



March 11, 2007  
Third Sunday in Lent

Exodus 20:12-13  
**Ten Signposts to Freedom**  
III. Revering Life  
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On this, the third Sunday of Lent, we are continuing a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, or as I have been calling them, ten signposts to freedom. Today we come to the fifth commandment, "Honor thy father and mother," and the sixth, "Thou shall not murder." Both commandments call us to revere life—the lives of those around us, and our own life that has been shaped and molded by father and mother.

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In a day when we have become familiar with the language of dysfunctional families and when many are engaging in courageous therapeutic journeys that bid them to return to their anger at Mom and Dad, the fifth commandment defiantly directs us to "Honor thy father and mother." The easiest interpretation of this law is to say it just applies to those many parents who did an honorable job. These good parents certainly made mistakes, but they also made considerable sacrifices and knocked themselves out to demonstrate their love for their children. But never trust the easiest interpretation of Scripture. This commandment is not conditional. We are not told to honor those who do well at parenting. We are told simply to honor father and mother, which includes all fathers and mothers, that our days may be long in the new places to which God is leading.

This is the first commandment that comes equipped with a promise: long days in a new place. Remember the commandments were given to a people who were on a journey between Egypt and the Promised Land, between a former place and a new place. And the fifth commandment serves as a signpost to help them make it to a new home. But, it cautions, unless you honor the home from which you have come, you will never be able to receive the home to which you are heading.

Let's be clear about what this commandment says. We are not told to stay at home with mother and father, to agree with them, or assume their values. Frankly, we are not even told to love mother and father. What we are told is that we must honor them.

To honor means to give people due importance, respect, and to acknowledge the significance they have. To honor your parents means you realize that you did not spring forth out of nothing and that your life was shaped, for better or worse, by those who raised you.

It is not an accident that the fifth commandment falls on the same side of the tablets as the first four that direct our relationship with God. Like the creator God, parents give us our names and identities, they nurture us and provide for our needs, teach us right from wrong, and they set the boundaries for the garden in which we grew. All of these are world-creating, life-shaping functions. Some parents did that so well. Maybe yours. Others were just awful at it. Maybe yours. But in either

case, unless you honor the influence they have borne in your life, you will never be free to turn your face to the future. All of life will be spent in blind reaction.

To honor the past doesn't mean you condone it. It means you see it for what it is, and realize God has used it all to shape your life. Both the pain and the joy of the past are creative. Both must be honored as the experiences that give us our life's story. For those of us who are still focused on the flaws of mother and father, it could be that those flaws are our best preparation for receiving the flawed relationships of the future. For those who believe mother and father did a pretty good job, it could be that the most honorable way to say thanks is to live as someone who knows how to give love to others.

I am struck by the small notice that often appears in our bulletin telling us who gave the sanctuary flowers this week. Often they are in honor of someone's father or mother. That's all it says. But you have to read between the lines a bit to know about the drama that sometimes goes into that honor. There is a man in our church whose father left when he was a teenager. For many years the son resented his dad. This anger bound him up and put a lien on other relationships. He was afraid to trust. Even when the son became an adult, his self-esteem was stuck in that of the abandoned teenage boy who was constantly searching for a father that would never return. He spent a lot of time in good counseling sorting through this past, but the symbol of his liberation came the day he gave the sanctuary flowers and wrote the words for the bulletin that simply said, "In honor of my father." This is not an unfamiliar story to me, so I knew when I read those words that he had finally forgiven, which means he had honored his past. Now he was free to move into the future.

To honor father and mother also means that we do not make them more than they were. They were neither devils nor gods. If we make them more than mortal, they will continue to govern our lives. Thus, we have to honor their humanity if we are ever to live as free adults. A time comes, according to Genesis, to leave father and mother and cling to another. Some leave by giving thanks to the parents and others leave by giving forgiveness, but we all have to leave in order to cleave. That is only possible if we have left behind the parents' ability to determine our identity and have now turned to the heavenly father to know who we are.

Those who have learned to receive their lives from God find it easier to honor not just the parent but to revere all life as if it were sacred because God creates it. And that brings us to the sixth commandment prohibiting murder. Taking a human life is the ultimate rebellion against the Creator for it assumes sovereignty over life and death, and robs from God his unique right to give and take it away.

Now perhaps some of you are thinking that, when it comes to this commandment, you finally get to check the "not guilty" box. That will work only if you refuse to read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There he claimed, "You have heard it said, you shall not murder, but I say whoever is angry with a brother or sister shall be liable to judgment." Isn't that just like him? For Jesus, righteousness is not a matter of what you avoid doing, but of what you do, and even think and feel.

Jesus is not giving us a new law but simply returning to the spirit of the Law of Moses, which never meant to say that as long as you don't murder the person you hate, you're okay in God's eyes. God created that person! So we dare not savor our anger because that will inevitably manifest itself in gossip or other diminishing activities that tarnish the sacred image stamped on a human life. We are but creatures, and it does violence to others when we refuse to revere the other as a holy "thou."

When anger settles into resentment, it also does violence to our own souls. In the words of Anne Lamott, "Resentment is like feeding yourself rat poison and then waiting for the rat to die. It only hurts ourselves." And that is why the commandment to revere life is a signpost to freedom.

We are most tempted to get lost in our anger at others when our own lives do not turn out as we had hoped. The rector of the Episcopal Church in Madison, Wisconsin, tells the story of a woman in his parish who died in her nineties. Throughout her long life, she had never been married and never got over that. So she left instructions for her funeral insisting that there be no male pallbearers. The instructions stated, "They wouldn't take me out when I was alive. I don't want them to take me out when I am dead." Sad last words for a life.

In a society that has lost the ability to receive life as it is, and thus has lost the meaning of life, one of the most redemptive things a Christian can do is to know how to cherish the creativity of God that is embedded in life's ordinary places. Have you ever cuddled a baby in your arms and made a fool of yourself cooing just to get a little smile? Have you ever caught your spouse's eye across a crowded room, smiled and winked? Have you ever held a wrinkled, old hand and listened to stories from long ago? Have you ever been the last one to leave a restaurant because you got carried away in a conversation with a friend, or cried at the funeral for someone you are going to miss for a long time? Have you ever had to stop reading the paper because you just couldn't stand it, or stared at a picture of a malnourished baby and started to pray?

If the answer is no, the chances are good you've never revered life. And if that's true, the chances are also good that you are already dead.

Benediction: *Who tells you who you are? Who really does that? Your answer to this question is also the answer to most of the rest of your questions. Amen.*