

Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother

(Sermon at Beaverkill Community Church, 6/16/2019)

Today, of course, is Fathers' Day in the United States as established by federal law in 1972. Fathers' Day, as such, however, was celebrated from the early Middle Ages as a part of the Feast of Saint Joseph the Father.

Also today we confront a hard-to-understand Gospel reading from John that seemingly has little to do with this subject of fathers except that Jesus, the Christ, actually refers to God as a "father" in this passage: "When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth . . . All that the Father has is mine"

So, who is the father, the progenitor, including of Creation? This is a difficult question not only in theological terms, but also in very human, practical concerns. I am sure you recall the story that Joseph learned that Mary would bear a child that Joseph knew could not be his offspring but that an angel told him not to get upset because the child had been conceived by the Holy Spirit. Pretty cold comfort, . . . except that a wise man does not get into a fight with an angel.

This type of paternal anxiety is not a new problem. The Jews solve this problem by accepting into the tribe any person born of a Jewish mother: the husband might be Jewish, but the father, maybe not. Who knows for sure? English common law solves this problem with an irrebuttable evidentiary presumption of legitimacy: the husband is the father, period, even if he is 99 years old, bed-ridden and impotent: So much for

seeking the Spirit of truth in the law. As the saying goes, I know I am the father because my wife says so and she is an honorable woman. Today we try to solve this problem with birth control, no fault divorce, single motherhood, welfare and support checks, and a quick DNA test which did not even exist few years ago. Does the god of science thus bring on the Spirit of truth? What does the Lord of Hosts have to say to man on this subject?

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you," this being the Fifth of the Ten Commandments of the Law of Moses set forth in the Torah at Exodus Chapter 20, verse 12.

Now there are those who insist that the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, cannot be accepted literally and in any event is just not up to date, particularly with respect to Commandments that can be very, very hard to follow, and especially in the modern times when we think we know so much more about good and evil than our ancestors knew.

Lest there be any doubt that the this fifth Law of Moses was brought forth into the Christian Era, Jesus Christ himself affirms the Fifth Commandment in five passages of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Here is Matthew 19:16-19 in which Jesus repeated five of the Ten Commandments, followed by the Golden Rule:

"And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder,

Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself."

Here we see Jesus, the Christ, validating the old prophets, starting with Moses, and receiving the old rules and the old revelation and wisdom which brought them forth.

Indeed, the Jewish philosophers in the Talmud point out that there are three partners in the creation of a human life, God and the two parents. Hence, honor given to parents is similar to the honor given to God.

Here is an uncanny observation on point from a compendium of writings of Jewish tradition:

"Honor the body that bore thee and the breasts that gave thee suck, maintain thy parents, for thy parents took part in thy creation. For man owes his existence to God, to his father, and to his mother, in that he receives from each of his parents five of the parts of his body, and ten from God. The bones, the veins, the nails, the brain, and the white of the eye come from the father. The mother gives him skin, flesh, blood, hair, and the pupil of the eye. God gives him the following: breath, soul, light of countenance, sight, hearing, speech, touch, sense, insight, and understanding... but if people do not honor their parents, God will say: "It is good that I do not dwell among men, or they would have treated Me superciliously, too."

How did they know and express this? Today we have just recently learned that human life is, indeed, composed of a 50-50 exchange of the genetic codes of the mother

and the father. How did they figure this out before scientific inquiry discovered and confirmed it? I must quickly add that we have yet to figure out how the human soul becomes infused in the vessel of the body.

We live among men and women, but there is no father, or mother, unless there is a child. Then the parents become the temporary custodians of a new life, separate from themselves. They struggle to have the means to survive with their child and to teach the child and steer the child into good choices and the path of righteousness. There is much uncertainty and turmoil in this process. I recall one of Sally's and my neighbors who had six daughters admonishing one of our three sons, who will go unnamed: "Now listen, boy, I know exactly what you are thinking about my daughter, and don't you dare!" I must say, though, I suspect she was saved by the pill. Someone knows.

And will they ever learn? The first trillionaire in the world will be the one who successfully defends a patent for a pill that keeps your children from making the same dumb mistakes that you made as a child. This thought reminds me of a Mark Twain anecdote about a young man who went off to a distant college. One of the reasons he left home was that his father was an ignorant and tyrannical man. When finally he returned home four years later, a friend asked how he was getting along with his father. "Very well," he answered, "It is amazing to me how much the Old Man learned in only four years."

At the last though, it is, certainly for me, the transcendental joy in fatherhood that overcomes the work, struggle, anxiety and tumult in the relationship to the child. The best expression of this joy that I

have encountered is a passage in a 1952 autobiography, Witness, by Whittaker Chambers.

Briefly in background, Chambers describes a confused and unhappy childhood in then rural Long Island, during which his younger brother attempted suicide three times, the last time with success. That suicide and the calamity of World War I convinced him to join the Communist Party and from that platform both found his wife and was recruited into the Soviet-directed revolutionary underground which was in a long process of infiltrating the United States government. The horrors of Stalin's purges caused an epiphany in which he embraced Christianity, became a Quaker, broke with the Communist underground, and for years went into hiding with his wife and child, fearing assassination. He carefully reentered society as a staff writer for Time Magazine, becoming a Senior Editor in ten years. On learning of the Hitler Stalin non-aggression pact shortly before the outbreak of World War II, he arranged a confession of his activities to government officials, but was ignored. After the War, particularly as a result of the Yalta Conference and the emergence of the Cold War, he became a witness in the many investigations, hearings and trials that endeavored to expose the extent of Soviet spying and infiltration.

But, one day in 1933, believing that no good Communist revolutionary agent should bring a child into the horrors of a 20th century world, Chambers' wife announced that she was pregnant. Chambers writes:

"No man can hear from his wife, especially for the first time, that she is carrying his child, without a physical jolt of joy and pride. I felt it. But so sunk were we in that life that it was only a passing

joy, and was succeeded by a merely momentary sadness that we would not have the child."

Nonetheless, coming back from arranging an abortion, he writes:

"my wife came over to me, took my hands, and burst into tears. 'Dear heart,' she said in a pleading voice, we couldn't do that awful thing to a little baby, not to a little baby, dear heart.' A wild joy swept me. Reason, the agony of my family, the Communist Party and its theories, the wars and revolutions of the 20th century crumbled at the touch of the child. . . . If the points on the long course of my break with Communism could be retraced, that is probably one of them. . . ."

Months later the child is born alive after days of agonizing labor. Chambers writes:

"She was scarcely out of the anesthetic, and reeking of ether, when I sat beside her bed. As I looked at her white, hollowed face, and the deep, leaden circles beneath her eyes, and felt her feverish fingers, I thought, 'What have I done to her?' At that moment, I cared only for my wife and nothing at all for the child. My wife kept urging me feebly to go and look at it. She wanted me, of course, to approve and love what had so nearly cost her life. . . . Through a glass panel, . . . I peered into the antiseptic nursery She was sleeping. Her long lashes lay against her cheeks She was beautiful I went back to my wife who was no longer only my wife but the mother of our child --- the child we all yearn for, who, even before her birth, had begun, invisibly, to lead us out of that darkness, which we could not even realize, toward that light, which we could not even see." AMEN.