Sunday, May 8, 1983
ANOTHER LOOK AT MOTHER'S DAY
Exodus 20:12; Mark 3:31-35

Recently I came across a research project which revealed a surprising fact about adults in this country. Most of the people surveyed reported that their most troublesome relationship was not with their children or their spouse, if married, but their most troublesome relationship was between themselves and their parents. This seemed surprising to me, because we hear and read so often about difficulties which parents have with teenagers or children at some other age.

Even where parents had died, the study revealed that many adults are still struggling with the basic conflict between the desire to be independent of parental control and the desire to affirm the deep belonging which they entered into at birth.

Read the letters to "Dear Abby" or "Dear Ann Landers," and one can see that many people are attempting to deal with this problem. One I came across recently said, "Dear Abby: I am 67 years old, and I am crazy. I got this way taking care of my mother, who is 92. She is the most impossible woman who ever lived. Unfortunately, she is in better health than I am. I'd sign this, but she'd kill me." Stuck in Encino.

Where any kind of conflict of this kind is present, Mother's Day can bring upon us mixed emotions.

Some people welcome Mother's Day with unreserved feelings of gratitude, affection, and celebration. Others view the day with a certain ambivalence. How do you honor your mother, for example, from a distance of 500 or 1,000 or 1,5000 miles? More importantly, what does honor mean? How is it carried out?

Today many adults have heeded the call to step out and make their own way in the world. More and more people have moved hundreds of miles from the home where they grew up, and as their parents get older, they wonder what is their continuing obligation to their parents. Others have parents who live nearby, and they have the same kinds of questions. What are their responsibilities? How much should their parents still control their lives? Do they have to jump every time their parents call?

Few passages from the Bible have the ability to create guilt as does the 5th commandment in the 10: "Honor your father and your mother." How is it to be done in our time?

Honoring father and mother has become a question for many people precisely because they have left home. Leaving home can carry with it a heavy feeling of guilt. There is also a basic, primitive fear associated with asserting one's independence from one's parents. So much has been received — all free, undeserved — how, then, does one ever go away? Should we remain geographically close to our parents? Is it wrong to move far away?

But Christian faith recognized the necessity of leaving. Jesus quoted the Old Testament and said, "Therefore a person shall leave his or her father and mother and be joined to his or her spouse." But whether or not a person gets married, we still have to leave our parents in some sense and be on our own and establish our independence. Biblical faith affirms the need to leave! Jesus faced this issue himself.

Jesus hadn't been in the business of teaching and preaching very long before tensions and conflicts arose with his family. The short passage from the gospel of Mark which was read earlier tells of some of these conflicts.

To begin with, some of his family and friends thought that Jesus was not doing the right thing to leave home and become an itinerant teacher. The gospel of Mark tells us that some of his friends, and perhaps family members, thought he was "beside himself," that is, a little out of his mind. And then in this passage read this morning, Mark tells us that Jesus'family had come to where he was teaching and preaching and that they sent word through the crowd that they wanted urgently to talk with him. Maybe they had come to try to persuade him to come back home with them. Or perhaps they were a bit concerned about some of his new beliefs. After all, he was being critical of the institutional religion of his time, and he had questioned the interpretation of some of the rules and traditions.

But Jesus knew that a certain break had to be made with his family — not a dishonorable break. He had a strong sense of vocation that had to be fulfilled. Certainly he also knew that the Biblical faith of the Old Testament recognized the necessity of leave-taking. He knew that Abraham had received a call from God to "go from his own country and his kindred and his parents'house to the land that he would be shown." When Jesus called his first disciples, they left their parents'homes and businesses and followed him.

A certain amount of leave-taking is necessary in all of our lives. We have a nostalgia about the family that is both positive and negative. We sometimes forget how the family can be a source of restriction or confinement, as well as a source of nourishment and maturity. For some it can also be used as a place to hide, to avoid stepping out into personal responsibility.

Our Christian faith affirms the need to leave. It is not always on the side of staying home. That may suggest, then, some things that honoring our mothers and fathers does not mean.

1. First of all, to honor mother and father does not mean that we turn out lives over to our parents'direction forever. Of course when we are very young and growing up, parental direction is very important, but it should gradually decrease as we mature, until the time when we are on our own.

Fortunately in this country we enjoy a lot more freedom in this regard than in many other cultures of the world. We do not arrange marriages for our children, although we sometimes try without its being obvious. We do not choose our children's vocation or occupation, although again as parents, we certainly make many suggestions. But by and large, children and young people are free to make more and more of their own choices of whom they will marry, where they will live, and what direction their lives will take.

2. Secondly, honoring mother and father does not mean that we have to imitate them in every respect. Certainly we hope that as parents we will be good overall role models for our children, and hopefully our parents were the same for us.

One struggle which many people are working out today is finding the right balance between home and career. This is true for both men and women. We can do it differently than did our parents without in any sense dishonoring them. More and more people are marrying at a later age and having children later in life. More and more women are working outside the home.

Many men are not as career-conscious as were their fathers. And that's OK. We have the right and the responsibility to fashion our own lives in our own time.

What, then, does it mean to truly honor our mothers and our fathers?

1. First of all, parents are to be honored, not in terms of their achievements as individuals or as parents, and not because of sentiment or simply because a Sunday has been set aside as Mother's Day or Father's Day. Such festivals, of course, can be reminders to us.

Rather, we honor our mothers and our fathers because they are the ones who have given us the gift of life itself. And in honoring them, we honor also the fact that life is sacred and holy. This kind of honoring has nothing to do with whether or not we think our mother was an outstanding mother or not so outstanding. It has nothing to do with what we think our parents deserve or don't deserve. It is an act of respect, an act of recognizing that our own life is a gift.

2. Secondly, we truly honor our mothers and our fathers by becoming responsible, mature human beings who contribute something to the world in which we live, rather than just taking from it. In other words, we may do more honoring by leaving home and doing something positive with our life, rather than staying home and being afraid of life.

3. Third, we honor our mothers and our fathers in the way in which we relate to them when we grow older together. Biblical scholars have suggested that the original intent of the 5th commandment was probably to protect older people from being driven our of the home after they were no longer useful in productive ways. In a basically rural culture, every person had to work in order to allow the family unit to survive. When an individual was no longer able to work, he or she became a real threat to the survival of that larger family unit.

Now in our technological society, with various forms of insurance, pensions, social security, and with people living longer and longer, things have changed so that society as a whole is carrying more and more of the economic cost.

As we try to work out these new relationships when we as adults often have to act as parents to those who are our biological parents, there is frequently a tension because we have to decide not to let out parents still control our lives and at the same time we need to honor them. Our Christian faith tells us that we have a God-given independence and a God-given connection, and we have to work at how they fit together.

My own mother died 13 years ago before she had a chance to know very many of her 21 grandchildren. She had had seven children of her own, and the six of us who were alive at the time she died wrote down some of our memories of her, and I was elected to read these at her funeral.

It was our way of honoring her in her death, as well as in her life, and as a conclusion to this sermon on Mother's Day, I want to read to you part of what we said.

We began by saying, "All of you who knew Irene Young are well aware of her character, integrity, compassions and fidelity to her family, church and community. Some of you knew her as a friend, or a church worker, sister, aunt or grandmother. We knew her simply as'Mom.' As we recall some of our memories, we do not intend to suggest that she was without faults, or to exaggerate her good qualities. We want simply to tell you some of the things we will remember.

“We will remember her as being one who did her best to be fair to each one of us and to give us each her attention when we most needed it. As growing children we experienced the full range of her emotions. We knew her anger, as well as her approval.

“With Mom we knew no generation gap. She was always open to new ideas and new ways of seeing and doing things. She had the courage to change, and yet she never compromised her integrity.

“We will remember her as being one who could relate to and get along with all kinds of people: educated and uneducated, rich and poor, young and old; all felt comfortable in her presence.

“We will remember her as being patient in much suffering. Being in a hospital was nothing new to her, beginning with a bone disease at an early age, bearing children, suffering several automobile accidents, and having numerous surgeries.

“We will also remember her as reconciler and peacemaker as she helped settle arguments between us children and between us and our dad.

“We will remember little things, like her heating water in the basement on a wood stove to do the weekly washing, making her own laundry soap, straining baby food before it could be purchased that way in the stores, making root beer, coloring Easter eggs, sending our laundry home from college each week by mail and having it promptly returned by Mom, often with little surprised tucked in among the clothes.

“We will remember the smell and taste of homemade bread as we came home from school, and fresh biscuits or cornbread for breakfast, and potato pancakes with fresh applesauce for lunch.

“We will remember her helping out when our children were born.

“Some people may write poetry, or compose music, or author books. Some enter a professions, and others amass great fortunes. Our mother did none of these. Her life’s professions, her contribution, and that which she enjoyed most was that of wife, mother, grandmother, friend, volunteer, and all-around good citizen.

“She made it easy for us to leave home when the time came and easy to return when we wanted to visit. She wanted us to be on our own, and she never made us feel guilty when we were moved away from home and couldn’t visit as often as she or we might’ve liked. She made no unreasonable demands on us as adults. She knew we had our own lives to live.”

Today and every day, I hope we honor our mothers and those who have been and are mothers to us — not because we have to, but because we choose to. Amen.