



First Congregational Church (UCC) of Ashfield
429 Main Street – Ashfield MA 01330
Creating Community, Welcoming All

Sermon March 7, 2021 “A Consuming Commandment” Rev. David Jones

Our readings from Exodus and John are both very familiar and famous episodes in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In Exodus we read a portion of the ten commandments; the last one we read today is that in this life we are commanded to honor our mothers and fathers. I sometimes struggle to speak about this commandment, because I know that not all people have positive relationships with their parents. It may be that disobeying or ‘dishonoring’ their parents--going against their wishes or their expectations--is exactly what God has called a child to do, that they may be set free to be as God made them to be. At the same time, it is clearly an important commandment, repeated many times throughout scripture. And it does resonate for many of us. Many of us have been well-loved by our parents. And so, many of us live our lives always with their opinion of us, their feelings toward us, their well-being first and foremost in our minds. We want them to be proud of us; we try to live our lives in a way that will make them proud of us. And this certainly seems to be the case for Jesus; it is this commandment to honor “his Father” that he is consumed by in our reading from John today. When Jesus becomes angry and lashes out at the money changers--when he turns an idle cord into a stinging whip--he explains that he does so because they have had the gall to turn “his Father’s house” into a marketplace. The action Jesus takes can strike us as violent, intemperate--it doesn’t square with our common depictions of Jesus that have him looking more like an angel. So today I want to invite us to use our imaginations, and try to get a better sense of what is happening here in this very famous passage.

I want you to imagine *your* parents, or to imagine a beloved sibling, or your dearest and most trusted family member. And I want you to remember one of those moments in your relationship with them when you have felt utterly safe in their presence, when you have felt warm in their care, when they have been gentle and kind and supportive, when they have affirmed who you are. Remember a time when your father or your mother looked you in the eyes and described you to yourself exactly as you hope to be described; remember a time when they saw you as you hope to be seen. Imagine this moment now set in the home you grew up in, or in the place you felt most at home growing up.

Now imagine, right after one of these moments in this home, you have to be apart for a time. They are leaving their house maybe to get away with their partner, say for a weekend--they’re away doing something you are really happy they are getting to do, whatever that may be for you. (For me, I can picture my Dad visiting some new town or city and learning all its local history. Or I can picture him sitting comfortably next to his late brother talking politics. I can picture my mom without a worry on her mind returning to the city she grew up in (Calgary, Alberta) helping one of her nieces with boy trouble, or treating one of her dearest friends to a fancy dinner).

And imagine also, while they’re away, sharing themselves with others, doing their own self-actualizing after all the support they have given to you, and you also have a reason to step away from this home that you grew up in. Just for a brief weekend, your parents’ house sits empty; this wonderful home, the source of all the light and love that radiates in you and in your siblings, is going to be

temporarily unoccupied. Picture that warm home, that paradise, that Eden, sitting quietly, with all the great toys from your childhood, the great pictures, the well-loved furniture, the basketball net in your driveway, getting their own time as patient objects to quietly witness all that your parents have given you.

And then suddenly into that quiet paradise an intruder breaks in. Someone breaks in who has forgotten any concept of family obligations, someone who was once loved but took that love totally for granted and turned away from it. This person treats *your parent's* house like it is theirs and starts inviting people in. And all the well-loved objects that you cherish because of how they made a home for you and your family are now being sorted and priced to be sold off. The basketball your father used to teach you to dribble and shoot, its composite grip worn off from years of father-son games--it sells for cheap because of its condition. The eden of a loving home has been mistaken for an opportunity to make a quick buck.

Sometimes people read this passage in the gospel accounts and are troubled that Jesus, returning to his own Father's house now turned into this crude marketplace, resorts to something that looks an awful lot like violence. But I wonder, what would we do if this was happening to the house we grew up in? What if there was no one to go to for help either, because somehow the intruder had persuaded all the guests that this house isn't your parent's after all? That somehow your parents have been displaced and evicted? I find myself thinking of those in our community living in fear of losing their apartment or their home because they're falling behind on their payments. I think of all the images and memories in their minds and hearts of the moments their home bonded them to their parents or siblings or children. I think it would anger Jesus that a home could ever be cordoned off to be sold at auction, that all the spiritually and emotionally rich objects could be robbed of all their beauty and divine meaning by someone who has intruded on a family's home. Jesus would be very angry that a priceless basketball or photo could be so crudely devalued. If Jesus ever came across a home that was wrapped in foreclosure tape, I think he would remake that tape into a whip to drive off the intruders, and restore that home to its true owners, to the father or mother who raised children inside it, who adorned its walls with the signs of love and affection.

We tend to read this passage and either turn away from it, so as not to face an angry, intemperate Jesus, or--if we are willing to see him so upset--we focus on the religious idea here, that churches or synagogues or any house of prayer should not take advantage of its worshippers. We focus on the idea that a house of prayer should not be a den of thieves; it should not be a place of corruption and selfishness. And I think if we read this passage as it appears in Mark and Matthew and Luke, we would be on very solid grounds in this interpretation. But in John, unlike in the other gospel accounts, Jesus does not describe the Temple as a "house of prayer" that has become a den of thieves. He describes the Temple as "my Father's house". And a house can not also be a marketplace.

In John, this is not a struggle over organized religion, it is not a struggle between Jews and followers of Jesus; in John this fight at the temple is a struggle over someone's parent's home--it is an attempt to seize a home *back* from the market. And Jesus is consumed with a zeal to do this, because he remembers the commandment to honor our father and our mother in this life. Is it violent to protect a home? Is it intemperate to do whatever it takes to stop your parent's home from being taken from them, or to stop your children's home from being taken from them? I think we should honor our religious ancestors, and our parent's or those who raised or care for us with love, to make a distinction between violence and self-defense.

In John, Jesus has made a whip to drive out those who would foreclose on his father's home, as any loving child should do. The fact that this courageous and loyal and faithful act, fulfilling one of the most ancient commandments, leads Jesus to the Cross--and leads so many to the cross to this day--should remind us that we have our own cleansing to do.

But this famous episode in the scriptures is good news. Like Jesus, we *are* to honor all of our parents in this life because of the ways they are like God, because of how we owe our very existence to them. In a place and in a time when homes can be taken, where parents can be evicted, Jesus gets very

angry. Jesus won't stand for it. That has been us standing for it. When he is resurrected in our own communities, a sign will be that all of God's children--all of our parents--will have homes to cherish, and in place of long sleepless nights, the ancient promise will finally be fulfilled: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you."

Amen.