

LESSONS IN LIVING

Honor Thy Roots

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
May 8, 2011

Scripture readings: Proverbs 23:10-11, 22-25; Ephesians 6:1-4 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I wish I could say that when I began this sermon series, I planned for "Honor your Mother and Father" to fall on Mother's Day. Actually, I had no idea. I was just laying it out. So let's start with a confession that while I didn't plan it, it works very well, although some people [from the early service] are questioning whether I really made the link from Mother's Day to the sermon that I gave. You can decide that.

I want to start with that passage and look at how we understand scripture in general-to realize the difference between looking at scripture *as a rule* and looking at it *as a principle* and to also realize what the differences are in religion. I think they are fundamental. I think they are [like] night and day. You can decide for yourself. This passage, "honor your mother and your father," can be understood in ways that make us very small and selfish and [encourage us to] pull back from one another. It can [also] be a foundation out of which we grow to include the whole world. Years and years ago, I ran across this passage. When you graduate from Seminary, people give you books and you are desperate, so you have all these commentaries. I went through and read them. There is one called Clark's Commentary that had some really horrifying interpretations of scripture, and of course, I'm not going to let that go...*(laughter)*, I'm going to share with my friends. *(laughter)* This is from the Clark's Commentary on Exodus, talking about this commandment:

There is no doubt that the untimely deaths of many young persons are the just consequences of their disobedience to their parents. (laughter) Most who come to an untimely end, are obliged to confess this, with the breach of Sabbath as the principal cause for their ruin. Reader, art thou guilty? Humble thyself therefore before God and repent.

Now, see I think that would make a good Hallmark card. *(laughter)* I don't know how you feel about that. I also ran across - and again, - I'm sharing another horrifying place. This is actually from Proverbs. It says:

The eye that mocketh at his father and despiseth to obey his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick out and the young eagles shall eat it.

Now that's scripture. Again, any type of religion can make us smaller, meaner, or can open us and pull us out. I'm going for that second option.

When we take the Ten Commandments literally, in some ways it's easier to get around them.

We looked last week at “Thou shalt not kill,” and there are those who obey that commandment by just beating people half to death. You stop at the boundary line of a terminal beating, and you haven’t violated the sixth commandment. Jesus said that’s not good enough. Jesus said that when you hate another person, your heart is already on that road. He always said shocking things, which appear to contradict the Ten Commandments, to drive us beyond rules and into principles. Can anybody guess where I’m going with this one? The commandment says “Honor thy mother and thy father”, and Jesus says that anyone who does not hate their mother and their father is unworthy to follow me. Not too many preachers are preachers are preaching on that on Mother’s Day. (laughter) Obviously, Jesus doesn’t mean that literally. What he is saying is, when your love of family overwhelms your universal love, it’s not [the kind of love] I’m talking about. We start with our personal relationships, but that has to open into the kind of universal love that Jesus is talking about. If nobody does the whole bag, then we all fight with one another. Maybe we are great with our families, but we turn on others. People are doing that kind of love all over the world. They love their families, they love their countries, but they don’t have the kind of love that ever steps outside of it’s own boundaries and asks “what is this like to someone else?”

What I want to do is look at the difference between rules and principles. *Principle* is a hard word to define. I’ve never seen a really good definition, so I’m not saying my definition will be [anything more] than to get us thinking about this. There are three traits which I think separate principles from rules.

One trait is with the principle, *you remember the reason behind the rule*. You are not just obeying what someone says. You have got the architecture too. Sometimes it looks like you are violating the law when you are really fulfilling the spirit that’s behind it. That’s why Jesus would sometimes shift to the opposite of the Ten Commandments, just to jolt us where we would realize that we have to keep thinking, or something really bad happens.

The second trait is that a principle *needs to be universal*. It needs to be something that works for people outside your boundary. You have to hold yourself to the standard that what you are doing should be good for people on the other side of the equation as well.

The third trait is that it *needs to be something you live out*. It needs to be what animates your life. It’s not something artificial that you pick up and obey. It’s defining who you are as a person. We are going to look at each one of those.

The first is that a principle should bring us to reason. Some people interpret that first commandment as saying, take what your parents taught you and never grow again. Some people look at Seminary like that. You memorize the answers of the dead people and whoever memorizes them best and adds the least, passes and goes ahead. Thomas Paine called that “tyranny of the dead.” We think that dead people had all the answers and that by imitating them we get to the same principle. Nothing is farther from a reformer than to do an imitation of the reformer. You are trying to get the principle that animated them. You are not trying to get their answer necessarily, you are trying to get to the principle that drove their questions.

Now, here is where some people (in our first service) thought I jumped off the track because I had to talk about what happened to bin Laden. I had to. You can’t have something like this happen and not talk about the albatross. I think I’ve got a patch here where it fits together. You can decide whether that’s true or not. I want to use this idea - how we understand something

that we love helps us understand why we have so much that happens to us that we don't love. How we love our families is very important. The man bin Laden has a thousand relatives, so some he loves and some he doesn't, I think. To many people he was a hero. The reason that's incomprehensible to us is because we don't know what we've done to the rest of the world. We don't realize how desperate some people were for something that would limit the misery that we visit on the rest of the world. Most of us don't want to know, but how can we come before the cross, how can we come before the Sermon on the Mount, and be indifferent to the cries outside our boundaries?

Barack Obama announced to the nation that Osama had been brought to justice. I understand the arguments that you have a predator out there and you have to do something about that. But to call a targeted assassination bringing someone to justice, I wonder how that felt to the people who live on the other side of our boundaries, young people, who hear us talk about justice and democracy? Someone decided with no due process, who dies. It's not just Osama. We are targeting other people elsewhere. Our president can do targeted assassinations now. Think of how that would play to you in your life if you weren't on that side.

Think how different it would feel if instead of people dancing in the streets, we had been sad and said we wish we could have brought him to justice, but we couldn't run that risk. We were in the shadow of the Pakistani military and we couldn't risk the people who were going in there, but we are sad that we didn't have the due process that makes America what it is. We will try to do that in the future, but sometimes things are too dangerous. Think how different that would have been from the person who presides over our legal system saying that a killing, an assassination is bringing someone to justice. I think it was very revealing when George Bush sent the congratulations and said this must be a wonderful day for you. *It's the Old West*. We think of ourselves as the good team and we are simply punishing the bad team. The problem is the rest of the world sees it with more nuance. Even those who like us, even those who didn't like Osama bin Laden are looking for a principle that works on both sides of the ledger. They are looking for reason from us and that is what I think we need to give. What does universality look like? What does it look like when the shoe is on the other foot? We are the most powerful nation in the world. We can do what we want. We can cross any boundary. We can just about take out anybody. What is that going to feel like when we are no longer the most powerful nation and somebody does that to us? Somebody decides that George Bush is a war criminal and bombs Dallas. Wouldn't that be the shoe on the other foot? Now it would be a targeted strike, a surgical strike. I love our language. It's a *surgical strike*. How do you do surgery with a hand grenade? I don't understand that. If it explodes, it's not surgical. I'm sorry. It's a hard world, it's a dangerous world. I'm not saying that we need to be naive. I'm also saying that we do not demonstrate that we are the examples of the principles we are talking about, that we betray ourselves from the inside out.

Whatever we mean by the Ten Commandments, whatever it means to honor your parents or your family *has got to be of service to the common good*. Do you know that the Ten Commandments - I don't know how to say this politely - were ripped off from the Code of Hammurabi? So if we interpret that fifth commandment, instead of saying honor your parents, we say *honor your roots*, that's what a principle would be. Honor that depth out of which you come. It is certainly those two people, if it's those two, but it may be one person or it may be not the original people. It may be a family of choice. To honor your roots would be to recognize that Christianity, and Judaism, and Islam all grew out of earlier religions that we now call pagan, but those are our roots. *To honor our roots would be to honor all religions everywhere, and to honor all people*

everywhere.

The roots have got to go down into the earth, the branches have got to stretch across this world or we are going to kill ourselves. Everybody is doing it for good reasons. I'm not saying we are worse or that we are even in the same league as some of the people we call terrorists. What I am saying is that we have so much power that we don't need to be in that same league. All we need to be is negligent and we can kill tens of thousands in a moment. We are that powerful. So we have to hold ourselves to higher standards. We have to stop being the *great exception* and start being the *great example* even if it hurts us as a nation. Either way you go it hurts. Either way you go, people die. What if we develop heroes of peace? We've got tons of heroes of war, tons of heroes of violence. What if we developed more Ghandi's, more Martin Luther Kings - people who are willing to suffer for peace? If we are not willing to suffer for peace we are not going to get it. We will be too afraid. Can the home of the brave find the courage to do the work of peace, or will we pull ourselves down to our little communities, our little families and pull back from one another, going deeper and deeper into the pain and the misery?

The last part of principle is that it needs to become who you are. You have to live out of it. You have to be willing to suffer for it and lose. If you only take up a principle when it's to your advantage, it's not really your principle. If we are only in favor of peace and justice and democracy when there is nothing on the table, and I think that summarizes it, don't you think? As long as there is nothing at stake, we want a democracy, we want justice, we want freedom. Anything that threatens us at all shuts that whole apparatus down. What Jesus was teaching with the example that we symbolize by the cross, long before the cross was [on] cuff links and little medallions, it was the symbol of a threat, of state power, of an empire that told the little people to stay in their place. Jesus said NO with his life. More than that he said YES to all of humankind - that he would not betray us. Like every one of you, I remember 9/11. History did not start at 9/11. That's just when we want to start the clock. Osama bin Laden started the clock when his own people were hurt and humiliated. Can we see that that is the road to more despair, more violence, more disappointment? We have to find a bigger story, a bigger context. That's what we are called to be. What does it mean to say we worship Jesus or even believe in Jesus? There are hundreds of millions of people who believe in Jesus. How hard is that, to believe that Jesus exists? But it is hard to *believe* Jesus, to believe that kindness is more powerful than hate. See if we don't believe that, we need to take the label off of Christian.

Obama's poll ratings went up after the assassination. Was anybody surprised by that? "Well, I guess he was a man after all, he can kill somebody." But do you know that the highest percentage went up among evangelical Christians? What does it mean to say that we follow this person who taught us to turn the other cheek, to forgive, to trust that love is more powerful than violence? What if we trusted love as a power? Not as something we protect with viciousness, but as something that we turn to and trust as our life itself. What if we would not betray our highest principles even if it meant death?

Now, let me say again, I understand the thinking that lead to the killing. I understand that. If I were one of the soldiers in the compound, I would not want to try to tranquilize a body and drag it out, but when we call it *justice*, we lose our bearings. When we dance in the street with joy because we killed an enemy, and when Christian leaders are leading the parade, then something's really wrong.

Years ago, during the Bush administration, I said that you cannot follow these principles and the

principles of Jesus Christ. I want to say that with the principles of Obama. You cannot believe that violence is the answer to the world's problems, and say that turning the other cheek means anything at all. *If we only turn the other cheek when we are safe, then these teachings are not our principles.* They are window dressing, they are rhetoric that we use. There was a certain person who won the Nobel Peace Prize not long ago who used the speech to justify violence. Not that it's a bad person at all, but because they don't believe that love is the strongest force. They believe in violence, and that's very natural, very human to do. We are called to do something deeper and truer and better.

You can decide if I made the patch with Mother's Day or not. *(laughter)* How are we going to understand that verse? What we mean by family, what we mean by love, what we mean by honor has much bigger ramifications for the world than we will ever know. Can we love our family and our church in a way that does not exclude others - that becomes a unit of service for the whole world? Can we have that kind of family where when a couple comes together in marriage there is a celebration that the world is going to be a better place because these two are working shoulder to shoulder? When a child is born into the world can there be the kind of consecration Jesus had where the mother sings a song, "This child is going to bring justice to the poor and to the weak and is going to speak for people for whom nobody else in the world will speak." Now that lead to a very sad ending in that particular story, but it also lead to the hope that has lasted these thousands of years later of somebody who didn't sell us out, and you are called to follow that one above country, above church, above business, above anything. Not because of Jesus, but because of that love. What you are being taught is to realize that your roots go down into the earth, and so you need to honor that. When somebody cuts the roots off with family, or with society, we need to look in the mirror and see what that did to Osama bin Laden. That idea that you just love the people like you when you circle the wagons, you have to see what that did to Osama and then look what it's doing to us. Look what it's doing to us. You start by honoring the people you know, the real people, the mothers, fathers, parents, uncles, aunts, but it has to go deeper and the roots have to keep going deeper into the earth. The branches have to stretch out until at some point you have to realize that this isn't a world of friends and enemies. *This is a world of family and every branch on that tree, no matter how wounded, how dangerous, no matter what we have to do as a response, is our brother and sister.* There is nothing on heaven or earth that should make us let go of that love.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.