Sunday, May 13, 1979
THE FIFTH COMMANDMENT
Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:1-4

Beginning this spring I am planning to do a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments. So today is a good day to begin — "Mother's Day," or sometimes called by the church — "The festival of the Christian home." One of the ten commandments deals especially with mothers and fathers. It is the 5th commandment which states, "Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you."

Just in case you've forgotten, the first four commandments are: "(1) I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me. (2) You shall not make yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. (3) You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain; for the Lord will not hold the person guiltless who takes God's name in vain. (4) Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy; six days you shall labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God."

Notice that the 5th commandment, honor your father and your mother is the first of the ten commandments that specifically moves beyond our duty toward God and focuses on our duty toward others. And appropriately enough in the 5th commandment, that duty begins with the intimate relationships between parents and children. This is also, the only one of the commandments governing our duty toward others that is expressed in a positive way. All the others place restraints and curbs on our behavior, e.g. "You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not covet. You shall not bear false witness." The fifth commandment, however, calls us to respond with a positive attitude.

1. First of all, as we consider this commandment to honor one's mother and father on this Mother's Day, it is important to remember that it is not automatic that children will naturally honor and love their parents, nor is it automatic that parents will love their children. It is not an inherited instinct. This may surprise some people because in our culture we work so hard to create a nostalgic romantic picture of both motherhood and fatherhood as if we were born with the instinct to love and honor our parents. Of course, those of us who are parents hope that our children will love and respect us, not only when they are children, but when they are adults. I suppose there is nothing I desire more deeply than to know that I have the love and respect of my two daughters and one son. But it won't happen automatically just because my wife and I are the biological parents of our children.

All of this is to say that loving, honoring, and respecting one's parents is learned behavior. This of course is good news for adopted children, for parents of adopted children and for stepchildren and stepparents.

Research shows that there is a strong contrast between certain societies as to how elderly parents in particular are treated. In some primitive cultures, if a person was strong enough to survive to an old age, which in fact was very rare in some societies, he or she was often treated shamefully with no qualms of conscience. The elderly in some cultures were banished from the tribe, left to starve, or even worse. At the same time there were and are cultures where the older parents and all elderly people are greatly revered and cared for.

Furthermore, the psychological disciplines in our time have discovered that there is often a rivalry and even a hostility which exists in parent-child relationships, particularly when the child reaches maturity. As we mature further, the role of the child is finally to replace the parent. Thus, some psychologists believe that much of the sentimentality that surrounds the culture's celebration of motherhood and fatherhood may be a cover for unacceptable hostility that some people are not willing to face in themselves.

What we know now at least is that the relationship between the child and especially the grown child and the parent is not an automatic romantic, sentimental relationship. It is more often a complex relationship of conflict and tension that needs to be faced and dealt with. It is many times a relationship of both love and hate of dependency and rebellion, of displacement and identification.

I mention this because it helps us to see the genius of the 5th commandment. The Hebrew people in the incredible insight in understanding human life, knew the tangled emotions that are bound up with our relationship to our parents, and so in their most sacred law of God, we are asked in the name of God to rise above the inner conflicts and give honor to those who have given us the gift of life. This does not mean that we always have to agree with our parents. This does not mean that our feelings will always be good toward our parents.

Although there is no requirement in the Old Testament about the parent's duty to love their children, the New Testament reminds parents that we are not to provoke our children to anger, but to bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.

To summarize our first point then, the honoring of our parents or us as Christians is a calling to a higher way than the instinctual behavioral natural patterns would produce.

2. Secondly then, what does it mean to "honor our mother and our father," and how does it come about? Let's be clear about it, honor is not just blind obedience. Nor for that matter as we begin to grow up and are able to make decisions on our own, should blind obedience be demanded of us by our parents.

We honor our parents best by growing up to be healthy, responsible, honorable human beings who are a credit to the total society. We honor our parents by being contributors to society rather than just takers. We honor our parents too by being grateful for what they have contributed to our well-being and to the society as a whole.

In Hebrew society, this commandment was aimed chiefly at the relationship between grownups and their elderly parents. It meant then as it does now that children have a responsibility to see to it that their parents can grow old gracefully with integrity. Older people are not just to be shoved aside as if they were worthless.

On the other hand, this commandment was never meant to be a club enabling parents to control their children by quoting this commandment and thereby trying to force children to modify their behavior. In other words, the commandment is not a bidding law on children to always obey. It does not force children to honor that which is not honorable. It does not automatically bless parental authority and never gives an excuse for child abuse. It does not require submission to or toleration of unacceptable behavior by parents toward children. I say these things because I know many people who carry this kind of burden, unable to express their negative feelings toward their parents'behavior, unable to work them out, believing themselves to be under the burden of a law that says no matter what your real feelings are you

are supposed to cover them up and honor, love and obey your parents. That is not in the commandment.

Abusive behavior is never to be honored! The other day I was reading one of the many stories we see today about the abuse of children by their parents. This particular story concerned a young girl, age 14, in a Sunday School Class. The subject was the ten commandments and when the teacher got to a discussion of the 5th commandment, the 14-year-old girl was particularly nervous. Later the teacher learned the reason. The girl had an ug1y scar across her forehead. Some years earlier her father had come home drunk and abusive one night and had kicked the child down the stairs, splitting her head open. The family did not seek medical attention. Perhaps they were too embarrassed or too afraid of questions being asked. So, the forehead was left to heal as best it could with some home remedies probably exaggerating the disfigurement. The girl was now having difficulty in determining what the 5th commandment meant for her.

Incidentally, there is now some new research data which shows that not every culture is violent and that there is a relationship between early infant care practices and the later development of violence in adults. The research shows that with few exceptions, societies which provide infants with a great deal of physical affection and bodily contact produce relatively nonviolent adults. In societies where infants are touched, held and carried, coddled and played with, the incidence of violence is much less than in societies where infant care is restricted to merely feeding and changing.

After much study and observation, the researchers have thus far concluded that physical holding, carrying, cuddling, and even rocking the infant turn out to be the most important factors responsible for the infant's normal mental and social development. Without physical contact of these kinds, the infant's pleasure system is actually stunted in its growth. His or her difficulty in feeling pleasure may later tip the person towards violence.

The researchers now believe that the infant who is deprived of movement and physical closeness will fail to develop the brain pathways that mediate pleasure. In essence, such people may be suffering at the neuronal level from stunted growth of their pleasure system. Later the person may have problems experiencing pleasure and as a result develop an insatiable need for it. In the absence of pleasure. the balance tips toward dysfunctional states such as violence.

In-depth interviews with child abusers reveal a pattern of reduced pleasure in daily living. Discussions with such parents often reveal an isolated alienated person with a quick temper, low frustration tolerance and a sense of personal deprivation. They are so involved with catering to their own insatiable emotional needs that they have little time to respond to the basic needs of their children or of anyone for that matter. Since they cannot receive pleasure, they are also poor providers of pleasure to their children. Child abusing parents rarely report having fun with their babies. Unfortunately, child abusing parents produce children who themselves become child abusing parents. It's about the only way they know how to react to children. The cycle is difficult to break!

It also means that whether or not our children honor us as parents can depend a lot on how we honor and love our children.

3. And that brings us to the third point in our discussion of the 5th commandment. As parents there are several aspects included in the kind of love we are to have for our children particularly when they are growing up if they are not only to honor us, but to honor all people.

Every human being needs the security to be, that is, we need love that is not discriminating, love that loves us just because we are, just because we exist, not because of what we do or don't do. It is a kind of love that is freely given, and which cannot be earned. Included as part of this love is a sense of belonging, a sense of community, a sense of worth that nothing can take away from us.

The right kind of self-esteem comes from being loved and accepted as we are from little on up. Unfortunately, too many people are bitterly disappointed with who they are. In a world that worships superstars and miracle women and men, people look in the mirror for signs of greatness and do not find it. Why is this? Because too often in our homes and in our society, we evaluate human worth by what a person can do and how beautiful or handsome a person looks. Thus, self-esteem is built on false values. For example, the most highly valued personal attribute in our culture (and in most others) is physical attractiveness. Accordingly, the personal worth of a child, young person, young adult and on up is too often based on this value alone.

Another important aspect of love is that which sets the right standards. Here we are talking about such basic standards as honesty, being responsible, being sensitive to others which includes having respect for all other human beings. Such standards are always first learned or not learned in the home. Children who grow up in the atmosphere of such good standards will be those who honor their mothers and their fathers throughout life.

"Honor your father and your mother that your days may be long in the land which the Lord your God gives you."

This is the one commandment with a promise attached to it-- "that your days may be long in the land which the lord your God gives you." The promise is made not only to individuals, but as much to societies and nations and civilization itself. When we honor our fathers and mothers, it means they are honorable. Thus, the promise of the 5th commandment recognizes that if we fail in the most intimate of human relationships, in the family, then society as a whole will be hurt. On the other hand, when we honor those to whom honor is due, then all of society benefits. Amen.