basic meaning is to care for them as they get older. As our parents move from maturity into old age and then to death, we take on the responsibility of providing for them--much as they provided for us when we were children; we give them food and clothing; we make sure that they have shelter and warmth; we clean them and clean after them. Notice this doesn't have much to do with money; it has mostly to do with care. As one rabbi has said, you could serve your parents a feast and not honor them; and you could serve them barley soup, and honor them greatly. By performing basic and essential tasks that give dignity to the one who can no longer do for themselves the child gives honor to the father and mother.

As I prepared for this message, I kept thinking of how many of families in our congregation are caring for aging parents and grandparents. I sat and counted nearly a dozen that I knew of, and I'm sure there are many more that I do not know about. You are taking days off to go to doctors appointments; you moving parents into care facilities or to live with you; you are making long trips to visit and arrange for their care. Millions of Americans are living as the "sandwich generation," caring for their children and caring for their parents. Recent statistics show that 50 millions Americans are serving as unpaid family caregivers, caring for either a spouse or a parent; that's one-third of American households. The average caregiver is a 48-year old who holds down a paid job and spends 20 hours a week providing unpaid care for a relative or chronically ill spouse. This care goes on for an average five years and often more, and it will not surprise anyone to learn that these caregivers all report much higher levels of stress. In fact, recent clinical studies show that long-term caregivers are at high risk for sleep deprivation, immune-system deficiency, muscle and joint problems, depression, and chronic anxiety.² Honoring your father and mother is very, very challenging. What I want you to hear in this message is that what you and millions of others are doing is not just a good thing; you are doing a godly thing. You are honoring your parents and you are honoring God; and--as hard as it is --you are living life well.

The people in the Old Testament who first tried to keep this commandment were under no illusions that it was easy. They knew it was difficult; and especially difficult because of the messy-ness and complexity of family relationships. There are two stories of I want to lift up from scripture that bring this kind of difficulty into focus. The first story is a of a parent's shame, and it is about Noah. When the flood waters had receded, Noah and his family came out of the ark, and God told them to settle down and replenish the earth. So Noah planted a vineyard, and before long he drank the wine; perhaps Noah was an early alcoholic; Genesis 9:21 says he passed out naked in his tent. (And you thought everyone in the Bible was a saint!) His youngest son Ham went and saw his father naked, and immediately he ran and told his brothers what he had seen. His brothers Shem and Japheth then took a cloak, and held it over their shoulders and walked backward into the tent and covered their father, keeping their faces turned away so they would not see his shame. When Noah woke

2. See <http://www.thedailybeast.com/blogs-and-stories/2010-01-28/saving-the-sandwich-generation/>.

up he learned what his sons had done, and he blessed the two sons who covered him and honored him. Noah's sons honored him through their care, even though in that moment Noah was thoroughly dishonorable. He did not deserve their honor; but his sons clothed him in honor nevertheless. Many of us have parents like Noah, who do dishonorable things, who do not deserve our honor. But it is important to understand this, and it is illustrated well by Noah's sons: we honor our parents not because they deserve it, because sometimes they do not; we honor our parents because it is the responsibility God has given to us.

The second story is of the wounded child, and it is from the life of Joseph. Joseph was a wounded child, to say the least; his story is fascinating, and maybe one day we can study it in more detail. Joseph was the eleventh of the twelve sons of Jacob. When Joseph was seventeen, his brothers plotted to kill him, and as part of their plot they dug a pit and threw him in it--and then they left. While they were gone, some traders came by and found Joseph and sold him into slavery in Egypt. The brothers returned and found him gone, so they took his coat and dipped it in blood and told his father that he had been killed. Joseph's goes on through many twists and turns, but eventually he ends up as the right-hand man to Pharaoh in Egypt; and when the great famine struck the land, Joseph was the man to see. His brothers came to Egypt seeking food and shelter, and they were sent to see Joseph--not knowing it was their brother whom they had plotted to kill.

When Joseph recognized his brothers, he decided to bring his whole family to Egypt to spare them the famine. He said to his brothers: "*Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you (and the "you" here is singular) there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.*" Joseph had every reason to be so angry with his brothers that he would write his whole family off, to walk away from them all--and yet he does not. He told his brothers that he will provide for his family, and that he will do it in order to honor his father. As the story goes on, it tells in detail how Joseph cared for his family, and particularly how carried his father's wishes for a proper burial in his homeland. Many of us have been wounded by our families, and sometimes by the very parents we would seek to honor; often we stand as Joseph, far away from home and family and faced with a decision to care for our aging parents. These stories of Joseph and Noah's sons show us that honoring father and mother can happen even when parents don't deserve it and even when children have been wounded.

So that is how we can fulfill the commandment; but why? Why do we honor our parents? For all of you who are living in this reality, I hope to offer you some encouragement and hope for the challenge. There are many good reasons why we honor our parents, and among them are that our parents cared for us as children, clothed and fed and provided for us; that we love them deeply; and it's the right thing to do. But the commandment in Exodus gives a very specific reason why we honor our mother and father, and it's actually a promise: "so that your days may be long in the land." As one commentator has said, this is the one and only commandment that has practical and realistic consequences; do this and you will live long in the land.

This promise is fulfilled for aging parents whenever a child cares for her mother and father in their later years, provides for physical needs, a place to live, support for their well-being, and continuing respect. Without that care, a mother or father have little chance for either long life or good life. But with that care, provided in a way that treats the parents with great weight and does not belittle or denigrate them, length of days is genuinely possible, and they are even likely to enjoy them.

So that is how the promise is fulfilled to the aging parents; but the promise of the commandment is to the children. Here is the connection: as each generation keeps this commandment, then each father and mother, each son and daughter, can count on the promise. In the medical field, a popular term is continuity of care, which means that all the doctors and nurses who care for a person work together. The fifth commandment is God's plan for continuity of care: from one generation to another, parents modeling for their children how to honor father and mother, so that the children turn and honor their parents in old age.

There is a fairy tale from the Brothers Grimm story that illustrates this reciprocal generation-to-generation promise well. It's a little "sappy," and I hope you're forgive that; but it certainly makes the point. It's told by Joy Davidman in her book *Smoke on the Mountain*.

"Once upon a time there was a little old man. His eyes blinked and his hands trembled; when he ate he clattered the silverware distressingly, missed his mouth with the spoon as often as not, and dribbled a bit of his food on the tablecloth. Now he lived with his married son, having nowhere else to live, and his son's wife was a modern young woman who knew that in-laws should not be tolerated in a woman's home.

"I can't have this," she said. "It interferes with a woman's right to happiness." So she and her husband took the little old man gently but firmly by the arm and led him to the corner of the kitchen. There they set him on a stool and gave him his food, what there was of it, in an earthenware bowl. From then on he always ate in the corner, blinking at the table with wistful eyes.

One day his hands trembled rather more than usual, and the earthenware bowl fell and broke.

"If you are a pig," said the daughter-in-law, "you must eat out of a trough." So they made him a little wooden trough, and he got meals in that.

These people had a four-year-old son of whom they were very fond. One suppertime they young man noticed his boy playing intently with some bits of wood and asked what he was doing.

"I'm making a trough," he said, smiling up for approval, "to feed you and Momma out of when I get big."

The man and his wife looked at each other for a while and didn't say anything. Then they cried a little. Then they went to the corner and took the little old man by the arm and led him back to the table. They sat him in a comfortable chair and gave him his food on a plate, and from them on nobody ever scolded when he clattered or spilled or broke things."

Continuity of care, that passes from one generation to another; honoring father and mother, that our days may be long in the land.