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The 10 Commandments – “Honor Thy Parents”

Over the last weeks we've been working through the Ten Commandments, exploring what wisdom they hold for us today. We've talked about how these 10 commandments are more moral guideposts than laws, words that are meant to guide the people of Israel to become a moral community. They begin by focusing on our relationship with God – worshipping the one true God, not taking God's name in vain, and taking time to rest in God – all which keep us grounded and focused outside our own self-centeredness, remembering what is most important in life.

The 4th Commandment, begins to shift our focus from our relationship with God to neighbor relationships. And we are starting close to home – literally – in the home, with family. ***Specifically, our relationship with our parents.***

Our families, as we know, have tremendous influence on our lives. Our family shapes us – for better or for worse. There really are no wounds that run so deep as those related to our family, there are few arguments that can be so bitter and lasting as those arguments we have with family. Some of the deepest pain and suffering we carry come from family. And our sources of joy, some of our fondest memories, our sense of safety and loving home, can also come from our parents. And all of these things – the good and the bad- are wrapped up in our relationship with our parents.

Considering the intimacy of these relationships and incredible power that our parents hold in our formation, perhaps it is not surprising that this relationship as addressed as one of the Ten. As we enter into worship now, I invite you to begin reflecting on the way you Honor your Parents – while they are still with us, and after they have passed on.

Proverbs 1:8-9

Hear, my son, your father's instruction, and do not forsake your mother's teaching; Indeed, they are a graceful wreath to your head and ornaments about your neck.

Exodus 20:12

Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

In a time when anti-aging creams and serums line the cosmetics shelves, when numerous women (and some men) dye their hair to hide the grey, when it's borderline rude to ask people how old they are – there are subtle and not-so-subtle hints about how our culture teaches us to feel about aging... DON'T DO IT! And if you must, hide it at all costs! Keep that youthful look as long as possible, lest your years show! To which I ask, What's wrong with aging? What's wrong with grey hair? Why do we feel we must hide, rather than celebrate our years?

Many cultures throughout the world train people to honor people of older generations, including parents, grandparents, and so on. But the dominant American culture goes in the opposite direction. We prize youth and ignore or even despise old age. Elders are disregarded as being outdated, out of touch, or even bothersome.

But the fourth commandment calls us to honor our parents, and by implication, those who are from older generations. The Hebrew verb translated here as “honor” (*kabed*) is related to the word “heavy.” It might be paraphrased here as: “Give your parents the weight they deserve in your life.” The opposite of this would be treating your parents lightly, ignoring them, minimizing them, or even mistreating them.

What it actually means to let our parents be weighty in our lives depends greatly on many factors. If we are minor children, honoring our parents includes obeying them. But this is not true during all stages of life. If our parents are suffering from serious dementia, we might find that honoring them would involve actually disobeying them. As a pastor, I have walked alongside people as they have had to get care for their parents that their parents didn't want, even though they desperately needed it. I have also worked with people whose parents or grandparents were so abusive that they needed to keep considerable distance from them. Journalist and pastor Chris Hedges wrote about this in his book on the Ten Commandments. He says: *“We cannot undo abuse, but we can find a way to honor life, even [the abusers] lives, by turning that abuse into compassion not only for ourselves, which is necessary for healing, but more important for all who suffer. Those who take the experience of sorrow and suffering and use it to lead a life of compassion, honor their parents, even as they rise above them.”*

For most of us, honoring our parents means listening to them, respecting them, and loving them. It means continuing to remain in relationship with them, even if this happens over a long distance. And, as our parents get older, the 4th commandment encourages us to care for them with respect and love. Sometimes we are forced into terribly confusing and

trying situations when our parents are aging. We may not be at all sure what honoring them implies. Some people are still thinking about what it means to honor their parents – even though they are no longer living. We honor them and their lives by being the best we can be. ... By applying the lessons that they so lovingly (and often painfully) lived, is the best way to honor all that they gave us ...their name, their character, and their love for others.

In Judaism, this honor for the elderly and even the dead is communicated through their reverence for a dead body, which is considered equivalent to a damaged Torah scroll - which they consider as sacred because it contains the sacred word. And it is to be treated with the same reverence... When a scroll has been used for 100 years, when it is crumpled and faded and breaking, they don't just say, oh, well, let's get rid of it. They bury it. They take good care of it... they hold it in a sacred place. It is treated with continued esteem because of the holy teaching that is found there. In just that way, those teachers in our lives, those who bore us and guided us, and taught us the laws of God are to be revered, esteemed and venerated like a Torah scroll forever.

In Judaism the afterlife is not defined and described with the same specificity as other religions... Judaism simply affirms that whatever that happens after-death will be impacted by how we have lived our lives here. It's here that matters most, that God acts, that we grow into our best selves and have a chance to impact the world. The Israelite then values life with a unique intensity, and wishes to die old and full of days, so they have enough time here to do what they're supposed to do, to give what they're supposed to give, and to reach their full potential.

It is then the parents and the elderly, the sages and wisdom figures that Judaism singles out for our special care and concern. Don't miss the wisdom figures in life, don't throw them away, don't cease to care for them... and yet, the modern world, our world, limits the kind of care that we are giving those who have worked all their lives to prepare the generations that followed them to live good and meaningful lives.

In our society, workers are being told now that they have to save for their own retirement, rather than depend on any kind of any national human support, despite the fact that they have paid into it all their lives, and everyone is letting it go... "Well, this is a time of recession, and great limitations and care..." But we have the same amount of money... it just all depends on what we are willing to spend it on. To whom will we give it for what? We don't seem to be struggling over a military budget, we don't seem to care about how many nuclear bombs we have. But we're not sure that old people can any longer have subsidized housing when their children are someplace else in the world. But those who work in low income jobs have little or no money to invest in their own future care. Where's that care coming from for the wise and the sage in another 20 years.

Given these changes and the nature of family, for whole segments of society now, old age is fast becoming doomed to long working years, no retirement time, dependence on public institutions (if there are any), or given to desperate poverty after they've worked every day of their life. Is this the spirit of the commandment that calls people to honor their parents? This commandment saves us from the terminal disease of immediacy... the only thing that counts is now, new and what's coming, not what was. It refuses to allow us to

discard yesterday for the sake of the glorification of the self today. It builds perspective into the human race; think back, look over, see the whole picture... appreciating and celebrating the weightiness of years well lived. I pray that our society and political system grows wary of continuing to strip away care and protections for our elderly who need it most!

I want to give thanks for all of you this morning, who I know are often hard at work to honor your parents. Many of you in this room have aging parents or parents that have recently died. You've told me stories about how you've cared for them, visited them regularly, you've cleaned out their houses, and have spent hours going through boxes helping them get ready to move, you've helped them move into an assisted living facility and been with them in the pain of saying goodbye to the house you grew up in, you've loved them and listened to them, you've valued the stories, you've put sweat and tears into being there for them, and you carry their wisdom and teaching with you in the way that you are choosing to live your life. You have honored them. And for that we give thanks.

Chris Hedges' gives us powerful closing words on this day. May we remember that *"each of us carry imprinted on our faces, our origins, our link with the past, wanted or unwanted. We cannot wash it away. It is rather a matter of what we do with it, how we honor it, how we redeem the experience to protect and create life."*