

SERMON TITLE: "Ten Commandments 5 & 6: Respect Other People"
SERMON TEXT: Exodus 20:1-13
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: January 21, 2018, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

We have a convergence of emphases today. One of those is the emphasis on Ending Child Homelessness. The Coalition of Religious Communities has asked congregations all over Utah to include this important cause in our worship today. You can see and hear this emphasis in some of our prayers and hymns. Our Sunday School children are making a poster today about this cause, and I hope a number of you will be going with me to the state capitol on Thursday to present our concerns to the governor and legislators. No child should have to live without a safe and stable home.

As you can see from the special offering envelope in your bulletin, another emphasis today is our Human Relations Day offering. Every January, on a Sunday close to Martin Luther King, Jr., Day, United Methodist churches all around the country collect these extra offerings for our work against racism and poverty and for the improvement of human relations.

These two emphases go well with our two commandments for today. At the beginning of this new year, we started a sermon series on the Ten Commandments. We've been covering two of them each week. On January 7, we summed up commandments one and two by saying that we should "worship God first and only." Last Sunday, we reminded ourselves not to "make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God," and to "remember the Sabbath day, and keep it holy." Those important ways to "practice holy living" now lead us on to commandments five and six.

The way I see today's pair is like this: "Honor your father and mother" is the tall goalpost at one end of a football field, "You shall not murder" is the goalpost at the other end, and every other kind of human relationship and interaction gets played out on the big field somewhere in between. As we

contemplate “Honor your father and your mother” and “You shall not murder,” let’s see how these divine goalposts can help us “respect other people.”

1—OBVIOUS MEANINGS

This week I heard someone say, “Well, there are just some things that are pretty clear, like the fact that you shouldn’t murder anyone.” The guy’s point was obvious. There are some things that seem to be black-and-white, cut-and-dry, sure-fire, no-doubt-about-it. Both these commandments—to honor your parents and not to murder—seem like that. Of course, these goalpost rules are right. In fact, they’re so obvious that it really makes sense that they are two of the classic Ten Commandments written in stone. Or, conversely, they seem so simple, so innately understood by us, that we might wonder why they even had to be written down at all. Shouldn’t these two laws have been like what the Prophet Jeremiah wrote when he described God’s new covenant that wouldn’t need to be taught because it would be written on our hearts? (Jer. 31:33).

Well, hopefully, that’s true for us. Hopefully, most of our hearts intuitively grasp the message of “Honor your father and your mother” and “Do not murder.” And, hopefully, our application of these two laws goes very smoothly throughout our long lives. Hopefully, we never forget to send a Mother’s or Father’s Day card or to make those important phone calls and visits. Hopefully, we can always treat our parents with honor and give them the appreciation, attention, and care that they deserve until their dying day. And hopefully, there has never been and never will be a time when we cut short *any* person’s life by an act of murder.

But I know from personal experience that what’s obvious in ideal theory or during the good times of life may become less obvious when push comes to shove and when the rubber hits the road. When we’re tired, when we’re afraid, or when we’re tired of feeling afraid; when our perceptions and abilities are altered by illness, medications, or illicit drugs; when we become responsible for children, siblings, or spouse; when we’re stressed out by work; when our job entails policing the community or

military action for the country; when past emotional trauma threatens us in the present day; or when we're in a current and immediate situation of danger—all these different circumstances can add complexity, blur the lines, and add shades of grey to what previously seemed so black and white. Whenever we feel like we're between a rock and a hard place, in a no-win situation, where we have to choose the lesser of two evils, or our reactions are by instinct—the grey area in the middle of the field may be where we find ourselves.

2—NOT-SO-OBVIOUS TIMES

So, let's talk about those not-so-obvious times on the spectrum of human relations. What does it mean to obey these commandments in less-than-ideal circumstances?

I think all of us would agree that the 17-year old California girl who escaped her parents' house last Sunday and called 911 to rescue her 12 siblings from a wretched existence did exactly what she had to do. Despite what the parents probably drilled into their children about obeying their authority, those 13 children desperately needed to disobey and reveal the horrors they had endured at their parents' hands. *In situations of abuse, the safety of the vulnerable always outranks the honor of the powerful.*

As a society, we're becoming more aware of the long-lasting and serious damage of child abuse. My husband Steve and I learned this personally when we adopted our children Angie and Oscar from the country of Colombia. At 8 and 6 years old, they had already suffered malnutrition, neglect, homelessness, and physical and sexual abuse. It's quite likely that they were also exposed in utero to alcohol or other drugs. By adopting Angie and Oscar and bringing them into a good and loving home in the United States, we thought we had rescued those little waifs from their difficult life.

Unfortunately, though, they brought their trauma with them and acted out their pain in every way they could. Consequently, parenting those two emotionally-damaged children was very challenging. Despite how much I perceived myself as a patient and peaceable person, parenting in the trenches like that didn't always bring out my best. In fact, I saw the dark side of myself rear its ugly head

in some ways that scared me. In fear, frustration, and physical danger, I discovered that the potential to react violently is not so far removed from me as I had always supposed. I worried that I might lose control of the person I believed myself to be. I realize our family situation was outside the norm, but I've heard enough other people talk about the stresses of parenting to know that, even in families without a history of trauma, less-than honorable feelings, words, and actions can easily be expressed.

When children are young, their parents are the ones with the most power and responsibility for developing good family relationships. Ephesians 6:4 acknowledges this by counseling, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger." But, as the children grow up and the parents age, the power shifts. Then it becomes the responsibility of the adult children to care for their parents well. That can be difficult too. It can be difficult for aging mom to admit that she needs help caring for her home. It can be difficult for aging dad to admit that he should stop driving. Often it's hard for older parents to trust that the younger generation is capable of stepping up and carrying responsibilities, or that they know what they're talking about when they counsel their parents in matters of health and finances. And so, sometimes, parents and children enter into conflict, and it's hard to maintain that honor and respect that our elders are due. Unfortunately, some in the younger generations do take advantage of their parents and grandparents, causing abuse and neglect and, sometimes, even premature death. Negotiating the trials and tribulations of parent-child relationships isn't always simple. It often takes place on that human relations spectrum somewhere in between honoring one another and wringing each other's neck. Hopefully, for most of us, it's closer to honor and very far from murder.

3—COMMANDMENTS APPLY TO FAMILY OF ALL GOD'S CHILDREN

I've spent most of this sermon talking about family relationships, but the playing field between honoring a person and murdering them also applies to the larger family of all God's children. When we move out into the community, we face the fact that we need to respect other people of all different types. Older, younger; richer, poorer; darker, lighter; taller, shorter; Christian, non-Christian; more-

educated, less-educated; employed, disabled, and retired; native-born, pioneers, and immigrants; renters, homeowners, and homeless; male, female, and the whole gender and sexual-orientation alphabet. We dare not assume, just because someone is different from us, that they deserve less respect or that their lives don't matter as much as ours.

It's really great that God gave the obvious and clear commandments that stand tall like goalposts at either end of the human relations spectrum. But we dare not forget all the messy life in between. That's where our United Methodist Human Relations Offering and Ending Child Homelessness effort come in handy. Those are good reminders that we're also supposed to care about all the people and situations in the middle. Just because a person isn't our beloved parent who gave us birth doesn't mean we should belittle, ignore, or demoralize them. And just because we aren't committing murder doesn't mean our hurtful or neglectful attitudes and behaviors are OK. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus noted this field of human relations by teaching, "You have heard that it was said . . . 'You shall not murder' . . . but I say to you that if you are angry with" or "insult a brother or sister" or don't resolve conflicts with your accusers, "you will be liable to judgment" (MT 5:21-26).

CONCLUSION

And that brings me back to where I started this sermon. If, as a society, we're going to keep bearing children, then we need to honor them and their parents enough to make sure they have safe and affordable homes to live in. And since we're all children of God, then we need to learn how to relate to each other in ways that don't demean and dehumanize. When considered together, as the ends of a spectrum, I believe commandments five and six present a call, a commandment, in fact, to look beyond the obvious simplicity of black and white. For all those grey area situations on the playing field of life, God commands us to respect other people.