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The 5th Commandment: Honor Your Mother and Father © Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-3 (4); John 19:23-27

A couple weeks ago we discussed how the 4th and 5th commandments are hinge commandments: the 4th commandment shows us that by honoring the Sabbath we honor God's good creation and thereby points us to the first three commandments. We have no other gods before us, do not make graven images and do not use the Lord's name in vain because of the power and creativity of a good God who has created a good creation for our enjoyment, care and respect. Or to reverse this, when we see the goodness of creation, we recognize the creative power of God, the mystery of God and the power of God's promises to us.

The Fifth Commandment, "You shall honor your mother and father so that it will go well for you in the land the Lord is giving you", is the hinge which directs us into the final five commandments. If the first four commandments are dependent upon the respect and honor we show God, the last five are dependent upon the respect and honor we show one another. This is why the Fifth Commandment begins with the source of our physical lives - our parents.

I want to suggest to you that the 'second table' of the 10 Commandments can only be closely adhered to if we recognize they are all dependent upon the recognition of the inherent dignity of each and every person. The dignity we afford others and ourselves will determine our ability to act in accordance with the desires of God in our lives.

I do not think it as an accident that the recognition of dignity in others and ourselves begins with honoring our mothers and fathers. Every generation is worse than the next, and if you read John Calvin and Martin Luther on this commandment, you could just as easily be reading a Baby Boomer rant on the incivility and lack of care Generation X and Y have for their elders, or how undisciplined and ungrateful the Millennials are toward the elders in their lives. The mothers and fathers of grown children rant and rave about their children's generation; and the children ignore it or take even more pride in their current behavior. This never changes and to think you or I have any power to change such a dynamic is delusional at best.

But respect, dignity and honor always begin at home. And in saying such a thing, we need to accept a couple things: First, many of you come from broken homes, abusive families and troubled pasts. Much of the responsibility for that life falls at the feet of your parents. And Second, all of us, whether from broken and abusive pasts or from strong and healthy families, must find a way to live up to and into this particular commandment. This commandment is, as Ephesians 6 says, the only commandment that has a promise attached to it. That promise goes like this: *If you honor your mother and father, then you will live long in the abundance the Lord has provided for you.* Very generally, doesn't this tell us that our ability to get along well with one another is dependent upon the honor and dignity we are willing to grant one another, in our homes as well as in our communities?

In the Fourth Commandment, we saw that God's creation was "very good". In the Fifth Commandment, we recognize *and accept* that "God created humankind in God's own image, in his image he created him, male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). We are created in the image of God, each and every one of us. Further, we are created in the image of our parents. If we are "God-breathed" creatures born of dust and holding the image of God within us, then we are also "dust-creatures" born of the DNA and flesh of our parents and carry their physical as well as their psychological and nurturing image, for better or worse. In other words, our

dignity and honor are because we carry the image of God. The image of God is reflected in the image we carry from our parents as well (whether we are with our naturally born parents or were adopted). The image of God is the source of our dignity and honor, and this is true for our parents as it is for each of us.

Let me tell you a story. Once there was a boy who loved his parents very much. They took good care of him and taught him well. His mother and father were in love with one another and they showered him with love. As the boy grew older and became a teenager, he bristled at being told what to do. There was a lot of stress at home for mother and father alike. Work, money and worry seemed to the boy to be the primary influences in the lives of his parents. They were young when they had him and they were learning to be adults as well. And this worry about work and money was what he came to know of his parents.

It was easier for the boy to remember what had just happened rather than what had happened when he was a child. He resented it. Relationships broke down. Parents and boy tried to understand one another and tried to speak respectfully. Aside from the love and respect from his childhood, the boy had learned a hot, restless temper from his father and a stubborn, resistant hardness from his mother. During and after college, the distance grew, especially between father and son, as is so common in cultures like ours. Sometimes, weeks would go by before father and son spoke to one another. Sometimes, the conversation would break down and the son would yell. Nothing, it seemed to the son, was right for his parents. Work choices seemed wrong. Marriage choices seemed wrong. Friends were wrong.

Then the son had a child with his wife. With the child came promises to one another to not carry over baggage from the past. With the child came the desire for the best things for the child and for her happiness. And with those desires came self-reflection. The son realized some of the deeper things of being a parent and therefore the deeper things of his parents. He understood, in part, that what he wanted for his child was also what his parents wanted for him. He understood many things and he began to have respect and honor for his parents again. This was a long, slow process. For him and for his parents.

In the Christian faith, we understand that Jesus is the perfect expression of God on earth. We know God through Jesus Christ. The pinnacle of Jesus' life is him on the Cross and in the Resurrection. Because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, everything is transformed. In Jesus, we say the promises of God are fulfilled. "*Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them,*" Jesus says to the disciples (Matt 5:17). The transformation Jesus effects upon the world alters how we view the world (the first four commandments) and the foundation of our relationships with one another (the last six commandments).

We see this radical alteration in our relationships in Jesus' attention to his mother. In an act of direct fulfillment of the Fifth Commandment, he ensures the care of Mother Mary by changing the nature of the familial relationship. Now the beloved disciple is a new son to Mary. Now Mary is a new mother to the beloved disciple. Both are given this opportunity and responsibility because the family Christ creates for us is dependent upon the dignity and honor of God, not upon the physical and emotional bonds that tie us to bloodlines and genealogy. Jesus redefines the nature of the family in this act from the Cross. As with the Prophets and the Law, Jesus does not negate the family, or abolish it, *rather, he fulfills it.*

The family built upon dignity and honor is the call of Christ, whether that family is from birth, the family you have covenanted with in this place or with those whom you have developed unbreakable bonds during your life. And here is the reason: when we recognize the dignity and honor God has given to our parents, we see the dignity and honor in all people. Is it too simplistic to say that everyone either has a mother and a father, or is a

mother and father to someone?

If this is the foundation - the dignity of God because we are in the image of God - for all people, then, if we see and act upon that knowledge, should it not “*go well for us in the land the Lord has given us*”? Anything which diminishes the image of God in another goes against the Fifth Commandment. Anything which raises up the image of God and affords the dignity of the human being fulfills the Fifth Commandment. Do you see again how Jesus intensifies this commandment, this time through his action from the Cross? Through Christ, the Fifth Commandment extends its reach to each and every person you meet, not just your mother and father.

And it is right here that the challenge of this commandment makes itself known. Paul recognizes this in Ephesians 6. He simply restates the commandment in verses 1-3, but in verse 4 he says, “*Parents, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*” For parents, the command for children to honor you is not a command for them to worship you. Honor precedes obedience, and the enforcement of obedience is often an avenue toward dishonor - for parent and child alike. The challenge for parents is to maintain the humility to which God calls us in our worship of the Lord. The challenge for children is to maintain honor while at the same time gaining the necessary independence required to be an adult in the world.

Remember our boy from the story? Many years had gone by. His relationship with his parents fluctuated with changes in their lives and in his. And then, something changed. Parent and child saw the dignity and honor each deserved and each had in and of themselves. Their conversations were more respectful. The insights gained in conversation were deeper. The boy felt bad for all the difficulty he had created in his resentment and struggles. But the parents were forgiving. They stayed with the boy through it all. The boy understood that part of seeing the dignity of others meant also allowing others to have the problems and difficulties they experience in their lives. In learning how to raise up the honor of his parents, the boy was learning how to raise up the honor and dignity of others as well. Sometimes, this helped other people and he was glad. Sometimes, those people who had been helped took it upon themselves to help others as well. And it began to go well not only for the boy but for the boy’s family and for his parents and for the entire community.

How will we live well in the land? How do we live well together? Jesus is the great healer and the great transformer. On the Cross, Jesus transforms the relationship of families. In our lives, Jesus heals us and gives us the opportunity of being transformed. We live well in the land, in our communities, by recognizing that we are all, like Mother Mary, bearers of Christ. We all carry the dignity, the image and the honor of God. We are God’s children and the inheritors of all that is Christ’s in this world and the next. This means we are the ones who recognize the image of God in all people and take seriously the goodness of God’s creation. Everything hinges on this recognition.

This is why it is so important that we find some way, especially for those of you who have come from abusive homes or broken family relationships, to honor your parents. You may never recover the lost relationship you have with your mother or father. But what you will recover is your sense of the presence of God even in the hardest of places. The Fifth Commandment calls us to a very deep spiritual discipline: *from best to worst, how do we recognize the image of God in others, and having seen the dignity God has given each of us, how do we act upon it?* For when we honor our mothers and fathers, when we let Christ transform our relationships, we let Christ transform us. In being the renewed, redeemed and restored children of the Cross and Resurrection, we see the dignity and image of God not only in others, but also in ourselves - and that is where true healing and transformation begin.

Amen.