

“Circle of Life”

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First Presbyterian Church
July 6, 2014**

New Testament Lesson: Matthew 19:16-19

Old Testament Lesson: Exodus 20:12-16

Last month we honored fathers, on June 15 to be precise. And a month earlier, we honored mothers, on the 11th of May. Don't you feel special, all you moms and dads in the congregation today!

But consider this. When it comes to being honored, egg salad gets a whole week, as do pickles, pancakes, pickled peppers, and split pea soup (one of my favorites.)

And moms and dads get just one day. Do you think that's what God had in mind when he said, "Honor your father and your mother" – setting aside one day a year? Of course not. So what does God have in mind with this and the other commandments we heard read today?

Well, God tells us what this is all about when he says, "Honor your father and your mother so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." God's doing all of this for us.

It was the same with the first four commandments we looked at last week – no other gods, no idols, no wrongful use of God's name, and keep the Sabbath holy unto God. There, God says his purpose is to show "steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments."

So you see, in all 10 commandments, God is interested in our health and longevity. Our only job is to love God and to keep God's commandments. Should be easy, but it's not. Elder abuse, murder, adultery, stealing and lying – they happen all the time. But if we're not victims of or, God forbid, committers of such things, what is it to us? I mean, sure we want a world where parents are honored, and murder, adultery, stealing and lying never happen. But that's a pipedream; there's nothing we can do about it. So why focus on the Ten Commandments?

Well, just look at the next five commandments; these are really great for showing us what's in it for us, what's at stake for us in whether we know about these commandments and pays attention to them.

Each of the next five commandments points us to a sacred gift from God. "Honor your father and your mother" points us to family, as a gift from God. "Do not murder" points us to the gift of life. "Adultery" points to the gift of our sexuality. "Stealing" points to our relationship with others, the gift that others are to us in this world. And "bearing false witness" – or lying – is about the gift of being right with God.

So each of these – family, human life, intimacy, the rights of others, and our own sense of integrity before God, – each of these are gifts from God that we are not to abuse or overlook. So, how do we keep these gifts – these commandments – ever before us in our day-to-day lives?

Taking them as a group, you can do this by thinking of them as the circle of life. Without families – without mothers and fathers – there is no life, for us or anybody else. Honor your mother and your father, honor the generation that has gone ahead of us and do right by the generation to come. That's God's command and God's gift to us – the gift of family. And what comes from the gift of family? Life. "Do not murder." John Calvin, who first outlined our protestant faith, sees a positive application of the commandment "you shall not murder." He says this means "We should not only live at peace with (other human beings) . . . but also (we) should aid (those who) are unjustly oppressed, and . . . resist (or stand up to those who oppress them)."¹

Given this perspective, murder is not only about not killing; it's also about honoring and supporting the fullness of life available to another human being. Wow; it's harder than we think to keep the commandment about not murdering, isn't it? When this is seen as a command to promote fullness of life in all our encounters, well, we will probably need some help and guidance to do that.

And that's just what God provides in the other commandments. The next three commandments have to do with all the different types of encounters we might have with other people, including encountering ourselves, as we stand before the glory of God. Let's look at the commandment about adultery, which points to the most intimate of encounters imaginable – sexual relations. When it comes to sexual relations, God says, "Do not commit adultery." Human sexuality – it's a gift from God not to be abused. It's the closest relationship we can possibly have with another person, and as such, it has incredible power, power for both good and bad. Don't use your sexuality – don't use this gift from God – to destroy a God-given relationship, any relationship. Not committing adultery is about not destroying relationships, period, no matter how that relationship is shared or expressed. The danger for us is that, as society becomes more self-centered, it's easy to dismiss close, committed relationships as a thing of the past. But the reality is that close committed relationships are what make possible any hope for the future.

"Do not steal." This commandment is about our relationship with people in general. Don't take things by force or deception. The key to this commandment is including among all our gifts from God other people. To steal from another person is to disregard his or her basic human right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. (That's a nod to the Fourth of July, in case you didn't catch it.) But it's true. By taking someone else's property against his or her will, you take away that individual's personhood. You're saying that he or she doesn't matter, doesn't have any basic, human rights. Personhood, the individuality of other people: it's a gift from God. Don't take that away from another person.

¹ John Calvin, Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 21.

And finally for today, “do not lie.” Each of the other commandments from today is about protecting and honoring life – specifically, honoring family life as represented by our mothers and fathers; honoring human life by not murdering; honoring sexual relations, which give rise to life; and honoring the basic rights of life enjoyed by other people, by not stealing from them.

Well, the commandment against lying also honors life. It honors your life. Every time you, or I, or anybody tells a lie or does something deceitful, that person dies a little bit inside, you die a little bit inside. Bearing false witness against your neighbor; that’s about creating a false reality, a reality designed to serve self-interest at the expense of the Spirit of truth that God has given you.

Of course in the end, putting someone else down just to build yourself up always comes back to hunt us, if not in this life, then in the life to come, when we stare into the face of truth itself. You do believe in an afterlife, don’t you? That was the question a certain boss asked one of his employees: “Do you believe in life after death?” “Yes, sir,” the employee replied. “Well, then, that makes everything just fine,” said the boss. “Because after you left early yesterday for your grandmother’s funeral, she stopped by here to see you!” You can imagine how poorly that encounter reflected on the employee. Which raises the question for us, when we stare divine truth in the face – either in our heart of hearts or in the glory of God – when we stare truth in the face, what will we see reflected back at us – will we see ourselves as a child of God, or as the offspring of lies and deception. Thou shalt not lie, for your own good and for the good of God’s most blessed of all creations; for the good of humanity itself.

Each of the five commandments we covered today points to the intrinsic value of human beings as children of God. In calling us to account for these commandments, God is placing in our hands the power to preserve humanity, both in a global sense and for us as individuals, for you and me as individuals.

We have the power to preserve our own humanity, to keep it sacred as a gift from God, a sacred gift that each one of us will account for when we as individuals look into the fullness of God’s glory. How well we keep God’s commandments in front of us today will determine how well we will stand before God in all our tomorrows. The ushers have a handout for each of you to take after worship today. It has all the hand gestures I taught during the Children’s Message about remembering the Ten Commandments. Not a bad thing to have, given how important they are to us, and to all of life. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We come to you, O God, hungry for your divine presence and wisdom in our lives. As you satisfy our spiritual hunger with the Bread and Juice of Holy Communion this day, we ask that you would shower upon us a measure of your patience, your hope, and your love.

We offer our gratitude that, out of the gift of your grace, you have allowed us to flourish in spite of ourselves. You always grant us a place at your table, regardless of the loads we carry and our own feelings of unworthiness.

Keep us mindful, O God, that you did not call us to be comfortable at all times, but rather you call us to be attentive to the needs of a weary world.

How grateful we are that you are always present to us; let us now be present to you that we might be fed and nourished and therefore able to be present to others.

We pray all this in the name of the one who came that we might know what a life of love looks like, Jesus, the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**