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**“Who Are My Parents?”  
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth  
Third Sunday in Lent  
March 11, 2012**

**Exodus 20:1–17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1:18–25; John 2:13–22**

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It is interesting on this third Sunday in Lent that we take a detour  
in our pilgrimage towards the cross to remember God's gift of the law to Israel—  
God's first incarnation of Word made teaching  
that is both protective and formative for the children of Israel.  
Jesus, you remember, was a rabbi himself,  
one who cut his wisdom teeth on the law of God,  
one who took the law into himself so completely, that he himself  
became its perfect incarnation, its praxis made flesh.  
During our forty-day journey in preparation for Easter, we get a reading of the Decalogue,  
the Ten Commandments from Exodus, given to Israel  
during their forty-year wilderness pilgrimage towards the promised land.  
You can understand the parallels: the 40/40 numerology of days to years  
which in Hebrew-think signifies a long time;  
the wilderness/wilderness parallel of Israel's post-exodus wandering,  
and Jesus' post-baptismal wilderness wandering,  
disorienting from a human perspective, but never lost to God.  
There are 613 laws in the total corpus of the gift of God,  
the Decalogue being a capitulation of those many dos and don'ts.  
Psalm 19 celebrates the gift of the law,  
calling the law of the Lord perfect, sure, wise, right, clear, pure, true,  
enduring forever, more valuable than gold, sweeter than honey.  
Israel did not view law as rules, but rather as teachings, as guidance,

as "the way" to live well with God and neighbor.

I'm especially drawn to the fifth commandment at this time,  
as it speaks constantly to me as we count down the days until our daughter's  
wedding next Saturday in Charlotte.

In so many ways, this new union of two families has been all about honoring parents.  
Emily and I took out the wedding gown that her grandmother wore and that I also wore,  
and took it to a dress-maker who specializes in old wedding dresses  
to see if we could restore its soul.

The dress-maker wasn't so sure that we could transform it sufficiently  
to satisfy Emily, my contemporary bride.

But neither did she want to cut up a beautiful dress that has been worn  
six times and passed down now to a third generation.

So I plan to have it cleaned and packaged  
so that perhaps another member of the family can have it as an option  
should they prefer lace and long sleeves.

But Emily has framed pictures of all the grandparents and parents  
from both brides' and grooms' families  
on their wedding days, in their wedding finery,  
to put on a table at the reception  
for all of our guests to see, as a way of honoring both families.

Moreover, she and her fiancé, Adam, are getting married at the same church in Charlotte  
where Hedge and I were married,  
which is such a lovely honoring of space and place  
that is particularly sacred to us.

And we have arranged to leave the flowers in the church the next day  
in commemoration of their marriage,  
but also in memory and honor of all of their grandparents.

And we have ordered an extra groomsman's boutonniere to put next to my father's plaque  
in the church columbarium, so he will not feel left out of the action that day.

Is this what the fifth commandment means, I wonder,  
when it says to honor your father and mother,  
so that our days may be long in the land the Lord is giving us?

The same commandment is stated a little differently in Deuteronomy 5:16,  
a later parallel restating of the law, where it reads:

"Honor your father and your mothers, *as the Lord your God has commanded you*,  
so that you may live long and *it may go well with you*  
in the land the Lord your God is giving you."

The Deuteronomy version adds the phrases, *as the Lord has commanded you*,  
and that *it may go well with you*.

This fifth commandment is central to the Decalogue, which puts it in a place  
of prominence, according to Hebrew-think.

And it is also the first of the Ten Commandments that comes with a promise:

"that you may live long, that it may go well with you in the land  
the Lord your God is giving you."

And it is one of the two positive commandments, not one of the "thou shalt nots!"

In the Old Testament, to honor someone or something can have several meanings.

It can mean to "prize highly," as Proverbs 4:8 advocates concerning Wisdom:

"Esteem her (Wisdom) and she will exalt you;  
embrace her (Wisdom) and *she will honor you*."

It can mean "to care for," as Psalm 91:15 suggests concerning those who love the Lord:

"They will call upon me, and I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble.  
I will deliver them and *honor them*.

With long life will I satisfy them and show them my salvation."

This relationship between the Lord and the faithful ones sounds a lot like  
the fifth commandment, doesn't it, with its promise of long-life and well being?

Or to honor can mean to "show respect," as the law is restated in Leviticus 19:3:

"Each of you must *respect* your mother and father (the order is reversed),  
and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the Lord your God."

Or to honor can mean "to obey," as in Deuteronomy 21:8, which leads me to tell you the dire consequences in the greater 613 laws of NOT honoring one's father and mother. If you're a biblical literalist, then gird up your loins for the hearing of this text:

"If parents have a stubborn and rebellious child who does not obey his father and mother, and will not listen to them when they discipline him or her, that child's father and mother shall take hold of their child and bring him to the elders at the gate of town.

They shall say to the elders, "This child of our is stubborn and rebellious, refusing to obey us; a spend-thrift and a drunkard.

Then all the men of his town shall stone him..." Yikes!

Over and against this, can you hear Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son oozing with the grace of second chances for the child who talks smack to his or her parents, or the teenager who misuses a parent's credit card, or for the teen who is pulled over by the police and found with an open bottle of beer in the car?

Jesus is not going to be cut and dry when it comes to interpretation of the law; instead, he will bend it like a rainbow with wider-arcng implications, we will come to find... thanks be to God.

The words of Philo Judaeus, a first-century philosopher and close contemporary of the ancient historian, Josephus, I find to be quite beautiful.

Philo says this in his commentary of the fifth commandment:

*For parents themselves are something between divine and human nature, partaking of both: of human nature, inasmuch as it is plain, as they have been born and they will die; and of divine nature, because they have engendered other beings, and have brought what did not exist into existence;*

***for, in my opinion, what God is to the world, that parents are to their children; since, God gave existence to that which had no existence,***

*they also, in imitation of his power, as far, at least, as they are able,  
make the race of [human]kind everlasting.*

(Philo Judeaus. *A Treatise on the Honour Commanded to be Paid to Parents*, by C.D. Yonge, B.A., London, 1855. p. 294.)

Isn't that amazing? According to Philo:

***What God is to the world, those parents are to their children!***

Why would children, then, not honor their parents?

Josephus, the first century historian, presents us with the concept  
of the unique place of parents as benefactors.

In the ancient world, parents were considered great benefactors in relation to their children,  
both in Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures.

In his explication of the Jewish law, Josephus concurs with Philo that the Law  
**ranks honour to the parents second only to honour to God.**

The fifth commandment legislates honor for parents, Josephus notes,  
although the consequences in Jewish law, that if a child does not repay his parents,  
the Law hands him over to be stoned.

It's almost like a financial obligation, this honoring of parents,  
a repayment of debt, according to Josephus,  
which adds a wrinkle to the *fifth* petition in the Lord's prayer,  
"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," doesn't it?

(Josephus, as quoted in *Paul's Gift from Philippi*, G.W. Peterman, 1997, p. 45.)

Jesus, in my way of thinking, is never very big on biological families.

He calls the sons of Zebedee, James and John, to leave their nets where they are  
and their father, poor Zebedee, in the boat, and come follow him (Mark 1:19–20).

Are the sons honoring poor Zebedee in this leave-taking?

Well, perhaps, if what James and John henceforth do with their lives  
brings honor to Zebedee and to the larger God-family of James and John.

In another instance, as Jesus is traveling around Galilee, preaching with authority, healing

and casting out demons before large audiences of on-lookers,  
his family hears about it and arrives to reign him in,  
because, as scriptures says, "he's beside himself."

They think he has lost his mind, that he's crazy!

His mother and brothers arrive outside the house where Jesus is practicing his art,  
and they send someone inside to call to Jesus, to bring him outside so they  
can remove him from the premises.

To which Jesus responds, "Who are my mother and brothers?"

And he looks around to those believers encircling him and says,

"Here are my mothers and my brothers.

Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:20–34)

Is Jesus honoring his poor mother who has come to bring him back into her fold?

Well, perhaps, if what he does henceforth with his life brings honor to her

in ways unforeseeable to her at that moment, in ways that will expand

her concept of family beyond blood relations to include other

believers and members of an even larger God-family of which she

and her biological children are one small piece.

Jesus is a great pusher of the envelope, you know.

Just when we think we understand the law, or what God is asking of us,

Jesus turns it on its head with even wider, boundary-breaking implications,

usually wrapped up and hidden in a parable.

When one of the experts of the law tries to pin Jesus down about his liberal

hermeneutic by condensing the 613 laws to this:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart

and with all you soul and with all your strength and with all your mind,

and love your neighbor as yourself,"

and then asking, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:25–29),

Jesus pushes the envelope even farther, erases the status quo boundaries,

and wraps up and hides his response in the oxymoron of a good Samaritan.

And so, in the manner of Jesus, I ask us now to ponder for ourselves

the meaning of this fifth commandment,

“Honor your father and mother,” by asking ourselves the

same question which one of the experts of the law asks Jesus:

“Who are my parents, really?”

Who are the ones who have taught us how to love?

Who are the ones who have taught us how to talk?

Who are the ones who have shared their wisdom with us? Educated us?

Who are the ones who have shared our pain?

Who are the ones who have known us inside out since birth?

Who are the ones who love us, even when you talk smack to them,

or misuse their money, or get caught wielding a bottle?

Who are the ones who have welcomed us with open arms

and given us second chances, third and fourth chances,

at bringing honor to them?

And, in the manner of Jesus, I wrap up the answer to this question

and hide it for you in a parable.

A young woman who had lost her mother early on,

and whose father lived far away with his new wife, had her first baby.

And since she did not have a mother to guide her in caring for her infant child,

others came to stay with her during those first formative post-natal weeks.

A grandmother came and stayed for a week, rocked the baby while she napped,

rearranged all the staples in the pantry, and filled the freezer with good food.

Her mother-in-law came and stayed another week, rocked the baby while she napped,

washed and folded the laundry, and cleaned out the kitchen cabinets,

putting the glassware and china in different, but more accessible places.

A distant aunt came and stayed for yet another week, rocked the baby while she napped,

rearranged the linen closet and cleaned out the cutlery drawers,

sorting the knives, spatulas and can openers,

putting them in different drawers for easier access.

And when the young mother woke from her lovely naps, when her helpers all had left,

when the young woman had recovered from childbirth,  
when she had adjusted to the routine of having a new baby and a husband to care for,  
and when she entertained thoughts that she might have lost her mind in childbirth  
because she could no longer find the pancake turner or the pillowcases,  
or the paring knife, or the cornbread mix...  
she just smiled because she knew that God had given her many mothers  
instead of one mother, and they had all left their mark upon her—  
love, that makes life complicated sometimes;  
love, that nurtures, cares, forgives, and rearranges;  
love, that makes one appear foolish or crazy sometimes;  
love, that makes all things go well in the land;  
parental-like love, that is the closest reflection, perhaps,  
of what God's love is for the world. Amen.