



Title	⇒ Those Who Rocked The Cradles (10 Commandments Series)
Scripture	Exodus 20: 1-12
Minister	The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place	Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
Date	November 6 th , 2011
Calendar	Remembrance Sunday (All Saints')
Note	This text is an approximate rendering

Minister: Peace be with you
Congregation: And also with you



September 18th, 1916. A letter from France. Bill Kittmer to his mother in Ontario.¹

Dear Mother:

I suppose you have received my card by now saying I was wounded, I just got a piece of shrapnel in the chest, am doing fine. Expect to be out of the Hospital soon.

We were all in the reserve trench when a shell burst and hit ten of us. There was only one badly hurt and he will be in the Hospital for a couple of months.

I will send the piece that hit me home so as you can see it. Well Mother, this is all for now so will close.

With love to all I remain

Your Loving son,

Bill

A son to a mother.

Certain moments in time carry more than their fair share of weight. Technically time moves at the same 24-hour pace. The air is still made up of things like nitrogen and oxygen. But something eternal seems to perfume our senses, lifting us up to another place—despite our surroundings masquerading in the same outfits as the day before. Christmas Eve is one of those times. A hospital room with a new sleeping baby is one of those times. The eleventh day of the eleventh month at the eleventh hour is one of those times. Time moves on, on-schedule. But something is different. The air is heavy. It has weight.

Our worship this morning includes yet another layer that contributes to this unique heaviness. We've been voyaging through the 10 commandments. We have spent time with the first four, those directing our attitudes toward Lord Almighty, the Producer of this beautiful yet bruised creation. After that we paused to remind ourselves that the commands are not rules for getting saved, but guides for holy and gratitude-filled living in the tail wind of a God who has breathed the gift of freedom into our dust-filled lungs. And then today we turn to first of the last six commands, those illuminating us about how to live with one another. Here's what Exodus 20 says:

“Honour your father and your mother,
so that your days may be long
in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.”

So it is as if our worship is holding two things in its hands: in one, the solemn remembrance of those who have served and lost lives in the pursuit of a better world and with the hope of peace, and in the other, this command to honour our fathers and mothers. At first glance they don't seem to be too closely related. But they are.

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A letter from somewhere in France. June 18th, 1917. Clarence Gray Fisher to his Mom.²

Dear Mother,

I rec'd your parcel and two bundles of papers today and one letter today and one yesterday... Yes I was in that battle you were asking me about. I was one of the lucky ones. What that fellow says about Raymond DeCoste is about right as far as what I heard. He was coming down a communication trench and a "Whizz Bang" landed pretty handy to him and a piece of shell casing hit him on the hip. He said he had a good "Blighty" and did not think he was hurt bad but he died the next day.

I was out about two miles today to the gas school to get a gas mask. As it was so warm I went in my shirt sleeves. I was just coming back when it started to rain and thunder all in about a minute when the sun was out as bright as a silver dollar...

I will close now with love to all from your ever loving son,

Clarence.

P.S. Would you mind sending me a thin sweater with short arms in it. They are the clear thing for here. The cigarettes were good and glad to get them. Am receiving all my parcels, now.

A son to a mother. The Scripture says, "Honour your father and mother." Because it's not just about what we can see today. It's about the world God is making through us for those yet unborn.

That's the connecting piece. The thing that connects this command to honour our fathers and mothers to this special Sunday of Remembrance, is that they are both very concerned with the well-being of the world God is making through us for those yet unborn. Honouring our parents is also about teaching our children about the centrality of the building block of the family in his world. Honouring those who suffered in wars in the gut-wrenching and long journey to peace is about teaching our children about valuing a future built on that very peace. They are both about a better tomorrow—one that we cannot always see in this lifetime.

In Hebrew, the word from Exodus 20 "to honour" means to give weight; to respect; to recognize someone's place of priority and prominence in our lives. We honour God, meaning we respect him; we recognize his place of priority and prominence in our lives, thereby giving him weight in the metaphorical sense. So then we honour our mothers and our fathers, meaning we are to respect them; that we are to recognize their place of priority and prominence in our lives.

As I explored Scripture and researched this commandment it became evident that part of the reason this command is the first of those teaching us about how to live in relationship with one another is because the parent-child relationship is foundational to so much else that goes on later in life. Child psychologists tell us that a young person's capacity to grow up trusting in God is often connected to whether or not that child grew up being able to trust a parent. Before we have friends, we have parents. Before we even know we are a human being, we have parents. Before we consciously know that a God exists, we have parents. Parents are the portal through which we shake hands with life. "Honour your father and your mother," it says. Give them weight. Respect them. Recognize their place of priority and prominence in your life.

I imagine the world of the ancient Hebrews, just having been freed from prison and beginning their wandering journey through the wilderness behind their leader Moses on the way to a new home. Next to the Lord, parents were almost everything. And this is in *addition* to the things we would call normal like love and discipline! There were no schools, and so parents taught their children. There were no safety nets, and so

parents protected the family. There were no synagogues (and definitely no churches), and so parents taught them to worship and serve. There were no arenas and community centres, and so parents nurtured fun and exploration. In so doing, they taught their children how to do it. They taught their children what to carry into a future they would not see—after they were gone, lying somewhere in the ground.

We all know who Mother Theresa is. One of the simplest things she said—something so practical and useful in day-to-day living, was also something of great depth. She said, “Children need to learn to pray, and they need to have their parents pray with them. If we don’t do this, it will be difficult to become holy.” And so—“Honour your father and your mother,” it says. Give them weight. Respect them. Recognize their place of priority and prominence in your life. Because it’s not just about honouring them; it’s about teaching the next generation what to carry into a future we will not see.

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But I know. Families are complex. Relationships with parents can be complex. It was Robert Brault who said, “The thing about family disasters is that you never have to wait long before the next one puts the previous one into perspective.” Yes, we have very positive feelings sometimes. But we also can have some negative ones. And further outside the boundaries of what we call positive and what we call negative are simply trials that are neither good nor bad, but which we have to deal with day-to-day. Times of yelling. Times of serious disagreement and feuds that fade or feuds that stay. Times of wondering how to care for someone who needs a level of medical attention you cannot provide. Times of disappointment. Times of anxiety and judgment and wanting acceptance and that unconditional love that everyone else seems to get but which you yourself question.

It can be a complex relationship. And God knows it. This honouring acknowledges that this man and woman—this mother and father we call our own—despite any foibles and warts they may have were used by God to bring us into this world to experience his unique gift of life. We honour them, in part, because God chose them to be the gateway for us into his creation and into his arms. “Honour your father and mother,” it says. Give them weight. Respect them. Recognize their place of priority and prominence in your life.

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Author Philip Yancey tells of a life-changing experience when he visited Russia in 1991—a country then in a free-fall. Much has changed in Russia since that time, but Yancey comments on how there was a lack of trust in the air—a sense of foreboding about pretty much everything. Grown adults walked around with their heads sulked, disillusioned at everything they had been promised. This is the aftermath of a near 70-year program in which, among other things, the church had faced persecution. But in response to his visit in 1991 here is what he writes, having witnessed some new, life-lifting freedoms: “I heard from ordinary citizens who now relished their freedom to worship. Most had learned about the faith from a *babushka*, an old grandmother. When the state cracked down on the church, it ignored this group: let the old women sweep the floors and sell the candles and cling to the traditions until they all die off, they reasoned. The aged hands of the *babushki*, though, rocked the cradles. Young churchgoers today often say they first learned about God in childhood through the hymns and stories Grandma would whisper as they drifted off to sleep.”³

“Honour your father and mother,” it says. Give them weight. Respect them. Recognize their place of priority and prominence in your life. Because before they were parents, they too were someone’s child. Before they had friends, they too were someone’s child. Before they even knew they were a human being, they too were someone’s child. Before they consciously knew that a God existed, they too were someone’s child. Their parents were the portal through which they came to shake hands with life.

When we honour our parents we are teaching our children what to take into a future we will not see. This is an outlook shared with the soldiers and veterans we acknowledge today. We honour them. And how we

honour, teaches our children about what to take into a future we may not see. We teach them the deep and abiding hope of God which is peace.



Two years ago I attend a conference outside of Orillia as a part of this denomination's response to the abuses which happened in the Indian Residential Schools. We gathered: Indigenous peoples as well as representatives from a variety of Christian denominations to seek paths of reconciliation in what was a legacy of abuse and, for many Christian churches, embarrassment. As the conference moved forward, we realized one of the main things motivating all of us. We are concerned for what is going on with other peoples, quite simply because we are all someone's child. Before we are nurses or teachers or ministers or engineers or administrators or retirees or whatever, we are someone's child. We heard stories about how a native child had died in a residential school and how no one had bothered to tell the parents until they came to pick them up for the summer—months later! The presenter said, "These were our children!" We also heard stories from survivors who said they wanted people to know that not all school experiences were bad. They said there were some wonderful teachers and wonderful students, and relationships that blossomed as a result—relationships that were now tarnished because they were cast in the same pale as those more rare experiences of abuse. All of these people, we acknowledged, are somebody's children.

To me, this came to the fore with greatest potency when speaking with a local elder. He said that when the elders or band gets together to make a decision about something one of the key questions they ask is "How will this affect our children seven generations from now?" Can you imagine how we might make decisions differently about life, about energy policy, about church, about our families, about war, about what we do every day if we asked, "How will this affect our children seven generations from now?"

Because it's not just about what we can see in the here and now. It's about the world God is making—through us—for those yet unborn. It's a simple command, really—"Honour your father and mother." Because these are the shoulders on which we stand as we move into a future we cannot see—a future for our children.



¹ Accessed from <http://www.pastvoices.com/canada/kittmer1916.shtml> on November 1, 2011.

² Accessed from <http://www.pastvoices.com/canada/fish19171806.shtml> on November 1, 2011.

³ As told in: Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 256.