

Honoring Parents Who Don't Deserve It

Text: Exodus 20:12, Mark 7:1-12

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on May 9, 2021

I have a complex relationship with Mother's Day. It was on Mother's Day 62 years ago that my father drove my mother to the hospital to usher me into the world. Even though it took until 2 am the next morning for me to make a formal appearance, she always considered me a Mother's Day baby and her celebration of me and my celebration of her were always intertwined.

But as I grew into adulthood and got married, I learned that I was not able to bear children. My husband didn't want to adopt, and when he ended our marriage, the first reason he gave me was that he wanted to have children. Mother's Day celebrations became mixed with grief. Mother's Day in church was a gut punch every year, as all the mothers were asked to stand and be celebrated and I knew I would never be among them.

As I began to talk to others about that, I discovered a lot of people were also struggling with Mother's Day in church. Some were, like me, unable to be mothers. But many others, and by a certain age most others, had lost their mothers and found the day amplified their grief, especially in the first few years after the loss.

As my informal community of Mother's Day mourners grew, it came to include those I hadn't expected—mothers who had gone through the unthinkable—the loss of a child. Then there were children who were estranged from their mothers and mothers estranged from one or more of their children. And then—those typically most hesitant to join the conversation—those who had suffered physical and emotional abuse at their mother's hands or whose mothers looked on and failed to act as other family members did them harm.

So I was not at all surprised to have someone ask for a sermon about the Commandment given to Israel to "Honor thy father and mother." As one of the Ten Commandments and one that Jesus repeats, it bears greater weight; and here in the 21st century, the issues have only grown more complex.

The first thing to recognize about this commandment is that, like all of the Ten Commandments, it is aimed at adults. This isn't the children's message in the middle of the Commandments. It's a commandment to guide adults in their interactions with their older parents. Jesus, likewise, is talking to adults—specifically religious leaders who had developed a tradition that let people off the hook for providing for their elderly parents if they dedicated their money to God. The commandment is for adults not children; and it's about honor not obedience. But what is honor?

For most of his life, my grandfather smoked several packs of cigarettes a day. But when he came to visit, my mother always made him smoke outside, even way back in the 60's and 70's. We lived in Rhode Island, not Florida. It didn't matter if it was 10 degrees outside and a blizzard was raging; if he wanted a cigarette, out he went. Was that dishonor?

Many struggle with how to provide for a parent who needs round the clock care and whether "honor" means the children always must provide whatever the parent wants. I have been with adult children wrestling with knowing that a parent has an addiction problem and is a threat to themselves or others and even with children aware of criminal wrongdoing by a parent. There was at least one of the Capitol rioters on January 6 that was turned in to authorities by his daughter. What does it mean to honor a parent in such circumstances?

To get a handle on any of it, it's important to look at the word "honor" in the commandment. The word in Hebrew, *kabad*, means to be heavy, which results in a fascinating variety of English translations in different Bible passages, depending on the context. If a person is loaded down with wealth, it's translated as being rich; if they are carrying sorrows, it is translated as being hard or grievous; if they have many accolades, it is translated as glorious, and so on. But the root means to be heavy.

So, if you were to do a very literal translation of the commandment, it would be something like, "Give weight to your father and mother," and that, I think, is an enormous help, because it allows for a similar variety of responses, depending on the circumstances.

When a parent has given us their all or has overcome great obstacles to provide for us, we owe them a heavy measure of praise and respect.

If we grew up with hardships, chances are pretty good that our parents made sacrifices we never knew about so that we could have what we needed. So, once we are grown, if the tables are turned and our parents are in need, the commandment asks us to provide the physical weight of food, clothing, or shelter.

And if a parent asks something of us, the commandment asks us to give that request weight; to treat it with seriousness, even if we know we can't do what is asked. That's easy to say, but can be hard to put into practice.

When your mother is suffering from Alzheimer's and asks for the sixteenth time who all these people are in her room, giving her honor means to take her seriously—to give her request weight—but the actual response might vary. You might decide to tell her who those people are for the sixteenth time. Or, you might say something like, "Mom, this is so hard for me. Your mind is failing and you don't recognize your family around you or remember when I tell you who they are. It must be hard for you too, when you think that you are always surrounded by strangers. Can I just hold your hand for a while?"

Both of those responses are serious. Both of them honor your mother as a person. A response like, "Oh, stop it, Mom. I've told you a million times already. You're driving me crazy." does not show honor because it does not take your mother's concerns or the limitations of her disease seriously.

Putting a parent who needs constant care in a long-term care facility is not in itself dishonor. When children aren't able to provide the needed care themselves and seek out a quality home with the needs of the parent first and foremost, that is honor—even if the parent is not happy about the decision. On the other hand, when a parent is left to waste away where the children never call or visit and do not inquire after their care—that is dishonor, even if the facility is a palace that caters to their every whim.

We can turn it around. Sometimes it can be dishonor to keep a parent out of a care facility, when their condition is such that they could do damage to themselves or others or when they are not really receiving the care they need. The same goes for dealing with parents who are driving and who should not be, with parents who abuse drugs or alcohol, or parents who have committed criminal acts.

Honor thy father and mother does not mean automatic obedience and it does not mean always doing whatever our parents want. It means considering all the needs and conditions of our parents weighing them seriously and striving to do what is best, even if we didn't receive that consideration from them as a child.

My mother's mother abandoned the family to run off with the local undertaker when my mother was just a toddler. My grandfather told me it was a month before anyone knew if my grandmother was alive or dead. No note, no contact, she just left. My mother grew up not knowing her; she was raised by her great grandmother.

But when my mother became an adult, she found her mother and made a point of keeping up contact, even though it was always one-sided. When my grandmother had a stroke, my mother flew down to Florida to see her. When she died, she went to the funeral. When I was on tour with a college choral group near where she lived, my mother arranged for me to go and meet her for the first time. That is honor. There was none of the affection that we hope would exist between a mother and a daughter, but my mother still showed honor to the woman who brought my mother into the world.

As with any passage of Scripture, we have to consider the message of Scripture as a whole and not just any one passage. Living the Christian life is a matter of balance, as Jesus articulated in the Great Commandment.

We show our love of God by loving our neighbors as ourselves. If I do what my mother or father is asking, are there any other biblical values that I'm violating? If I take my parents into my home, will I still be able to give my spouse and children what they need? Am I putting myself or others at risk? If I continue to do everything a demanding parent wants, will either one of us be able to grow in Christ's freedom and love? Am I enabling something that will end up harming us both?

I don't mean to suggest that any of this is easy. While we like to think there is always a right and a wrong answer to something; most of our choices in life are nowhere near that clear, and sometimes our only choice is between equally bad options. Or, if we're fortunate, equally good options.

But whatever difficult choices you may be facing, my goal is to be sure that a misunderstanding of the Bible isn't making things worse. "Honor" in this commandment does not mean obey. There are other words for that. To honor means to give weight. If the situation is bad enough, we might have to do that through a third party; but there is no exemption from such consideration for even the most monstrous parents. Why not?

To answer that, there is one critical thing to understand about all of the Ten Commandments, including this one. These were the vows taken by the Israelites as they agreed to enter into a covenant relationship with the God who brought them out of Egypt. The Ten Commandments were about how they would live together in a society that, *as a group*, proclaimed the nature of the God they served to the surrounding peoples.

We tend to view all of the Commandments as speaking to us as individuals about our private behavior. But their purpose was to create a community whose living witness would fulfill God's promise to Abraham to be a blessing to all nations.

Of course, a community is a group of individuals, and so individual behavior matters. But the difference is that throughout the Bible—from Genesis to Revelation—the good of the whole community was the primary consideration when any individual had to make a decision. This central set of vows, presented by God and agreed to by the people, was a community decision about their identity as the people of God—a way of living that would set them apart as people in covenant with the God of love and mercy.

The community aspect of the Commandment becomes obvious in the larger body of laws that follow. Because the ability for any individual to honor their parents is dependent on the larger culture making that a way of life. One of the last words of Jesus from the Cross was honoring his mother by giving her care over to John. A woman on her own in that time and place meant she would be destitute. In a patriarchal society, she needed to be legally associated with a husband, a son, or some other male that would provide for her. Placing Mary in John's care was an individual decision by Jesus, but it was made possible because the law in Israel both created and recognized that kind of safety net.

Our inability to recognize the Ten Commandments as being about more than individual behavior, prevents us from recognizing the enormous obstacles that our country's disdain for any kind of social safety net places in front of adult children trying to care for ageing parents.

It takes a village to raise a child and it also takes a village to care for and honor our parents. Right now, our national village does its best to make sure that even the most heroic efforts of individual children result in ruin for all but the wealthiest among us. My mother had a pretty good pension deal for her lifetime of service in the public schools. But once she got Alzheimer's, her care cost twice what she made. I was her guardian. When she died a decade later, we donated her body to Tufts because there wasn't enough money to bury her. A year later, a young postal worker came to my door and awkwardly handed me a package. My mother. In a box. It takes a village to give everyone the ability to honor our parents.

But to the particular question for the day, we aren't commanded to honor our parents because they deserve honor. What any individual parent does or doesn't deserve is not the point. We're to honor our parents

because doing so proclaims to others the nature of God—a God who gives honor to us—who treats our requests and our needs with serious consideration, who offers us a full measure of the fruit of the earth, and who joins us in suffering the burdens of life; even when we don't deserve it. We call that grace.

Honoring our fathers and mothers is no more than doing for them what God does for us every day; and in this crass and violent and vulgar world, what a witness that can be to the God whose nature is love. Amen.