

“My Father’s House”
July 14, 2019
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. 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.

Colossians 3:20-21

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord. Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart.

Welcome to the fifth week of our summer series on the Ten Commandments! For ten weeks, we will focus on each one of the Ten Commandments – Ten Gifts, Ten Promises. I will preach on these commandments; but not only that, I will interpret the commandments musically as well! The Music of the Ten Commandments.

Today, we are looking at the fifth commandment “Honor your father and mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

A lot of folks talk about the Ten Commandments as existing in two tables: the first table (the first three commandments) is all about loving God, and the second table (all the ones about how we relate to each other, like no murder, no adultery, etc.) is

about loving neighbor. In other words, God is not just interested in how we relate to God, God is also quite interested in how we treat each other. I cannot have a right relationship with the Divine if I'm not willing to be in right relationship with my neighbor.

And who is your first neighbor? Your parents. Which brings us to the Fifth Commandment.

We live in such an individualistic culture. It's all about *me*, what I can accomplish for *me*, it's all about taking care of #1. And I need to do it RIGHT NOW! But this fifth commandment, as Sister Joan Chittister tells us, "saves us from the terminal disease of immediacy. It demands that we respect the past."¹ And, she adds, it "reminds us that we are not worlds unto ourselves. We all come from somebody somewhere and we owe them gratitude. And reverence. And care."²

My best friend in college, Fu, is Chinese. My friend had come to the States when she was five, so she was a very interesting combination of both American and Chinese culture. Her family lived in New Jersey, which was close to where we went to college, so I found myself visiting her family a lot throughout my college years (and, come to think of it, after college, as well!).

I think it was our senior year when Fu's grandmother, Nai-nai, came to live with her parents. (Her grandmother was actually going to be living with Fu's parents for two years, then with her son – also in the States – for two years, and so on). Nai-nai had been living in China, but had become too weak to take care of herself. So Fu's mom flew over to China to pick up her mother, flew back with her, and by the time I visited my friend's family next, they had her set up in their guest room. When I arrived for one of my usual visits, I couldn't believe how they treated her! It was like the queen was in town! First off, they had turned the guest room into a beautiful space with all her own things. And they were so respectful towards her, so reverent, so aware of her every need. I mentioned this to my friend, and she said, nonchalantly, "Yeah, this is how we treat our elderly." It seemed so different from what I was used to.

I wish that every elderly person could be treated the way Nai-nai was. That is what this first song is about.

"Nai-nai, come and stay a while with us
We can see you're older
Nai-nai, come and make your home us,"
They told her
So Nai-nai crossed the sea to come to them
She knew they would uphold her:
Mother Queen.

Her room, it glistened with the morning sun
Green and red and golden

¹ Chittister, Joan, *The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart*, p. 31.

² *Ibid.*

And Nai-nai sat there with a smile so bright,
Not beholden:
For she knew that she was cherished; she was safe,
She knew she could not hold in
That morning sheen.

And me, I felt both happiness and grief
At the scene before me
I knew there were so many other ones
We fail to see
I wished that all our grandparents could have
The same deep love as Nai-Nai:
A love, so clean... in the morning sheen... Mother Queen.

But can I be honest, church? Parents are complicated, aren't they? Or they can be. No parent is perfect, and some are very, very far from that. So, what if your parents *weren't* loving? What if they were neglectful? What if they were abusive? How do you honor them, then?

I think one way to honor them – if this is at all possible – is, when you are older and safe, by telling your parents the truth of how they hurt you. What a way to honor them, by truth-telling, by telling them, human to human, what it was like. But I know that is not always feasible. So you tell your truth to safe people – a therapist, a spouse, a trusted friend. From there, from that truth-telling place, we can start to *re-parent ourselves*: to take care of ourselves in the way our parents were not able to. That is honoring the *work* of parenting that your parents could not do. That, in my book, is honoring your parents. Re-parenting as honoring the work of parents who were far from perfect.

This next song is by Bruce Springsteen, but I wrote the music to it. He really gets to the heart of a complicated father, and names that he will never really be able to connect to him, even though he longs to:

Last night I dreamed that I was a child
Out where the pines grow wild and tall
I was trying to make it home through the forest
Before the darkness falls

I heard the wind rustling through the trees
And ghostly voices rose from the fields, heart pounding
I ran down that broken path
The devil snappin' at my heels

I broke through the trees, and there in the night
My father's house stood shining hard and bright
The branches and brambles tore at my clothes

The branches and brambles tore at my clothes and scratched at my arms
But I ran till I fell, shaking in his arms

I awoke and imagined the hard things that pulled us apart
Will never again, sir, tear us from each other's hearts
I got dressed, and to that house I did ride:
I could see the light

I walked up the steps and stood on the porch
A strange woman spoke to me through a chained door
I told her my story, and who I'd come for
She said "I'm sorry, son, but no one by that name lives here anymore"

My father's house shines hard and bright
It stands like a beacon calling me in the night
Calling and calling, so cold and alone
Calling and calling, so cold and alone
Shining 'cross this dark highway where sins lie unatoned.³

It's complicated, this whole parent-child thing. Later in the New Testament, the writer of the letter to the Colossians seems to understand that, at least a little. The letter reads: "Children, obey your parents," but then adds, "and Fathers [and I would add, 'Mothers'], do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart." This piece was probably implied in the Ten Commandments; Colossians makes it explicit.

It's hard to be a parent and it's hard to be a child – either a young child or an adult child. But God calls us to honor each other – both parent and child – and when it is hard to understand the other, to keep trying, in love.

I think Cat Stevens captures this give-and-take very well in his famous song, "Father and Son."

It's not time to make a change, Just relax, take it easy
You're still young, that's your fault, There's so much you have to know
Find a girl, settle down, If you want you can marry
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy

I was once like you are now, and I know that it's not easy,
To be calm when you've found something going on
But take your time, think a lot, think of everything you've got
You will still be here tomorrow, but your dreams may not

How can I try to explain, when I do he turns away again
It's always been the same, same old story

³ Bruce Springsteen, "My Father's House," 1982.

From the moment I could talk I was ordered to listen
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away
I know I have to go

It's not time to make a change, Just sit down, take it slowly
You're still young, that's your fault,
There's so much you have to go through
Find a girl, settle down, If you want you can marry
Look at me, I am old, but I'm happy

All the times that I cried, keeping all the things I knew inside,
It's hard, but it's harder to ignore it
If they were right, I'd agree, but it's them you know not me
Now there's a way and I know that I have to go away
I know I have to go.⁴

Remember how Jesus later summarizes the Ten Commandments: Love God,
and love neighbor as *yourself*. My prayer is that we honor one another as best as we
are able, all the while not forgetting to love, and to take care of, ourselves.

Thanks be to God.

⁴ Yusuf Cat Stevens, "Father and Son," 1970.