

“Who Is My Mother?”
Exodus 3:14-16; Ephesians 5:1-2, 6:1-4;
Matthew 1:1-17, 12:46-48, 15:1-9

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Honor your father and your mother, as the Lord your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. ~ Deuteronomy 5:16

As we continue on with this series on the Ten Commandments, we get to the commandment today that talks about honoring your father and your mother. That seems pretty straightforward. In some sense I think it is.

In Matthew 15, Jesus is talking to the scribes and Pharisees and suggests that they are really not doing that. They are not taking care of their parents. They have a way of getting around that, and in doing so they are not really living up to the spirit, or even the letter, of the commandment. So that truly is one of the aspects of that commandment.

Ephesians tells us the same thing. It is good for children to obey, it says. The word there is like hyper-listen or hyper-hear, so pay *really good* attention. We have to realize that when you pay really good attention, then you are going to react and do because really hearing has a sense of impelling you to do something, to engage. So Ephesians is inviting us to engage, to pay attention to our parents. It's nice that it goes on to say, “Fathers, don't exasperate your children.” So there is a sense of there being a reciprocal relationship.

It is interesting that the commandment says “honor” your father and your mother, not “love” your father and your mother. When I went back and looked at the word for “honor,” sometimes also translated “respect,” it really is the word for “weight” or “burden.” As a parent, you don't really want to think about yourself as a burden on your children, and yet when we talk about something weighty, we know it's important. In a way, this word “honor” is pointing us to recognize how important our parents are, to think about what they have given us. Which is very different than saying you have to love them. Now, as a parent I hope that love is there as well, but the commandment is not to love your parent. It's to recognize the weight they are in your life—hopefully not a burden—but the importance of who they are.

We also recognize how important our ancestors are. When we begin to talk about honoring our parents, it's really pointing us back to think about all those who have come before us, our ancestors. God keeps doing this. When he showed up to talk to Moses, he said, “Look, I'm the God of your ancestors. I'm the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” There's something important there. It feels like this is a commandment that invites us to look at our history. It reminds us to look at where we came from.

That's what they do at the beginning of Matthew; they are looking at where Jesus came from. The incredibly interesting thing about that is that when they start talking

about where Jesus came from, they don't whitewash the whole thing. In fact, the women get to be there to point out the problems. If you know the story, the first woman who shows up in that genealogy is Tamar. She is Judah's daughter-in-law. Her husband dies, and according to tradition, she is supposed to then be given to the next son. She is, and then he dies, but she hasn't had a child yet. Judah has one more son, and he's worried that if he gives Tamar to his remaining son, that son is going to die, too. So he doesn't do it. But that's breaking the rules, so when she knows Judah is going to come by, she goes and acts as a prostitute and she gets pregnant by her father-in-law. It is her son, out of that encounter, who is in this genealogy. This genealogy is willing to look back and say that we make mistakes. Our ancestors made mistakes.

Rahab is another prostitute who gets to come into the family of faith because she lets the spies into the Promised Land. Ruth is a Moabite. She's not an Israelite at all, but she gets to come in because she shows faith in Naomi and in Naomi's God.

Then there's Uriah's wife—she doesn't even get her name put in because they so much want to remind us of what David did, how David was wrong when he caused Uriah to be killed so that he could have Bathsheba, his wife.

Finally, there's Mary, who was a poor young woman who has to face the idea of being pregnant with actually being married.

In each of these, there is a willingness to say that as we look back at our ancestors, our mother and father extended, everything was not right. It invites us to look back at our ancestors and say, "Not everything was all right."

At the Presbytery meeting earlier this month, we heard from the Native Americans and the struggles that they have been through. We heard their story and how they had been oppressed and at times experienced genocide. We've heard the story and we recognize the legacy of slavery and racism in our own country. This is an invitation to look back and see that our ancestors were not always right. I think it's important to look back and say yes, there's that which is not right, and there's that which is right. God was the God of our ancestors. It's an invitation to bring it to today.

As a little bit of an aside, this is a passage that says look at how important our parents are, where we come from. What we're finding out today in something called epigenetics is that what our parents experienced and their parents experienced may actually be changing the way genetics are expressed over time. So our parents' experiences may actually affect something about who we are. It comes out as a biological component of who we are. What they are finding is that those genetic expressions can sometimes be changed by new behaviors, by new experiences.

So as this commandment invites us to look at where we've come from, as we look to Jesus he begins to help us unpack something that I think is really important. You may be familiar with that little children's book, *Are You My Mother?* It brings to mind the idea

that by identifying who our parents are we identify who we are, our place in the world. But there's another side to that. Does who my parents are mean that's all I am? Does that determine who I am? Should I divide the world up by family groups because of that?

When Jesus was told "Your mother and your brothers are here, asking to see you," he said "Who are my mother and my brothers but those who do the will of God." I feel like what Jesus has done there is extend the family. We all come from somewhere, and it's incredibly important to pay attention to where—our whole ancestry, our whole history—to see what was good and to see what was bad and to learn from it, to mitigate the bad and hold up the good. But that's not all that there is. There is this possibility of recognizing God's grace in the present as well. We hear again that God comes to us in love and invites us to know that we don't have to be completely defined by our biological family, but we can be transformed by the grace of God into the family of God, to be the people of God.

So this commandment invites us to really care for our parents, to recognize the weight they have in our lives, to think back on our ancestry and how it influences who we are, and in the end, I think it takes us full circle and points us beyond our own parents to the initial parent, the creator of all that is, the giver of life, the Father in heaven, the one who knows how to show the love of a mother. It points us to God, who comes in grace and invites us to learn from him, to learn, as it said in Ephesians, to emulate him. Mostly what he does is love. He invites us to learn to live the life of love. In doing that, in learning to do what the Father asks of us, we truly honor our parent, our Father in heaven. Amen.