

Honor is Part of the Bigger Picture
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Exodus 20:12 -- "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." – *New International Version*.

While most of this sermon has been redrafted by me into my own words, the overall shape, and elements of the reflection were strongly influenced by a sermon on *Preaching Today* by Derek Helt. From references within the notes of the sermon, he apparently delivered it or wrote it in 2000 or so. I will footnote or quote when exact quotes are used. When it comes to shape, nature of the discussion, and the overall sequencing of the discussion, I will not recall attention to that beyond this observation here. <http://preachingtoday.com/35382>

Author and preacher Tony Campolo said that when his wife, Peggy, was at home fulltime with their children and someone would ask, "And what is it that you do, my dear?" she would respond, "I am socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation."

Then Peggy would ask the other person, "And what do you do?"¹

When phrased like that, being a parent is quite a job description.

It's a job description with more than a few obstacles thrown in the way of successful accomplishment.

Today is Mother's day – and I want to use this opportunity to reflect on parenting. I do trust that all of us here today, parents, and those not parents, will lean forward and listen to the message that is applicable to all of us – be you parent or be you not.

Christianity Today asked several Christian writers the question, "What trend will have the greatest impact on the church in the next ten years?" Of that group, Lyle Schaller, a noted United Methodist church consultant and author, in attempting to answer that question Schaller observed: "The 'me' generation has given way to a 'me' world"².

Schaller seems to have put his finger on something that many of us feel.

The lens through which we too often examine life and the various courses of action are: "how will it affect me?"

Truth be told, the question "how will it affect me" has been asked since the beginning of time. But I can't help but wonder if in the past, the need to honor both ourselves, and 'you all' wasn't held in better balance. Asking "How will this affect my family, my community, my country?" seem to be perfectly legitimate questions – before we turn to the question of "What change will this require of me personally?"

For those of you do serve within a community of some kind and in some way – we need to say thank you to you. Current sociologists suggest that those who are interested in serving within a community framework, for the greater good of the community, not focusing on themselves, are an increasingly declining percentage of our population.³

George Weigel suggests in his book *The Cube and the Cathedral* that the declining birthrate in Europe is a function of movement away from God. I agree in part, but I wonder if it just isn't pure selfishness.

One Christian writer once wrote: "Our land lies east of Eden, and in this land Self is sovereign."⁴

How often do we hear almost any discussion about community quickly evolve into a discussion about the individual?

Let's look at our commandment again.

Honor thy father and mother.

Notice, that this particular commandment is focused on another – not ourselves. Said another way -- the other is at least for this one commandment what is truly of greatest importance.

This is the fifth commandment, and in much of the art depicting the 10 Commandments, the Commandments are often portrayed as on two tablets. One tablet – with the first four commandments – is about being in relationship with God. And the second tablet – with the other six commandments – contains guidance about being in relationship with each other.

And that relationship tutorial starts off with the idea – of honoring our parents.

In Ephesians 6, the Apostle Paul operating as a preacher to his flock unpacks this particular commandment and uses it to remind us how a Christian home is to function:

Quoting here from a translation called "The Message": "Children, do what your parents tell you. This is only right. 'Honor your father and mother' is the first commandment that has a promise attached to it, namely, 'so you will live well and have a long life.'" -- Notice, Paul doesn't stay with the child but moves to the parent: "... don't exasperate your children by coming down hard on them. Take them by the hand and *lead them* in the way of the Master."

So, let's be clear – this Exodus commandment speaks to children—it provides divine guidance for them to honor their parents— but is the honor a one way street – all about the parent -- or is it a two way street – child honoring parent, and parent honoring the growth and development of the child? I think Paul makes it clear – two way street. Honor doesn't only work up, it works down as well.

And honor could be argued as due to those who operate as a helper or substitute for parent.

Derek Helt tells the story about a friend of his – a school teacher – the classical person operating in lieu of a parent – who made it clear inappropriate material in school would be confiscated. One day during class she took away a teenager's *Hot Rod* magazine, and based on what she felt was clear, threw it away.

The principle came to her and told her that the boy's mother was not happy and wanted the magazine returned or for her to pay for the magazine.

Somehow, I think that is not a two way street of honor. It is one way. Helt's friend was acting in lieu of parent, had made it clear the implications of inappropriate behavior, and the real parent undercut her authority.⁵

The incident thus became about the teacher – and how the teen felt in some way HIS self had been violated – and somehow the rules within the community were forgotten and ignored – to the detriment of the society.

Sad – and I wish this were an isolated incident. But people who have a vast amount of experience in the world of dealing with parents and children suggest it doesn't seem to be.

Many articles I have read about contemporary education focuses on how often the relationship between teachers and parents becomes argumentative and combative – filled with expectations for the teacher to impart facts and figures wisdom while at the same time parents failing to support the teacher in the building of trust and support needed to frame and support the community that is a class room.⁶

Policemen tell similar stories. Long term policemen who used to take a misbehaving child back to a parent saying they had done something wrong and were greeted with a thank you and we will work on that. Those same officers now report as likely as not the response is “my child would never do that” or “you must be mistaken”. With the clear understanding that lawyers perform a civic good – how often is the first response of someone “I am going to call a lawyer.”

The very words have turned an honorable, justice seeking profession into one tainted by it's association with the selfishness of our society.

Again, sad. Where we should honor the profession of law – and it pursuit of justice – we instead make it the brunt of tasteless jokes.

My guess is that while I have offered two stories about education and law, your own lives are filled with examples that we could pull up and offer for community reflection.

This apparent breakdown of community isn't about children run amok. It is about all of us giving in to a worship of the self and making everything about "me" to the detriment of "us".

Part of my personal dissonance with what we call the Post-Modern world is that there is no absolute truth and whatever truth we seem to have, it is relative. And then our Post-Modern world tells us it is all about us.

No – to understand the Exodus passage in a Christian context –as Paul laid it out for us – says this isn't about having the child honor us and only us – there is rather a two way responsibility here – honor the parent – and the child is honored by the parent by love, care, and adult leadership.

The ancients of Africa have it right – it takes a village.

The nurture of the individual in their growth into maturity is accomplished within the framework of community. Parents. Friends of parents. Grandparents. People with no children themselves but who think of themselves as disciples of Christ. People who become advocates for children at a place like where Mittie works – Court Appointed Special Advocates – CASA.

Again returning to Helt: "To lay the full burden of this commandment solely upon children is to miss something crucial here. That is this: We parents need to strive to be parents who are worthy of honor and raise children who respect authority and show honor when and where it is appropriate."

A child has some responsibility to honor the parent, and the parent has responsibility to honor the child – partially by creating a framework for ultimate success in life.

Remember how I opened our reflection today with the words of Peggy Campolo? I am sure part of her context is that we seem to have dishonored the role of care giver to children – her words bite -- "I am socializing two Homo sapiens into the dominant values of the Judeo-Christian tradition in order that they might be instruments for the transformation of the social order into the kind of eschatological utopia that God willed from the beginning of creation."

Peggy may have said "I" but I would expect her to see this accomplished within community.

I trust that you can see the reflection here is not only to children and parents. It is to all of us who act on behalf of parents in the world.

How might we do this? I start with balance.

There is no doubt that there is a fine line we walk as parents – and people who act in lieu of parents – as it relates to how much praise is appropriate, how much criticism is

appropriate, how we scold, and how we lift up. It isn't easy, and I would offer that how our culture focuses so much on making it all about "me" and not "us" doesn't make it even harder.

Balance – aided by a good dose of common sense. One child psychologist once said: "Parenting is not an intellectual endeavor. It does not emanate from the head. If it did, the smartest people would be the best parents. And I have never noticed that. Good parenting is a matter of how rooted you are in the steady soil of common sense."⁷

Common sense then is the start point.

Let me offer you one piece of common sense then. Where do children then learn much of their behavior? Is it perhaps from watching us?

Bill Sheaves was sharing with the C. S. Lewis study group the other night about how he changed his behavior some 30 years because of a commercial that reminded him that his children watch him.

Children learn from what they see and hear from us. If we do it, then they feel like it is oh kay for us to do it. Remember Paul? Parents – take your child by the hand and lead them in the way of the master, and I hope we can agree that that is a responsibility all of us have to lead in the way of the master, and we do that by displaying to all around us – Jesus in the flesh.

Two tablets – one about God, one about People. And the first one about people is about honor based on it having a promise associated with it.

All of that having been said – I am mindful that some of us may have parents that seem (or seemed) to be unlovable.

It may have been a result of abuse. Our joking last week about getting an occasional spanking should not be construed as a suggestion that I felt I was abused. I don't think I was. But there are people walking around who have been abused – in some cases horribly.

Let me offer you a Christian challenge.

Don't let the abuse you suffered as a child continue to define you. Don't let the abuse you suffered as a child define how you parent.

Recognize the tragedy for what it was – abuse – highly inappropriate behavior – something that may have scarred you physically and emotionally -- and ask that forgiveness of the parent for the exploitation or pain they may have caused you be part of your Christian walk.

Part of putting on the full armor of God calls us to be born again in Christ – to die to this world and be reborn as a new creature in Christ – and – while difficult -- part of that being a new creature in Christ calls for us to forgive those who have hurt us.

Let me emphasize: that doesn't mean we need to stay in an abusive situation and place ourselves again at risk of exploitation in some way – but once we get to a safe place, and some time has gone by, it is the Christ-like role for us forgive the sin that has been done to us and move on.

What would Jesus do? I think we know that he forgave those who were part of his own execution. We are called to do the same – hard ? Yes. Unachievable ? No.

Forgiving the offender – while operating to be sure that you don't let the offense continue – is part of allowing yourself to be defined in the image and mind of Christ.

Again a last time returning to Helt: “Living the life of a follower of Jesus Christ is all about striking the right balance between different aspects of our lives. Right now, our culture is sending the message of individualism—what I want should be most important to me.” Let me ask you – is that very balanced? Do you think if all of us were truly selfish and focused on ourselves that our world would operate very well?

Isn't this about placing the past where it belongs, in the past, and using our present to shape a better future?

Marilyn and I have a friend – a friend who is now an Ordained Elder in the United Methodist Church in Virginia – who had been a businesswoman in the Monday through Friday world – and her former professionals would ask her she now did for a living – she would say “I invest in futures.”

Paul's letter to the Ephesians reminds us that this Exodus commandment about honoring our parents is about promise. It is about the promise found in a future that is about relationship – a relationship that moves me to the background and makes something about – us.

I invest in futures.

I have to think that a people who say they believe in the celebration of Easter every Sunday truly believe in the future.

I think Linda's quote is going to be part of my future job description – Dennis Shaw – investor in futures. Can I ask you to join me – us – you, me, all of us –walking with Christ Jesus and following the Holy Spirit -- in that future.

Today is Mother's day – I invite each of us here today to celebrate Mother's day by thinking of *all the people* in our lives who brought honor to themselves by setting aside

the fact that they lived in a “‘me’ generation [that] has given way to a ‘me’ world”⁸ and rather – focused on others.

Being a follower of Jesus means – the lens through which we examine life and the various courses of action are not: “how will it affect me?” Rather, they will ask “how does this bring honor on the Body of Christ”.

We truly honor our father and mother, by honoring their past and commitment to us, and focus on a future full of promise and hope ... a future that is best framed within community.

¹ John Ortberg and Ruth Haley, *An Ordinary Day with Jesus* (Zondervan, 2001), p. 122

²Fall, 1999 *Leadership Journal*, p. 29.

³ Robert Putman, *Bowling Alone* is an excellent example of a detailed analysis of this topic.

⁴*Leadership*, Spring 1987, p. 90.

⁵ <http://preachingtoday.com/35382>.

⁶ A recent article in *The Weekly Standard* about immigration is a good example of this. DelMarVa Peninsula chicken farming area schools tell the story of how they like the engagement of the new immigrant parents which instead of a combative relationship with the teacher is rather focused on how Jorge or Juliana has learned. I will find the article if this interests you. Excellent piece.

⁷ John Rosemond is the psychologist and is quoted in the Helt sermon.

⁸Fall, 1999 *Leadership Journal*, p. 29.

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