

Psalm 119:81-96

- ⁸¹ My soul languishes for your salvation;
I hope in your word.
- ⁸² My eyes fail with watching for your promise;
I ask, 'When will you comfort me?'
- ⁸³ For I have become like a wineskin in the smoke,
yet I have not forgotten your statutes.
- ⁸⁴ How long must your servant endure?
When will you judge those who persecute me?
- ⁸⁵ The arrogant have dug pitfalls for me;
they flout your law.
- ⁸⁶ All your commandments are enduring;
I am persecuted without cause; help me!
- ⁸⁷ They have almost made an end of me on earth;
but I have not forsaken your precepts.
- ⁸⁸ In your steadfast love spare my life,
so that I may keep the decrees of your mouth.
- ⁸⁹ The Lord exists for ever;
your word is firmly fixed in heaven.
- ⁹⁰ Your faithfulness endures to all generations;
you have established the earth, and it stands fast.
- ⁹¹ By your appointment they stand today,
for all things are your servants.
- ⁹² If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my misery.
- ⁹³ I will never forget your precepts,
for by them you have given me life.
- ⁹⁴ I am yours; save me,
for I have sought your precepts.
- ⁹⁵ The wicked lie in wait to destroy me,
but I consider your decrees.
- ⁹⁶ I have seen a limit to all perfection,
but your commandment is exceedingly broad.

Exodus 20:12

12 Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

Sermon

I collect stories about aging, partially, I am sure, because I work in a mainline protestant church, and I'm keenly aware of our ever creeping average age inching up. Partially, I am sure, because part of my calling and work in my own family is to care for my grandmother as she ages, and soon enough to care for my parents and my aunts and uncles, when the time comes. But really, when I am honest with myself, I collect stories about aging because, relatively young as I am, I know it's one of the few human experiences I am all but guaranteed to experience, myself, God willing. And, according to Bette Davis, "Old age ain't no place for sissies."

I collect the stories of my family: my grandfather declining rapidly with Alzheimer's, my grandmother's Parkinson's, the different ways the decisions to stop driving were made on both sides of my family and the different outcomes of those processes. And more than managing aging and physical decline, I collect the stories of what is good: my grama travelling with each of her daughters to far flung locales, the clever and compassionate ways my aunt and uncle use technology to allow my grandma to live safely alone, the different ways each of my grandmothers reacted the death of their husbands, and what that might say for how I could live if I ever find myself in that space.

And stories of being stubborn, simply because it's a gift age has bestowed. Like once, just a few years before her retirement from Kaiser, where she had worked in the accounting division, Gram Betty was given a card to get gas for her company car, but it was at one of the only gas stations in Oregon that's self-service. Well, Grama had never, literally never, pumped her own gas. Heaven forbid! She threatened that if she were asked to ask like a gas station attendant she would arrive at work dressed as one, in a jump suit with "Betty" stitched over the pocket. The next day Grama was granted a card to a full-service gas station, the only member of her team to get one. It was one of those moments where the title "stubborn old bird" feels like the well-earned moniker. I love this characteristic of my grama, and I aspire to be quite so flamboyant and clever in my own stubborn aging someday.

But, of course, it's not just stories of my family. I've told you all the Athabaskan legend of Ch'idzigyaak and Sa', the two old women left by their band to die of exposure, because they were assumed to be dead weight. And how in their determination, wisdom, friendship, and skill they survive the arctic winter and end up providing life-saving supplies for their band the next year. And, of course, we cannot forget one of my very favorite stories of aging, that of Ruth and Naomi, a story I could nearly recite word for word I've read it so many times. I love the depth and range of human emotion in their story: loss and bitterness, anger and pain, love and loyalty, devotion and humor, terror and a little innuendo. Ruth teaches me what it means to commit to love others, even when they've given up on themselves.

If I am lucky enough to age, I want to do so surrounded by the stories and experiences of those who have been gifted to walk this path before me. And as aging is an experience I literally cannot have without actually making those trips around the sun myself, collecting these stories is a tool I use to build up my own empathy and understanding as a pastor and

a person. When anyone older than me tells me about their life—the good, the hard, the painful, and the thrilling—I listen, because it’s a gift.

And I’m enumerating all of this because this is part of how I’m building up the muscle memory I need to follow the fifth commandment: Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.

This commandment marks a real shift in the decalogue, so it’s important to pause and note this. The commandments are traditionally seen, drawn, and understood as two stone tablets, right? And yes, this makes for a vivid mental picture and all that, but there’s a pedagogical reason for this, as well. The first half of the commandments are about God, the second half are about us. Now, of course, they’re all about God in the sense of being given by and a requirement for being God’s people and all that. But look at them—the first four are all about honoring God, I’m the Lord your God, don’t have idols, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, honor the Lord’s Day. But the next six are all about how we relate to other people, our neighbors: honor your father and mother, don’t murder, don’t commit adultery, don’t steal, don’t lie, don’t covet. There’s two tablets, two lists: love God, and love your neighbors, this is the sum of all the law and the prophets.

This commandment: Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. It’s interesting for a bunch of reasons. First of all, it’s a positive commandment, it’s open ended, and it comes with this odd sort of “if, than” implied construction. So, let’s pick it apart a little.

First of all, this commandment is primarily, above all else, directed to adults. Let that sink in just a bit. Sure, this is a commandment that kids can hear and kind of understand, but this is first and foremost for adults and their adult parents. And who are our parents, when we are adults? In a sense, they are our first neighbors. We very often move out of our family home, establish our own family places, and while our parents are always our parents, the relationship shifts naturally. If we are shifting our gaze from God to other people, it’s somewhat natural to start with those who are in many ways closest to us: those family whom everyone has, because you literally can’t be here without a parent. So, this is a commandment about our adult parents, and relating as adults to our elders.

It’s also interesting that it’s open ended and positive in its inflection. This commandment does not say “honor your parents by making sure they have a comfortable retirement” or “honor your parents by calling them three times a week.” It also doesn’t say “you shall not dishonor your parents.” This is a wide open commandment because it’s positive, but it’s also nonspecific. Just honor your parents...ok...well...how?

This is a great place to briefly pause and note that “parents” is a complicated construction. Some of us, of course, like me, are blessed with pretty fantastic parents. I’m bananas about my parents, they’re two of my closest friends, and they were great parents when I was a kid, and they continue to be great parents now. But others don’t have this story. Parents who you might not know, parents who weren’t there, parents who were abusive or neglectful, parents who just didn’t care, parents who reject their own kid for not being the

person they expected. Parents are complicated, even great parents, and our relationships to them necessarily reflect this complexity.

I'd like to offer a few options for thinking about honoring our parents in this complexity. First of all, you might choose to read this verse as "elders" rather than parents. Who are those people in your life who loved you and cared for you and acted in the role of parent when you needed them? Or, who do you care for as your "closest neighbor" in this way of thinking? It might be a bit easier to hear it through those relationships. And second, God does not ask us to "walk on our knees for a hundred miles through the hot desert" to paraphrase Mary Oliver. To love our neighbors as ourselves carries the implication in it that we love ourselves, and that we honor and respect ourselves, building a foundation from which we can love God and love our neighbors. Having boundaries, having healthy relationships, even when that means having no contact with another person who has hurt you, creating space when we need it, and it goes without saying acting on the wise counsel of those who love us and a trained therapist, is all good. We can honor our parents, even if it means honoring them from a distance, if that is part of our story. You should not sacrifice yourself to love others.

With this said, what then does it mean to honor our parents or our elders? First, I think it's important to note here a rejection of the idolization of youth. We love young, new, shiny things, often to the total erasure of those who age. Just ask most actors who happen to be women and over the age of 40. This commandment rejects this, and places our elders in a position of honor. Second, this commandment serves as a reminder that to love others begins with our first and closest neighbors, and that often our first neighbors are also some of our most vulnerable. Aging, for the wisdom and insight and great depth it can bring, also puts many of us in increasingly vulnerable positions. As we see our bodies and minds change, as our relationships shift, as some lose the able-bodied status they enjoyed for so long, there's a loss and a vulnerability in all of this. Compassion, honesty, and speaking truthfully are all ways of honoring our parents as they age. Throughout the Hebrew Bible God is deeply concerned with those who are vulnerable: the child without a parent, the partner who has lost their spouse, everyone as they age, the slaves and servants working for those with money and power, and even the animal plowing the field. To honor is to be honest and compassionate toward this vulnerability.

And finally, there's a deep practicality to this commandment. Like I said, this commandment has an implied "if...then" construction: "If you "honor your father and your mother, [then] your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you." That second part "your days may be long" isn't a blessing from God or even an implied punishment if you don't follow the commandment ("you'll die young, sonny, if you don't care for your elders!"). Instead, it's just a statement of likelihood. Not a promise, not a threat, just an observation. And it's logical. If you care for your parents, when you are an adult, and your children observe you. If you teach your children this commandment. Then someday, when you are the parent of an adult child, they will hopefully do the same for you. And your days may be long in the land the Lord your God is giving you.

It's almost a statement of social order: to care for our elders, to give them honor, builds a cycle in which we, too, will be honored by our children. It's not a promise that everyone gets to live into old age, simply an observation or a hope for the cycle.

And this is why I collect stories. I want to know what it looks like to honor my elders: what people appreciate, places where honor was not given and the consequences therein, what builds up the collective social web, rather than erasing and hiding age, as if it were shameful and not a great gift. I want to know so I can follow the commandment, so I can be effective at my job, and selfishly, so that if my days are long in the land the Lord has given me, perhaps I do might benefit from this cycle. Because what's better than a commandment with a little self interest to motivate our good actions?