



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Honoring the Saints”

Ephesians 3:18-21; Hebrews 12:1-2
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In the last two months, in various settings I've asked folks to name their favorite commandment. Today's commandment, honor thy father and mother, was the number one choice. The interesting thing is that almost everyone who identified this as their favorite is a parent of a child under the age of eighteen.

Honor your father and mother. In other words, thou shall treat thy parents with respect. Thou shall clean up thy room. Thou shall put away thy toys. Thou shall never throw a tantrum in a public place. Thou shall regularly bathe thyself. Thou shall keep thy curfew. Thou shall never dye thy hair or pierce any body part other than thy ear. Thou shall never say “Whatever.” Thou shall basically do what thy parents say.

Children, obey your parents. That's what this commandment is about. Right?

I was in my first six months as a pastor and leading a women's Bible study on this commandment with a group of women. I got the group talking about their parents. They told story after story of how their parents had nurtured them and shared their faith with them. They shared heartwarming stories. Beautiful stories.

One woman was silent. I was trying to be a good leader and draw everyone into the conversation. So, I said, “Sarah, do you have any stories to share?”

She sat there for a few seconds in silence and then she said. “Yes, I have stories. I have stories. My father regularly beat me and abused me. My mother knew it was happening and did nothing to protect me. I've never felt any interest in honoring either one of them.”

I don't remember much of what happened next. I can tell that I've never looked at this commandment in quite the same way. I learned that day that some parents don't deserve to be honored.

This is very important to make clear. This commandment is not addressed to minors. This commandment is not addressed to children. Children cannot defend themselves; they cannot speak up for themselves; children have no power. This commandment is addressed to adults. In its original context, this commandment called upon a community of adults to honor and care for their elders.

So, this morning it would be appropriate to focus on how we as a society care for the elderly. We could talk about Medicare and prescription drug programs and nursing homes and hospice. We could analyze how well we do at taking care of the old and frail among us.

We're not going to do that only because today is All Saints Sunday, a special day in the life of the church. Today the commandment to honor our fathers and mothers takes on a particular meaning. On All Saints Sunday, the church remembers all those who have died, but we especially remember those who have shaped our relationship to God. The church has long called such people saints. Today we honor those who nurtured us in faith: our spiritual mothers and fathers.

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspsc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

For many of us the people who raised us also encouraged us in faith. But, for some of us, that's not the case. And, for all of us, the list of those who inspired and cultivated our faith includes more than one or two names.

Who shared the story of God's people with you? Who first told you that God loved you? Those people are our mothers and fathers in the faith. Today we honor these saints.

How do we honor them? By naming them. By talking about them. It is important to talk about the dead. In our culture, such talk is not encouraged. We all have a deep need to speak about our lost loved ones—to remember and to celebrate. Today we honor the saints by saying their names out loud, by sharing stories about them.

We honor the saints by sharing God's love with the world. So many of my saints are folks who gave back to their community, their church. People who did large and small things to make the world a more just and loving place. People who were generous with their time, their gifts, and their money.

Let's return to the fifth commandment. It reads in full, "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." So, if we honor the saints, we live longer? Again, this goes deeper than that. Remember, this commandment is addressed to a community of adults admonishing them to honor their elders, to take care of the old and frail and honor the wisdom and experience of those who have gone before them. When communities do that, they flourish. Another way of putting it—when we stop honoring the saints—when we ignore the insights and intuitions of those who came before us—things go awry. We lose our way.

We honor the saints by honoring the tradition. Honor the tradition. Hmm. I'm not sure about that.

A story. Many years ago, in a Zen temple, every evening during meditation the temple's cat would screech at the top of its voice preventing the monks from concentrating. So, the master teacher ordered that the cat be tied up during the evening meditation. Years later, when the teacher died, the cat continued to be tied up during the meditation session. And, when the cat eventually died, another cat was brought to the monastery and tied up. Centuries later, learned descendants of the master teacher wrote scholarly treatises about the religious significance of tying up a cat during evening meditation practice.¹

That is not the kind of tradition that I am talking about. Honoring the tradition is not about tying up a cat. We honor no one by continuing practices that no longer make sense, that are no longer life giving. Honoring the tradition is all about believing that those who went before us have something to say to us—something of value to pass on to us. It has always been an assumption of the reformed tradition that we have important things to learn from the past. We honor the saints by listening to them.

More than anything, we honor the saints by trying to be one. A saint. One who shares the love of God with others. One who lives a life that is focused on things that matter—community, faith, forgiveness, love.

All this honoring. Do the saints really care if we honor them or not?

Bernard of Clairvaux answered that question back in the 12th century: "The saints have no need of honor from us; neither does our devotion add the slightest thing to what is theirs. Clearly, if we venerate their memory, it serves us, not them. But I tell you, when I think of them, I feel myself enflamed by a tremendous yearning."²

¹ <http://www.katinkahesselink.net/tibet/zen.html>

² J. Robert Wright, ed., *Readings for the Daily Office from the Early Church* (Church Publishing, 1991), p. 496.

Or to put the matter only a little differently:

*O when the saints go marching in,
O when the saints go marching in,
O I want to be in that number,
when the saints go marching in.*

We in the church are pretty strange. We regularly remember the dead. We celebrate the power they have in our lives. We say out loud that we will join them some day. We will die and become not ashes nor dust but a part of the communion of saints.

Right now, I invite you to remember one of your saints. Hear the sound of their voice. See their smile. Feel the touch of their hand. Recall a story about them. Remember a parent or spouse or teacher or colleague or friend who gave you strength and faith and hope and love. Who helped you say “yes” to God. Who was your father or mother in faith.

I’m remembering Sarah, the woman I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon. Sarah had such a rugged childhood. She grew up into an adult known for her compassion and her honesty. She showed me and showed others that the Christian story has something powerful and healing to say to those who have experienced betrayal and brokenness. She died about 10 years ago. She is one my saints.

Today, we give thanks to God for the saints. We honor the saints. And we long to join them someday.

Oh yes, we want to be in that number... when the saints go marching in.