

**A sermon written and delivered by Rev. Shelley Dugan
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HONOR THY FATHER AND MOTHER

It is the fifth instruction in the list of the Judeo-Christian Ten commandments. "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." This same directive is present in most of the other world's religions. It is a religious and social duty that has been passed down through the centuries. Its importance is ranked right up there with do not kill and do not steal and do not bear false witness against your neighbor.

And today is Mother's Day. A perfect day for us to remember this spiritual principle and live it out. And yet, I find myself wondering...

Honor your father and your mother – why?

All the other commandments, with the exceptions of the first three that charge people to worship the correct God - all the other commandments have to do with keeping an orderly and stable society. In finding ways to be in the world and live together in community, the other commandments just make sense.

Do not murder. Well, that is easy. If people went around murdering and killing, soon there would be no one left. There could never be a sense of safety. There would rarely be a time people were not focused on revenge. Do not murder is necessary if humans are going to live together.

Do not commit adultery. Again, this is simply good judgment. While different cultures define cheating on one's partner in different ways, there is that need for people to experience and know loyalty. When adultery takes place, relationships are deeply threatened. Marriage involves the economic, social, sexual, and physical realms. It often addresses matters of property, inheritance, and care-taking. Since so many basic components of a society are linked to this intimate partnership, when it is threatened, the whole the social order is threatened.

Do not steal. Do not lie. Again, common sense. If we can not trust one another, if our possessions and reputations are falsely taken from us, on what foundation can we build a civilization?

And finally, you shall not covet your neighbor's house, you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your

neighbor. Did you notice the part about not coveting your neighbor's wife? It is in the same list as ox and donkey and house. In those days, women were property in just the same way.

The meaning of this decree is do not crave what belongs to another. Over and over we have seen the damage done to individuals, countries, and the earth when greed takes hold. Rather than experiencing contentment and gratitude, feelings of entitlement and hostility arise. Feuds begin. Wars are fought. Rights and responsibilities are overlooked. Battles and takeover happen on large and small scales. Territory, natural resources, power, money, recognition, almost anything can be coveted. No real good can come from the rationalization of a person, a class, or a country deciding that what is yours is mine and what is mine is mine.

If we are going to live together in this world, we need some basic guidelines. Religions often have been the vehicle for teaching and transmitting these standards. These are not just gentle suggestions of ways that we can play nice. These commands are actually about survival, for the human community and even the resources of the earth.

However, I am still mystified by the directive to honor one's parents. How does this impact our survival? Why is this dictate so important that it made the top ten?

It would be an easy line of logic to follow if the command were "Parents shall cherish their children and raise them to be good people." Children that are raised with love and care are more likely to have good self-esteem, show compassion for others, and have less of a need to dominate others or prove something. A commandment along these lines would make good sense.

And it is interesting to note that this fifth commandment – honor your father and mother, has no qualifiers. It does not say, "Honor the good parents." It does not say, "Avoid the mistakes of the bad, ignorant, cruel, and immature parents." The only requirement for such respect is that one be a parent. Period.

What is particularly fascinating is that these similar charges from the different faiths, were written during times in history when children were generally considered property. It was within the parents' rights to beat them, work them, use and abuse them, and sell them as slaves. The children growing up, being religiously required to esteem their parents, may have, in many cases, had good reasons to despise those very parents.

And the decree says nothing about love. One must honor the parents. One is not required to love them.

So what is this all about? Why is it that religions throughout the ages have instructed their followers to respect their fathers and mothers? How is it that some other commandment was not deemed more important or practical?

In many cultures, giving respect to one's elders is considered a necessity. It is not just a social nicety or a way to humor an old man or woman. The elders are the keepers of wisdom. They are prized for what they have lived through and what they know. I think today of the crowning ceremonies I have attended. Women, past a certain age, may choose to go through a rite of passage. In this ritual, the woman declares that she is free from the restraints of raising children and running a home and she has gained the personal power to step into the arena as a

woman with something to give her community. The word “crone” may bring up images of an old hag – but the derivative carries the meaning of holy one. One set apart for a special work.

In societies where elders are revered, they are cared for. Unfortunately, in much of our culture, the elderly are brushed off in favor of what ever is new and exciting. The old is out of date and of little value. And older people get in the way of productivity.

Caring for the elders demonstrates a set of values that focuses on continuity and relationships more than progress and material goods. So we could say that this fifth commandment makes some sense if we broaden it out to care for our elders and view them as an important resource for our communities.

Yet it really is a very specific command. Honor *your* father and honor *your* mother. This charge is not directed to young children. They really do not have a choice. They are dependent on their parents for food, shelter, and care.

This charge is directed to older children. In fact, I think it is speaking to adult children. Perhaps, more than any of the other commandments, this is the one that requires us to step up to the plate. Here we are asked to take on a specific type of maturity, compassion, and forgiveness.

What does it mean to “honor?” It means to “respect, esteem, to give intentional recognition.” In honoring someone, that person is cared for, not tossed aside, we are conscientious about doing no harm. In honoring another, there is a degree of admiration and reverence.

It is an easy thing for many people, especially younger people, to point to all the ways their parents failed them. Imagined injuries and real wounds. Missed opportunities and calculated cruelty. How convenient to place the blame for our woes upon our parents. Our court system even supports this as lawyers cry that their clients were abused as children and therefore should not be held accountable for their crimes.

There is a second step. A adult child comes to recognize that parents are able only to do the best they can. Even those that have been mean, abusive, and neglectful, could only work with what they had. Forgiveness for actual hurts originates at this point. Here is where the maturity begins.

And then there follows another step. This is the place where as children we can look back on our lives, review our growing up years and our current relationships with our parents and discover respect. It is not merely acknowledging that they did the best they could. It is admiring what they did do and who they were. It separates us from our parents. We come to know them as individuals, whose lives are not all about our own. It is seeing them for who they are without the thick persective that parents somehow do not exist apart from the children. They are people in their own right, and we children have only been one piece of the puzzle of their lives.

We can respect, honor, and esteem our mothers and our fathers, no matter how capable or incompetent their parenting skills. We can do this because it is no longer about us. *They* are no longer all about us.

Getting to this point requires more of us than the simple commands of “do not steal, do not lie.” It requires us to truly grow up – beyond ourselves. And our focus moves past our individual world.

For myself, I have found that the older I get, the more I can understand and respect my mother. And I can have a better sense of why my father lived as he did. They have become for me priceless treasures. The more I mature, the easier it is to appreciate and respect my parents.

I think of a man I know that takes care of his mother. There has been some history between them and it has not been particularly pleasant. This man has spent a number of years addressing the injuries she inflicted. His sister has pretty much written mom out of her life. She has caller ID and when her mother calls, she doesn't answer the phone. The mother is often difficult and demanding. And yet this man does right by her. He takes her shopping and gets her groceries and deals with her frequent crisis. It isn't something he enjoys. But he is giving her respect instead of writing her off. There is a maturity and compassion that is needed to care for this woman.

Now, before I go further, and because I know it will be asked, there is the question if it is ever right to separate one's self completely from one's parents. And I am going to say, “Yes.” There are times when one can no longer be in relationship or communication with someone. The destructiveness may be too bad. The harm may still occur.

This charge of honoring one's father and mother is not about sacrifice or martyrdom. And there are situations where the honoring may need to happen at a distance.

While I was working on this sermon, I talked to a co-worker. Right now his step-father is in hospice. And my co-worker is right there, supporting both the step-father and his mother. And though it is hard, it is not burdensome. What he said was that his biological father had died when he was fairly young, and he had not been able to care for him, or thank him, or let him know how much he was prized. Yet he can be there for his step-father. And it is one way he can honor his father and his father's memory.

There is for me one particular daughter who I was able to witness as honoring her parent. I was sitting with a woman at the nursing home who was dying. She was a character. Feisty, funny, frail. The staff and the other residents just loved her. In a very loving way, she had become the “pet” of the unit. Everyone adored her.

While I was sitting with her, her family came in. We spent some time together, talking about what to expect in the dying process and I told the family about how their mother was so loved on the unit. It seemed like something that would bring them comfort and let them know that their mother was special to us. Strangely, they didn't say much.

The following day, I was again with the dying woman and her daughter came in to be with her. This time I learned what I would have never suspected. This darling little woman, in whom the staff and residents delighted, had been a mean, cruel, and hateful mother. All her life she had struggled with a mental illness and she refused to take medication. And her children

paid a great price. She was not nice and there were no pleasant memories. It was only after she entered the nursing home and began to take psychiatric meds that she blossomed.

And yet, here was the daughter, sitting with her dying mother. Keeping a vigil and doing her best by her mom. The daughter had decided that although her mother had not done well by her, the daughter wanted to be the best person she could. Rather than stay trapped in a painful past, she wanted to do right by her mother. She would not just throw her away or disregard her. She needed to be there. She was compelled. Her standards meant honoring her mother.

After her mother's death, the daughter and I planned the funeral. When I do services, I usually open up a time where family and friends can share some of their memories and thoughts. The daughter had a statement to make. It was short. She stood up, took out a piece of paper, and with both tears and a steady voice, she said, "Mom, your legacy stops here. You can do no more harm." And she sat down.

Honor your father and your mother. It is not about closing your eyes to what has been real. It is not about sugar-coating the past and pretending that your childhood was a Norman Rockwell picture if it was not. Honoring your father and mother is genuine. It moves us past the Hallmark cards and the surface sentiment. It means being as honest and mature as we can about who our parents have been and who they are and respecting them in whatever ways we can. It is an authentic honoring and respect.

And finally, there is an ecological theology involved here. The full text of the commandment is "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." It is interesting that this decree includes the promise of long life on the land. If we are to respect and care for those who have given us life and sustained us, might we not include our mother earth and father sky? Beautiful, bountiful, and brutal. Powerful, persistent, and placid. The earth brings us into existence and provides for our needs and wants. There is a soundness about tending to that which has cared for and nurtured us. If we care for our planet, we have a better chance of continuing to live on it. We are to honor our physical parents, our earth as parent, and those who have acted for us as spiritual parents.

Now, having spoken to you about the growing up we have to do to fulfill this commandment, and focusing mostly on the hard relationships, I want to close by reminding us that parents often do a wonderful job. Despite all the cares and worries and responsibilities of their lives, in the midst of complications and confusion and the messiness of living, many parents have been truly heroic in the raising of their families. In small, daily acts of love and support, in large and overwhelming acts of care and concern, they have been admirable and worthy of deep respect.

And given this great truth, I close with this poem –

Communion – Ann D'Agostino Clune

Setting out the tea, my mother
says, "There are homemade cookies
in the freezer. I'll be right back
up." Unstoppable, she limps
to the top of cellar stairs and down,
leaning like her aged apple tree
after last winter's weighty snow.
The cartilage in her bad knee is gone
so every step grates bone against her bone.

Discomforted, my sister will not come
around mealtimes and curtails her every
visit, saying there's no stopping Mom
from wearing herself out. But nothing's
changed; from our days in the womb,
she has always fed us. Before we
even nursed we were nourished by
her blood. I drink and eat,
knowing it is her body I consume.
Such intensity of love is hard to bear,
but I know whose lead she follows,
Who sets the table. I'll not deny
her the giving while she's able.

Amen and Amen.

In J.D. Salinger's book, *Frannie and Zooey*, there is a powerful scene in which Frannie comes home from college a nervous wreck. Her well-intentioned but misguided efforts to explore the depths of religious mysticism have left her extremely tense. Bessie, her mother, is concerned and shows that concern by bringing her distressed daughter a cup of chicken soup. Even though Frannie knows her mother is trying to be comforting to her, the offer of the chick soup annoys her, and she lashes out at her mother.

Frannie's brother confronts her and tells her that her approach to religion is all wrong. He says, "I'll tell you one thing, Frannie. If it's the religious life you want, you ought to know that you are missing out on every single religious action that's going on in this house. You don't have sense enough to drink when someone brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup, which is the only kind of chicken soup that Mom ever brings to anybody."

Order of Service
Unitarian Society of Menomonie
Mother's Day
May 8, 2005

Opening Words

Come into the circle of caring.
Come into the community of gentleness, of justice and love.
Come, and you shall be refreshed.
Let the healing power of this people penetrate you,
Let loving kindness and joy pass through you,
Let hope interfuse you,
And peace be the law of your heart.
In this human circles,
Caring is a calling.
All of us are called.
So come into the circle of caring.

Chalice Lighting

In the light of truth
And the warmth of love
We gather to seek, to sustain, to share.

Opening Hymn

21 "For The Beauty Of The Earth"

Readings

Mother is the name for God in the lips and hearts of children. – William Makepeace Thackeray

A mother who is really a mother is never really free. – Honore de Balzac

God could not be everywhere and therefore God made mothers. – Jewish proverb

An ounce of mother is worth a pound of clergy. – Spanish proverb

What the mother sings to the cradle goes all the way down to the coffin. – Henry Ward Beecher

The first half of our lives is ruined by our parents and the second half by our children. – Clarence S. Darrow

Children's Sermon

(And Adults)

What are some things that Mother's do?

What is the hardest thing your Mother does?

How are you going to tell her "Thank you?"

Children leave for RE

Offering

Freely we have received, freely let us give.

The morning offering will now be given.

Special Music

Song of an Old Woman -- (text by Jane Bowles)

Oh, I'm sad for never knowing courage,

And I'm sad for the stilling of fear.

Closer to the sun now and farther from the heart.

I think that my end must be near.

I linger too long at a picnic, 'cause a picnic's gayer than me.

And I hold to the edge of the table, 'cause the table's stronger than me,

And I lean on anyone's shoulder because anyone's warmer than me.

Oh, I'm sad for never knowing courage,

And I'm sad for the stilling of fear.

Closer to the sun now and farther from the heart.

I think that my end must be near.

Reading

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor --
Bare.
But all the time
I've been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now --
For I've still goin', honey,
I've still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
by Langston Hughes

Responsive Reading

596 "Boundless Goodwill"

Sermon

"Honor Thy Father and Mother" – by The Reverend Shelley Dugan

Dialogue

Hymn

368 "Now Let Us Sing" (Left and Right sides)

Reading

In J.D. Salinger's book, *Frannie and Zooey*, there is a powerful scene in which Frannie comes home from college a nervous wreck. Her well-intentioned but misguided efforts to explore the depths of religious mysticism have left her extremely tense. Bessie, her mother, is concerned and shows that concern by bringing her distressed daughter a cup of chicken soup. Even though Frannie knows her mother is trying to be comforting to her, the offer of the chick soup annoys her, and she lashes out at her mother.

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Extinguish Chalice – in Unison

We extinguish this flame,
But not the light of truth
The warmth of community
Or the fire of commitment.
These we carry in our hearts
Until we are together again.

Benediction

May love surround us,
May joy gladden us,
May peace lie deep within,
And may our lives,
And the lives of all those we touch
Go well.