

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
July 7, 2013  
Rev. Kirk Hall

Navel Gazing  
*Exodus 20:12*

There is a story, a nineteenth century fairy tale written by The Brothers Grimm about a little old man, with trembling hands and fading eyes, who lived with his son's family. His uncertain table habits became increasingly offensive to his daughter-in-law until one day, she grew fed up (couldn't take it anymore) and objected to her husband, the man's son. So the two took the fumbling old man to a corner of the kitchen, set him on a stool and gave him his food in a bowl. There, he was no longer troubling them with dribbled food. The tablecloth at the table was no longer stained by the food that he once spilled with his trembling hands.

One day, with trembling hands, the old man dropped the bowl and broke it, leaving the food all over the floor. The daughter-in-law was outraged. "If you are a pig," she said, "you must eat from a trough." And they made a wooden trough and he ate from it.

The pride of the couple's lives was their four-year-old son. One evening, they noticed the boy playing with his wooden blocks with incredible intent and focus. When the father asked what he was doing, the son said with an engaging smile, "I am making a trough to feed you and Mamma out of when I get big." For a while the man and the woman didn't say anything – they just looked at each other. Then they cried. Then they went to the corner and led the little old man back to his place at the table. They gave him a comfortable chair and put his food on a plate. Never again were they troubled by the food he spilt and the plates he occasionally broke.<sup>1</sup> ***Please read Exodus 20:12***

In 2005, Jeannette Walls wrote *The Glass Castle*<sup>2</sup>, a book that I am sure many of you have read. It's still on the New York Times Best-Seller list, having sold some 4.2 million copies. It is the true story of how Walls was raised by an alcoholic father who was probably bipolar and a mother, self-described as an "excitement addict."

Her parents had 27 addresses in the first five years of their marriage, staying (as the mother puts it) "one step ahead of the rent collector" and as the father believed, one step ahead of the F.B.I. The children they had along the way often went hungry, eating out of trash cans when their father stole the grocery money for booze and their mother remained consumed by her own wants over her children's needs. The stories throughout the book are unbelievable.

The book begins with the story of how Jeanette was three years old, standing on a chair, cooking hotdogs because her mother couldn't be bothered to cook. Walls' pink tutu dress catches fire and the entire front of her body was severely burned sending her to the hospital for the next six weeks until her father, suspicious of trained doctors, breaks her out of the hospital and takes her home. When she returns to the chair to cook more hot dogs, her mother encourages her, "Good for you. You've got to get right back in the saddle."<sup>3</sup> The book continues from there to describe an abusive upbringing that Walls later describes as a daily "Outward Bound." Even to this day, long after the father has died, Walls' brother still can't stand to be around his mother and one of her sisters denies that she even has a mother.

My sense is that two typical reactions to such a memoir is either to relate to this experience (finding comfort in knowing that you are not alone in experiencing a broken home). Or to find a greater appreciation for how good your parents really were.

While some of you may have lived in such a world like Walls', others of you may have been fortunate enough to have parents who protected and who cared for you, leaving nothing but warm memories of our childhood and the closest, healthiest relationship that you have ever had. I would guess, however, that most of us are somewhere in the middle – raised by loving, good human beings doing the best they could but falling short from time to time (in one way or another) with unrealistic expectations, selfish acts or even their own psychological heirlooms passed from down from *their* parents – leaving the "iniquity of forefathers" (as scripture tells us) "to be paid for by the third and fourth generations." The good news is that the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment has nothing to do with what our parents have done or left undone.

The 5<sup>th</sup> commandment doesn't say that we must have warm fuzzy feelings about our parents. It doesn't even say that we should love our parents (or even like them). It says that we should honor them. And it doesn't say that we should honor them only if they deserve it, or to the level that they have earned it. This "commandment provides no exceptions and no modifications, because the commandment isn't speaking of what the parent deserves. It is speaking of the child's own welfare, and of the larger welfare of society as a whole."<sup>4</sup>

"Honor your father and mother..."

The Hebrew word translated here as "honor" literally means, "to make heavy," in the sense of regarding someone as "weighty" or deeply significant. This same term is used in other places in scripture to describe a faithful attitude toward God. It doesn't describe how we should show this honor. It simply orients our relationship with our mother and father to have same/similar "weight" as we would our relationship with God.<sup>5</sup> But we honor our parents not because they are all-knowing, all-powerful or in all places, but as thirteenth century rabbi Moses de Leon wrote, "father and mother should be honored because 'all three have been partners in thy creation.'"<sup>6</sup>

In the very act of parenting, mothers and fathers become co-creators of those who bear God's image - vessels through which God breathes being into each human, the soul that points beyond science. They are the very participants of God's creative work *of* humanity, *through* humanity. And those who play such an instrumental role in the parenting of God's story of life should be honored for that (if nothing else). There is a passage in the Talmud (Jewish sacred teachings) that reads, "When a person conducts himself by honoring his mother and father, God is heard to say, 'It is as though I were living with them and they honored me.'" <sup>7</sup>

Many believe that this sacred tie that binds parents to God in such a deep way is illustrated even by the order of the commandments, themselves.

As the Ten Commandments were placed on two tablets, the first (bearing the first 5 commandments) had to do with our obedience and service directly to God. The second tablet points to our relationship with our neighbor. This 5<sup>th</sup> commandment about honoring father and mother is the final commandment on the first tablet – the tablet that directs our piety to God. Most say that it serves as somewhat of a bridge over to the second tablet - from the laws about our direct relationship with God to the laws about our relationship with one another. It looks back to the source and creation of life and forward to how that life is honored in community long after we have left home.<sup>8</sup> And parents who stand on such a bridge become the foundation by which we come to understand the laws on the second tablet.<sup>9</sup>

It is no fairy tale that long before we even know the 10 commandments, ethical laws or moral theories, parents shape our intuitions (for better or worse) about how to behave, patterns of honesty and caring for others. And while they have that role, it doesn't mean they're always right.

Just before our first child was born, I was growing more and more nervous about being a father. I was talking to a friend who already had two daughters and made it look easy. After I rambled on about all my fears of messing this child up, he said, "All you have to do is to raise the child with enough sense to one day know to go out and find a good therapist to undo all the things that you did wrong."

Maybe of all the life that parents shape, the deepest impression they leave is about God. Not by their perfection, but more by their imperfection. That even in God's most profound act of creating and giving life, God wants to be in relationship - not with unrealistic superheroes, but with normal human beings simply because God loves us. That, despite our cracks and faults, God calls humanity (with all its fears and brokenness and insecurities and pride) into partnership in the continuation of life.

To tell the story that despite who we are, what we mess up, God continues to honor us even unto death.

This points to the reason why, I think, that in the traditional Jewish funeral, the lifeless body is considered equivalent to a damaged Torah scroll. The body is never left unattended from the moment of death to the burial service because, while it is no longer able to fulfill

the purpose for which it was created, it is still revered for the holy purpose it once served: the purpose of telling the story of God's relationship with creation, with humanity, a story of redemption and grace, of compassion and forgiveness - a story much bigger than our own relationships with our mother and father.<sup>10</sup>

Even after a childhood that would leave most of us on the floor, Jeannette Walls (of course) made it as a writer and after describing her upbringing through her 2005 book, she is often asked how she could forgive her mother for the way that she was raised.

Her response is that, "it's really not forgiveness in my opinion. It's acceptance. She's never going to be the sort of mother who wants to take care of me...Mom is Mom...she couldn't take care of herself, how could she take care of me?"<sup>11</sup>

Recently, after the housing complex in New York where her mother was squatting burned down, Walls brought her mother to live with her on her farm in Virginia, built her a house, bought her a car, a T.V., a cell phone, even a horse and there she lives today, now at 78 years of age.

Even if you cannot relate with the experiences of Jeanette Walls, most of us, if we'd like to admit it or not, have spent many of our days coming to terms with how are parents are not God, but mere human beings, just like all of us - broken vessels that do what they can to share the love that none of us can fully understand and to teach (in one way or another) something about who God is and how God calls us to participate in this Divine drama of life and hope and compassion and grace.

So if our parents are loveable, we may love them. But whether they are lovable or not, we must honor them because just as they give us life, they teach us about who we are and about the redemption deserved by none, but given freely to all. Maybe the fullness of life is found there. So honor that, if nothing else, "so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord God is giving you."

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup>As told in J. Ellsworth Kalas', *The Ten Commandments from the Back Side*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press) © 1998. pp. 54-5.

<sup>2</sup> Walls, Jeannette. *The Glass Castle: A Memoir*. (New York: Scribner) © 2005.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted in Alex Witchel's, "How Jeannette Walls Spins Good Stories Out of Bad Memories," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Kalas, J. E., *The Ten Commandments from the Back Side*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press) © 1998. pp. 57.

<sup>5</sup> Hebrew for "honor" is *kabbed*. Please see Patrick D. Miller's, *The Ten Commandments: Interpretation Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church* (Louisville: WJK) 2009, p. 176.

<sup>6</sup> Kalas, J. E., *The Ten Commandments from the Back Side*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press) © 1998. pp. 58.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, Patrick. *The Ten Commandments. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church* (Louisville: WJK) 2009. 168ff.

<sup>9</sup> For more on this theory, see Patrick Miller's *The Ten Commandments. Interpretation: Resources for the Use of Scripture in the Church* (Louisville: WJK) 2009. 168ff.

<sup>10</sup> Chittister, Joan. *The Ten Commandments: Laws of the Heart*. (New York: Orbis) 2006. p. 50.

<sup>11</sup> Witchel, Alex. "How Jeannette Walls Spins Good Stories Out of Bad Memories," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2013.