The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204
704.333.5428 *www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org*

Live Long and Prosper

Exodus 20:12, Genesis 44-45; Ephesians 6:1-4
Sermon 6 of 14 in Summer Series
The Ten Commandments for the 21st Century: The Calling of Wisdom
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, July 16, 2017
Rev. Martha Dixon Kearse, DMin, Associate Minister

More than any other writer I can think of, Pat Conroy takes on the complexity of the relationship between children and parents head on in just about everything he writes. I saw an interview with him where he talked about the way he returns to those issues, time and again. He said, "My father seemed Zeus-like to me, my mother seemed like Athena—it was something I always appreciated, that I was born into this family of great drama." He said, "If I figure out the trauma of my childhood for myself, who knows? Maybe I will figure it out for the whole world." His first novel, *The Great Santini* (originally titled *The Ace*), tells the story of a Marine pilot and his family, which, according to Conroy, closely resembled his own family. One memorable scene is when the oldest son defeats his father for the first time in a game of one-on-one basketball. With his usual bad grace and poor sportsmanship, the father, Bull Meecham, refuses to accept the defeat, and changes the rules—"You have to win by two!" he says. His son, Ben, replies, "You said one." Until Bull threatens her, his wife stands up to him. His other children know him to be a poor sport and a bully, but run away when he threatens them. When Ben will not play his father any more, his father follows him up the stairs to his bedroom, bouncing the ball against his head, saying, "I'll bet you're going to cry now. Come on, cry. Squirt a few." Throughout the story, Bull Meecham proves himself, again and again, to be one of the central issues of suffering in the life of his own family.

This theme is one of a few which Pat Conroy gnaws at in almost everything he has written. He takes up Southern culture, and its propensity towards secrecy; he takes up race, and the damaging ways prejudice and oppression affect every single person in the culture; he takes up art and music, and the difficulties of being a male person in the South who appreciates them; and he takes up family, specifically the issues of parents so caught up in themselves that they cannot give their children the

unconditional love the children need. When we talk about this commandment, "Honor your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you," we, too, run up against several issues. First of all, who are your father and mother? For some people, that is relatively straightforward: the two people who conceived and gave birth to them are also the two

people who raised them. Ok. But at no time in history has that been the full story. In medieval times, boys were often given over to other houses to be raised and taught to fight. Through history, children have often been used as hostages or slaves to settle issues between their parents, and then grow up away from the place of their birth. Things happen, and people are raised by grandparents or older siblings or family friends. Even Opie Taylor was raised by his father and his father's Aunt Bee.

Another significant question raised by this commandment is, "What does it mean to 'honor?'" Quite often, "honor" is made synonymous with "obey," as in the household codes read for you from the book of Ephesians. And, certainly, obedience is called for in several places in the Bible as a thing that children owe their parents. Anyone who has lost their mind answering the question, "Why?" from a child, until they are finally driven to the last defense of the tired parent: "Because I said so!" understands that children must be taught to simply obey their parents. It's a matter of vision, really. When a person is small, they can only see knee-caps. And knee-caps are both boring and the least likely source of danger in the life of a child. Instilling in children the belief that parents should be obeyed, simply because they can see what's coming, is necessary for the continuation of the species. Children, while they are beautiful and delightful, are, shall we say, short-sighted. I personally spent a great deal of my childhood standing on the edges of mountains, saying to my poor, beleaguered mother, "It's fine! I won't fall!" until she finally would say, "Martha Ann Dixon you step back from that edge this instant!" Knowing that the next thing to happen would not be good—and might not be a big improvement over actually falling off the edge—I always stepped back.

But is "honoring" parents exactly the same as obedience? At some point, parents stop having better vision than their children. Interestingly, it tends to correspond to the time when parents actually cannot see well anymore. Just about the time reading glasses are an absolute necessity, children reach a point where they can see where they are going better than we can, don't they? They see through those romantic lenses of youth—that rosy future that is out there, somewhere—just past the vision of their parents. And the parent, who, by this time, has invested quite a bit of money, effort, and blood, sweat and tears in this kid, tries to say things like, "Is a motorcycle the best idea for transportation around New England?" or "Do we want to put a tattoo there?" And really, by that point, the decision is not the parents' to make, is it? Part of the job of a parent is to equip a child to become a functioning adult, able to use his or her own vision and make their own decisions, and, of course, their own mistakes.

The Hebrew word which we translate as "honor," is a very interesting one. It comes from a root, *kavad*, which means heavy or weighty—it has to do with mass. And so *kavad* can have a negative sense, like weighing something down, or making it dull, but it can also have the sense of something being given its appropriate weight—its due respect—something being given the weight it deserves.

So to honor parents, then, is to give them their due—the weight they deserve. I find this a very appropriate image—parents can be weighty things. Those of you who grew up in this church and still worship here—do you hear your parents' voices in your ear every Sunday morning? Those of you who grew up elsewhere, but also grew up in church—what voice do you hear when you do not go to church on a Sunday morning? You may be happily relaxing on a beach or a golf course or a mountainside somewhere, but I'll bet you anything there is a moment when you hear that voice that says, "Why aren't you in church?" Parents lay many expectations on their children: achievement, excellence, hard work, community service, being a "good" person—and all of this while becoming independent and making a living that allows you to leave their house and stay gone. And their expectations are not always the best, or even accurate, assessments of their children's gifts or pathway in life.

The final question that this commandment poses for me is about this promise/threat that accompanies it: "that your days may be long on the land the Lord has given you." This sounds very much like something my mother would say. As in, "Come into the house, that your days may be long in this house that I have given you;" or "Eat those turnip greens, that your days may be long…etc." Out of context, it seems like a weird promise to make—observably, everyone who listens to their parents or takes good care of their parents does not live to a ripe old age. That doesn't work. Neither does it work to look for those who clearly dishonor their parents—they do not necessarily die young. Through the trajectory of the biblical story, though, this idea of how to live a good, long, abundant life is a recurring theme. In the Old Testament, it is tied to Wisdom—it is one of the promises of Proverbs 8. In the New Testament, it is connected to Jesus, who fills fish nets and bread baskets, and heals lepers and crippled people and blind people, and is all about wholeness and abundant life. Not only that, but this metaphor of parenting pervades the text as well—the story of the people of God begins with the promise of becoming parents; sibling rivalry, parental blessings, parental favorites, poor decisions of parents, good decisions of parents—so many of our stories are about children and their parents. And then, here comes Jesus, who calls God "Abba," or "Daddy;" an intimate name, the name of a beloved, warm, protective father.

The first three commandments have one central theme in common: God is beyond humans, beyond names, beyond comprehension. Our God is a worthy God, by virtue of God's immense nature and God's love for humanity. And God is not to be trifled with—respect for God is God's due. Giving God God's due is the central idea of those first commandments, and then, with this one, we transition into the human world. Honoring God involves not putting anything above God, and avoiding acts of disrespect or neglect. The fourth commandment brings humans into the mix—it recognizes our need to rest from the world, to turn our eyes to God and provide for ourselves a few moments when the scrabbling voices are quieted. And after respect for the God of all the universe, who is next on the list?

Parents. Wow. That's right—there is something significant to notice here. There is no mention of governments or leaders; no mention of clergy or bishops or popes; no mention of teachers or professors or bosses or masters or grand poobas of anything. Next on the list of those worthy of the weight of respect is parents—and then no one else. That is the path to abundant life—God first, parents next, and then no one else. The rest of the commandments can be summarized as "Try not to hurt each other! Good luck!" Allison pointed out to me this week that the Star Trek gesture for "live long and prosper" was Leonard Nimoy's idea—it came from a gesture made by Orthodox rabbi's as a blessing—the fingers for a shape which resembled the letter "shin," the first letter in "*Shaddai,"* which means "almighty." It seems appropriate to invoke that here, when we are talking about giving the appropriate respect to God and to those who raised us, in return for a prosperous, abundant life.

During this period of worship, you've been asked to think of those who have parented you—the many people who gave you their love and attention and molded you into the person that you are. I have called their names to myself often this week: besides Tim and Barbara there were Althea, and Betty, and Lilly, and Gracie, and Hugo, and Wally, and Lee and Mary Alice, and Pete, and Henry and Anna Lynn—there was Charlotte and Mary Liz and Bud and Carmen and Nancy Rae--and beyond them were Mary Sue and Harry and Herman and Frona—on and on and on. And honoring them is not the same as agreeing with them or doing what they want. Herman didn't believe in evolution. Charlotte thinks I should wear quite a bit more make-up. Nancy Rae liked Reagan. But each of them gave me something I hold, something I have bought into that serves me well and contributes to my abundant life. We know this, here in our family. We know this, living, as we do, in community with each other. We know the absolute abundance of having multiple mothers, multiple fathers, who reign us in and protect us and guide us and mold us, and then set us free.

The movie of Conroy's novel, *The Great Santini*, ends with the family moving out of yet another house after their father died in a tragic accident during a trial flight. Bull Meecham dies because, in order to keep his plane from crashing into a populated area, he has to stay in the cockpit to get it over the water—he can't punch out in time. And on moving day, Ben wakes his family up in the middle of the night, the exact same way his father did. He settles them all into the car. And he gets behind the wheel, ready to be the one who takes responsibility for getting his sleeping family safely to their next place. Conroy rejects violence, he rejects abuse, he rejects bullying, and poor sportsmanship, but he does not reject the father and, without pretending that the bad wasn't there, embraces that which he can honor, holding onto what works, what is right for him. Parents are complicated. They are people, and people are complicated. And so honoring parents is complicated. But looking for the blessings parents want to give us, and receiving that blessing, whatever it may be, is a pathway to healing, a pathway to wholeness, and a promise of life, more life than we can possibly imagine.