

The Fifth Commandment

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

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Luke 14:25-33

Big crowds were journeying with [Jesus], and he turned and said to them, “Anyone who comes to me and doesn’t hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life can’t be my disciple! Whoever doesn’t carry his own cross and come along behind me can’t be my disciple!

“If one of you wants to build a tower, doesn’t he sit down first and figure out what it’ll cost, and if he has enough to finish it? Otherwise, when he lays the foundation but can’t finish [the project], everyone who notices will start making fun of him. They’ll say, ‘This guy started a building project, but couldn’t finish it.’

“Or what king will go to war against another king, without sitting down first to figure out if he can oppose with ten thousand the one who’s coming against him with more than twenty thousand? And if not, then while the other is still at some distance, he’ll send a delegation to negotiate peace.

“So then, every one of you who doesn’t forsake all of his own possessions can’t be my disciple.”

John 19:25-27

Standing by the cross of Jesus were his mother, his maternal aunt, Clopas’ Mary, and Mary Magdalene. When Jesus saw his mother and, standing nearby, the disciple he loved, he said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” Then he said to the disciple, “Here is your mother.” And from that time, the disciple received her into his family.

Children’s Story

Billy Collins is thirteen years old. He lives next door to his best friend, Kevin. Kevin is twelve years old, and he is Billy’s uncle. Really! That sounds confusing to me. How about you?

Well, it might be confusing to us. But it’s not confusing to Billy and Kevin. Sure, twelve year old Kevin is thirteen year old Billy’s uncle, and thirteen year old Billy is twelve year old Kevin’s nephew. That part is kind of confusing. But what matters most of all is that Billy and Kevin are friends, best friends.

Something like that goes on in the church. We have lots of different families in the church. Each one of them has moms and dads, sons and daughters, grandmas and grandpas. Each one of them has uncles and aunts, nieces and nephews. But in the church, all those families are one family. In the church, we’re all brothers and sisters. That’s what matters most.

Sermon

Before turning to today’s commandment, let me say something about the Ten Commandments in general. It’s not something new, but it bears repeating.

We receive the Commandments not through Moses, but through Jesus Christ. We are not Israel. We are not the Jewish people. With us, Jesus Christ has the last word, not Moses. (With us, Jesus Christ has the first word also, because he is the Word.) So, while the Ten Commandments are a central part of God’s covenant with Israel, those Commandments are ours, not wholesale, but only insofar as and to the extent that they are given again to us in Christ.

This can lead to some unexpected conclusions. Last week, for example, I noted how the Gospel does not bind us to the one in seven pattern, the pattern of rest and work, given in the Fourth Commandment. (Though the church has given that pattern to its members as a gift.) Today we turn to the Fifth Commandment, which also may diverge from our expectations.

The Fifth Commandment is, according to the New Testament, “the first commandment with a promise” (Ephesians 6:2). “Honor your father and your mother” — that’s the commandment — “so that your days may be long and so that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you”

— that’s the promise (Deuteronomy 5:16). It’s clear enough, I suppose, what the commandment means and how the promise works. Well, maybe not crystal clear.

I always heard the commandment as addressed to young children, calling them to obedience. And, in fact, the New Testament does go in this direction, instructing children to obey their parents. But at Sinai, the commandment is addressed to grown-ups. And it’s clear from the rest of the Old Testament that the commandment is especially about how grown children treat their old parents.

The Book of Sirach — sometimes called Ecclesiasticus, and listed in the Belgic Confession as worthy of our attention — the Book of Sirach expresses the intent of the Fifth Commandment very well:

Honor your father by word and deed,
that his blessing may come upon you.
For a father’s blessing strengthens the houses of the children,
but a mother’s curse uproots their foundations.
Do not glorify yourself by dishonoring your father,
for your father’s dishonor is no glory to you.
The glory of one’s father is one’s own glory,
and it is a disgrace for children not to respect their mother (3:8-11).

That sounds straightforward enough. It’s not necessarily clear that we’re talking about grown children and old parents. But we read on:

My child, help your father in his old age,
and do not grieve him as long as he lives;
even if his mind fails, be patient with him;
because you have all your faculties do not despise him.
Whoever forsakes a father is like a blasphemer,
and whoever angers a mother is cursed by the Lord (3:12-13,16).

“Even if his mind fails, be patient with him.” The picture here is all too familiar. Some of us have worried over our old and failing parents. Some of us are doing it right now. It’s one of the hardest things for a child to face. Sometimes the demands are unrelenting and wearying. So much to look after! So much to watch out for! Sometimes what we hear and what we see breaks our hearts. Things we wouldn’t dream of telling anyone, not if we care about our father’s honor or our mother’s dignity. We keep it inside, and we go about our tasks, out of love and out of duty. We go about our tasks, trying not to think too far into the future, not to think ahead to the days of our own frailty and feebleness.

Out of love for our old parents and out of a sense of duty, we do our tasks. That’s how the promise works. The brothers Grimm put it well:

The Old Man and His Grandson

by The Brothers Grimm (translated by Margaret Taylor; altered)

Once, long ago, there was a man
who lived with his son, his daughter-in-law, and their four year old boy.
The man was old, very old.
His eyes had become dim,
his ears dull of hearing,
his hands weak and unsteady.
When he ate with the family,
he often spilled his soup onto the table,
or let it dribble out of his mouth onto his shirt.

The son and daughter-in-law found this quite unappetizing.
So they gave the old man his food in an earthen bowl
and made him sit in a corner behind the stove to eat it there,
which he did, with tears in his eyes.

Once day the old man dropped the bowl
from his shaking hands to the floor.
It broke.

From then on,
the son and daughter-in-law made the old man eat his food
from a coarse, wooden trough.

Some time after this,
the son and daughter-in-law watched their four year old boy
as he gathered several pieces of wood together.
“What are you doing?” the boy’s father asked.
“I’m making a little trough,” he answered,
“for you and mother to eat out of when I am big.”
The son and daughter-in-law looked at each other
and started to cry.

From that day, the old man ate with his family at the table.
And when his hands shook and he spilled his food,
the son and daughter-in-law looked at him with love and said not a thing.

We have an expression: “What goes around comes around.” So treat your parents well, especially when they’re old. Your own children will learn from that how to treat you. Treat your parents well, and in your time “it will go well with you” (Deuteronomy 5:16). That’s the promise of the Fifth Commandment.

That commandment and the promise have been given to us in Christ. **The commandment, however, has been radicalized.** Jesus himself is the radical! He upends the most basic and enduring social and cultural arrangement. Parents and children are bound together, bound together for life. Children owe their parents honor, all the way to the grave — and beyond. But Jesus calls James and John to abandon their father Zebedee. “Leave the fishing to him. You, come follow me” (Matthew 4:21-22). And he tells a would-be disciple who only wants to look after his father first, to tend to him in his final days and to see to his burial, in other words, to fulfill the proper duties of a son — Jesus tells him, “Let the dead bury their own dead; you, follow me!” (Matthew 8:22).

It’s all about the Kingdom of God, which transforms everything, which upends everything. In the kingdom, losing is winning and winning is losing. In the kingdom, first is last and last is first. In the kingdom, living is dying and dying is living. So in the kingdom, never mind everything you’ve seen and everything you’ve heard about children and parents. “I have come,” Jesus said, “to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother. . . . Whoever loves father or mother, whoever loves son or daughter, more than me is not worthy of me” (Matthew 10:35ff.).

What matters is discipleship, following Jesus. Whatever stands in the way of discipleship, not just bad things — sins and obsessions — but good things, too — the closest and dearest people, the people you have known and loved longer than anyone else, the people you owe more to than to anyone else, the people you belong to, the people who gave you your life and your identity — whatever stands in the way of discipleship is to be set aside, forcefully if necessary, even the father who watched over you, even the mother who gave you birth.

Listen to what Jesus the radical says. “Anyone who comes to me and doesn’t hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and even his own life can’t be my disciple!” (Luke 14:26). There is a cost to discipleship, even to the point of sacrificing the most precious relationships. Because Christ and the kingdom come first.

I don’t intend to give specific examples here. We each have our own. But here’s the thing. Discipleship is not a when-it’s-convenient calling. It’s not something for us to “fit in” along with the rest of life. Discipleship is life, or it is nothing.

Let go of everything. Let go of everyone, even mom and dad. Grab hold of Jesus. Go where he goes. That’s discipleship. And not even the Fifth Commandment may stand in the way. **Unless . . . unless that commandment is somehow reconfigured.**

One time, Jesus’ family wanted to restrain him. People were saying that Jesus had “lost his mind” (Mark 3:21). That was more than his family could take. They wanted Jesus to come back home. They wanted him to start acting “normal” again. So Jesus’ mother and brothers and sisters found out where Jesus was, went there,

and called for him, so he would go with them. When Jesus was told that his mother and brothers and sisters were calling for him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God” — i.e., whoever is a disciple — “is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:31f.).

Do you see what happened there? Jesus reconfigured his family. There is a new family, Jesus is saying. And it's the first family, it's the genuine family. For disciples of Jesus, family is not a biological arrangement; family consists of all other disciples. Jesus, the Scripture says, is the firstborn of a large family (Romans 8:29). And it's within that family that we keep the Fifth Commandment. We keep the Fifth Commandment, supported by one another.

Jesus demands radical commitment to the kingdom. There's no getting away from that. But part of being a citizen of the kingdom is being a decent human being. And decent human beings honor and look after their parents. Somehow we have to fit that together with all the rest of discipleship.

The good news is, we're not in it alone. Yes, it is the primary responsibility of children to look after their old parents. But the family of God doesn't leave us on our own. We pray for each other. We listen to and support each other. We weep with each other. We provide respite for each other. And we'll even ante up benevolent resources, when needed, to help. This is part of our shared discipleship. The faith community that fails to look after its older members is not much of a community. And it's certainly not a family. Nor are sons and daughters who abandon their mother or father.

And, by the way, this is not fudging on the demands of discipleship, the radical demands of Jesus. While Jesus himself was paying the highest kingdom cost, hanging there on the cross, he was concerned for his mother. And he entrusted her to a beloved disciple. “Woman,” he said to his mother, “here is your son.” And to the disciple he said, “Here is your mother” (John 19:26). When he himself, as the firstborn, could not look after his mother in her final years, he relied on the family of God to stand in for him. And notice, it's the family of God, the family of disciples, that he relies on. He doesn't rely on his brothers and sisters, the ones who had come calling for him, to take him home. He relies instead on his reconfigured family. The Fifth Commandment, you see, is about a family much bigger than the ones we grow up in.

Kids — and we're all always kids, aren't we? — kids, honor your father and your mother, no matter how old they are, no matter how old you get to be. And remember, the family circle — the circle drawn by God, the circle of all those gathered by the Spirit — the family circle is large indeed.