

Honoring Our Traditions, The Fifth Commandment

Homily by Rev. Dr. Jim Nelson
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I recently visited a cousin who lives in Aptos, California, when I took Hannah, my daughter, up to school in Santa Cruz. It was a good visit. I remember Bob from when I was much younger (he is ten years older) and it is a good feeling to have family nearby, especially when he and his wife are the only other liberals on either side of our family. Bob was even a UU for a while.

He gave me a sheaf of papers, copies of letters my Dad wrote during World War II to him, my Dad's only nephew at the time, and to his mom, my Dad's sister. Most were from England where my Dad was stationed before going to France and Belgium. My Dad was in the second wave of invading forces, just a week or so after D-day, in which his youngest brother was killed. Some letters were from France and Belgium, describing the devastation of the war.

The letters are not graphic and they are, while realistic, positive. My Dad describes the black-outs in England, the mud in France and Belgium. There is passing reference to the "bodies piled up like cordwood" on the beaches of France, but more about the young soldiers, to whom he became somewhat of a father. He was in his early thirties then.

The letters are consistent with what I knew of my Dad, and they gave me a bit more of a window into his life. He rarely talked about the war, though I know it weighed heavily on him.

Honor your father and mother, that the days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God has given thee.

First, a clarification: I grew up Protestant and so thought there was just one version of the Ten Commandments. But Catholics have their order and Jews theirs. For Catholics the 5th commandment, about killing, is the sixth commandment for Protestants and Jews. The commandments are all there for each, just numbered a bit differently. The joke is that for UUs, these are the ten suggestions in any case.

But honor your father and mother. Not all of you, I know, had parents to honor. Not all fathers and mothers are good; I was blessed with good parents and have tried to be a good father myself. I learned from my Dad much that was good. So think of this commandment as honoring those from whom we learn wisdom: perhaps our parents, perhaps just one of them, perhaps from mentors, other relatives, teachers, ministers, our tradition.

And note that this commandment says "honor," not "obey." These are two very different words, honor and obey. To honor takes some discretion; it takes thoughtfulness. Think for a moment about from whom you learned those most important lessons of life. Think for a moment about from whom you have learned some wisdom.

Now all of this makes easy sense: honoring our mothers and fathers, or honoring those from whom we have learned important things about living. Nothing radical about it.

But it is to the next parts of this commandment I want to turn for a minute. It goes: "that thy days may be long upon the land the Lord thy God has given thee."

First, the last part: "the land the Lord thy God has given thee."

Each night before dinner, my family says a table grace. It is a simple one. We take a moment of silence, holding hands, and then express things for which we are thankful. There is no compulsion to say anything, and at times we have all been silent; at times there is much shared. We then say together: "We are thankful for everything we have and we promise to take care of it."

We have done this since the girls were little, and it has become a ritual in our family. It is a good thing; I hope you have something similar in your home. What it suggests is that our lives are a gift, that we are given this life, that there are blessings in our lives that are gifts to us, and that our responsibility is to take care of them.

This cuts to the very heart of what it means to be a human. We are creatures, after all, who make promises, and then try to keep them, and who can care for the small corners of the universe vouchsafed to each and to all of us. We do so imperfectly; we all fail at times in taking care, or in keeping those promises we make, but the extent to which we do, and try, and always seek to do better, is what, as the commandment claims, will “make your days long.” That is, will bring about meaningfulness into our lives. It is these promises we make. Last week I told you the story of William Ellery Channing and his decision, he said, to follow the higher principles of his nature, and in living out those higher principles, he would grow a soul.

This is what this commandment is about—about honoring those higher principles, and the sources from which they come.

We are poised for a transition in ministry here as Kathleen will be bidding us goodbye at the end of this church year. We will miss her. I will miss her.

But I am mindful that she and I stand in what is often called a living stream, a living tradition. Each year at our General Assembly (our national convention) there is the “Service of the Living Tradition.” It used to be the centerpiece of GA; sadly enough, it no longer is. It honored ministry, but not in the sense of honoring ministers, but ministry, that is, of those who carry forward the living stream of our free faith.

What I am after here is that this commandment, at least within these walls, asks us to honor our tradition and the wisdom of freedom and justice. Our tradition tells us to honor each other in our spiritual search, to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning, to work for peace and justice and equity, to honor and care for the earth.

These are the teachings of our tradition, the one we honor. It is to be free—free to care for each other and the earth, free to work for justice, free to believe or not, free to search for the truth. Free.

And if we become free, if we seek freedom, not only for our own self but for those around us, for those distant and near, freedom, if we seek freedom, then truly the days will be long, filled with meaning, in the land, this life, these corners of the universe we have been given. Those letters of my Dad were about freedom, about the fight for freedom.

We stand in a living stream. Honor it. Love it well. Care for it. Pass it on. Stand up for it. Support it.

In 1968, in April, Martin Luther King Jr. was shot and killed. He died in the cause of freedom. We remember him this weekend. He said he wanted to be remembered as someone who tried to love others, who worked for freedom. In his magnificent speech at the Lincoln Memorial he concluded with these words: “Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I am free at last.”

To be free: this is our tradition and this is what we honor; this is what we have been taught. And if we become free, then, indeed, our days will be long in the land the Lord has given us.

Amen