

I

I once had the honor of leading a graveside funeral service for a man who had served our country in the United States Navy and who was to receive military honors at his burial.

The senior officer of the Navy honor guard held the rank of Captain. As I watched him lead his sailors, he possessed what the military calls a “command bearing.” Judging by his weathered face and the close-cropped silver hair under his cap, I supposed he was at least 20 years my senior.

The honor guard finished their presentation, saluted the flag, and then prepared to march away. Just as they brushed past me, the Captain and I made eye contact. And then, this high-ranking officer in the United States Navy, this man who was at least 20 years my senior, this man who by all appearances outranked me in every conceivable way, whispered to me, “Thank you, Father.”

I just smiled at him, but inside, it was all I could do to keep from whispering back, “You’re welcome, my son?”

II

This summer, we are making our way through a series of sermons called, “Words to Live By,” as we study the Ten Commandments, and today we come to the fifth commandment: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your

days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.”

As we’ve been making our way through the Ten Commandments, we’ve been learning a memory technique using our ten fingers. By the time we’re through today, we’ll be halfway done, so let’s review what we’ve covered so far, shall we?

Put an index finger in the air, and notice that it looks like both the number one and the letter I. The Ten Commandments do not begin with “Thou shalt” or “Thou shalt not.” The Ten Commandments are about relationship, and so the first commandment begins with the word “I.” I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me.

Now put up your pinky finger and notice that your hands look like bull horns. We read in Exodus that before Moses was even down from the mountain, the Israelites were already worshiping a golden calf. So the two horns remind us of the second commandment, “You shall not make for yourself any idols.”

Now take three fingers and notice that your hand also looks like the letter w, which is the first letter in wrongful. Now touch that w to your lips, and that reminds us that the third commandment is “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.”

Last week, we learned the fourth commandment. So take the five fingers on your hand, and give your thumb a rest on your palm, and then tap your four fingers to your temple like you're trying to remember something. And then you close your eyes and rest. The fourth commandment is, "Remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy."

But today marks an important milestone in our conversation about the Ten Commandments. You may have noticed that the first four commandments are about how we are to live out our relationship with God. But today and for the remainder of the series, the conversation shifts to how we are to live out our relationships with one another.

As we've been saying all along, the Ten Commandments are not first and foremost about rules. They're first and foremost about relationships. They're about the ways in which we are interconnected to one another. And the first point of connection, the first relationship that every human being ever has, is with a mother and a father.

And that brings us to today, the fifth commandment. So imagine that you're a small child, and you're trying to reach way up to give a high five to a grown up. The fifth 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."

But what's really at stake here? Is this just about remembering to call your mother? Is this just about being sure that your dad gets a snazzy new tie for Father's Day? Is this more than a matter of good manners? Why does God go to the trouble of literally carving this in stone? Why is this so important that God would make it a commandment?

And what about those who have never known their mother or father? And what about those who have endured mothers or fathers who, to put it nicely, are not honorable people?

III

The Ten Commandments did not just fall out of the sky one day. They're rooted in the larger biblical story of the liberation and redemption of God's chosen people, collectively called the Israelites, to whom we trace our heritage of faith through Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ.

The foundational story of the Hebrew Scriptures, more commonly called the Old Testament, is the story of the exodus. Our ancestors in the faith were once forced to leave their homeland because of a severe worldwide famine. And so in order to have a fighting chance at life, in order to survive, they packed up their children and emigrated to Egypt. And at first, they were welcomed as neighbors and friends, and they became important contributors to the Egyptian economy.

But as the Book of Exodus opens, a new king of Egypt, called a Pharaoh, comes to power. At his very core, this new Pharaoh is a fearful, insecure man, and so he looks at our ancestors and sees them not as neighbors and friends, but as a threat.

And as history has proven from the time of Pharaoh all the way until the present day, when fearful and insecure people attain great power, terrible and dark things often follow.

And just so, Pharaoh incited the Egyptians to enslave our ancestors. As Exodus tells us, “The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites and made their lives bitter.”

Exodus tells us that our cried out to God for deliverance, and God heard their cries and liberated our ancestors. The story of exodus – the story of the liberation and redemption of God’s covenant people – is *the* foundational story of the Hebrew Scriptures.

IV

My brother, because you trace your faith to the ancient Israelites through Jesus Christ, this isn’t just a neat story about a people who lived far away a long time ago. My sister, this is the story of your ancestors in faith. This is *your* family story.

And so the Ten Commandments are not just a set of rules to be followed or else. Getting your ancestors out of

Egypt was the easy part. Parting the Red Sea, leading the people through on dry land, that was parlor tricks for the God of the Universe. Getting the Egypt out of the people is an ongoing project.

These commandments are the framework around which God is still transforming you. They are the means by which God is building you into God’s holy person, God’s royal priest, God’s chosen, covenant child. Honoring your mother and father is about so much more than good manners. Honoring your mother and father is about so much more than your biology.

Just outside the doors there are marble plaques that memorialize each of the eight pastors of this congregation who have died and joined the Church Triumphant. As I pass by those plaques, I think about our mothers and fathers who came before us. What must it have been like trying to follow Jesus in the midst of a devastating Civil War? What must it have been like trying to follow Jesus two world wars and a Great Depression? What must it have been like trying to follow Jesus during integration and the struggle for civil rights?

The truth is that our mothers and fathers didn’t always get it right. The very wood upon which you’re sitting at this very moment was in all likelihood hand cut by slave labor. The truth is that on some of the most important questions of their day, our mothers and fathers got it wrong.

Honoring our mother and father doesn't mean that we can't look critically at our history. The bible pulls no punches about the many failings of our ancestors in faith. The truth is that our mothers and fathers are flawed, sinful human beings, and that's a genetic condition. Which means that you and I are flawed, sinful human beings, and many years from now, our descendants may very well say the same thing about us.

Honoring our mothers and fathers is about coming to the understanding that we are the living beneficiaries of the faith of countless saints who have gone before us, who have finished their race, and who have now passed the torch to us.

And so my brother, the fifth commandment is not just about saying yes ma'am and no sir and showing respect to your parents. My sister, the fifth commandment is not just about good manners. It's about remembering who you are and who your people are. It's about doing everything you can to learn your faith family story and knowing your own place within it, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

V

For four hundred years, our ancestors lived in Egypt. For four hundred years, our ancestors saw how things were done in Pharaoh's kingdom. In Pharaoh's kingdom, there was no

Sabbath. In Pharaoh's kingdom, violence and fear were the orders of the day. In Pharaoh's kingdom, our ancestors were only valued so long as they provided some sort of useful benefit to Pharaoh's economy, namely through hard physical labor.

I shudder to think about what happened to our ancestors when they were no longer able to do the hard labor required of them.

But God's kingdom operates with a different set of values. In God's kingdom, people are valued not because of what they can do, but simply because they belong to God. In God's kingdom, every human life has inherent dignity and worth. And because of that kingdom value, God is particularly concerned with those who are the most vulnerable.

In the days of our ancestors, there was no such thing as Social Security or a defined benefit pension program or tax-deferred savings accounts. And so the commandment to honor our father and mother is also a commandment about economic justice. It's a commandment to ensure that those who can no longer work because of physical limitations are nonetheless cared for and honored and receive their daily bread.

For when we care for those who are the most vulnerable, then we start to look something like the holy nation that God has envisioned for us. When we value people because of who they are,

rather than what they can do, then we start to look something like the royal priesthood that God has set aside for the blessing of the earth. When we honor our fathers and mothers, as the Lord our God has commanded us, it will go well with us in the land.

So may we remember who and whose we are. And may we remember who our people are, and may we honor them. May we remember that we belong to a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, so that we might proclaim the mighty acts of Christ, who has called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light.

To God be the glory.

Amen.