

May 10, 2020

Exodus 20:12

Acts 6:1-4

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

I begin this message with a Shout-Out to the Rev. Dawn Swartz, a Methodist chaplain at the independent living facility in Columbus, Ohio, where my mother lives. For those who haven't figured it out, the scripture reading, the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment, was read by my mother. Rev. Swartz filmed her and emailed the video to us. Thank you to both!

Sometimes deadlines come up faster than thinking through completely what you want to say before the deadline arrives. In this case there is a second scripture passage that came to mind after the reader plans and video were made. That scripture passage comes from the Book of Acts. How appropriate it is that the passage is about the early church rushing to get caught up in trying to figure out how to live out its faith. As can happen, in the rush, some things, and some people, got left behind.

Here then is the story about the advent of the first deacons, as told in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts, from *The Message Bible*:

*During this time, as the disciples were increasing in numbers by leaps and bounds, hard feelings developed among the Greek-speaking believers – “Hellenists” – toward the Hebrew-speaking believers because their widows were being discriminated against in the daily*

*food lines. So the Twelve called a meeting of the disciples. They said, “It wouldn’t be right for us to abandon our responsibilities for preaching and teaching the Word of God to help with the care of the poor. So, friends, choose seven [people] from among you whom everyone trusts, [people] full of the Holy Spirit and good sense, and we’ll assign them this task. Meanwhile, we’ll stick to our assigned tasks of prayer and speaking God’s Word.”*

This ends this morning’s readings ...

In this Easter season, up until Pentecost, we are looking at what we have been experiencing and learning in these days of entombment, shelter-in-place isolation, or a practice of solitude. We have looked at the importance of being in community, in the physical presence of others, for our physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being. We have recognized the fact today’s essential workers represent the very model of what our faith has lifted up as essential: giving of oneself, caring for others – both individuals and communities, and a willingness to sacrifice certain things for the benefit of all.

Today, Mother’s Day, I want to broaden the day’s focus from just mothers to fathers and, even further, to our elders. One of the most horrifying realities of this pandemic is how it has so negatively impacted our senior citizens. What is very upsetting – and no one is to blame here, other than all of us – what is upsetting is how little attention was given to our elders in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. We had protocols for hospitals, businesses, retail stores, even churches,

but the nursing homes were overlooked – until the infection rate and death toll caused us to look.

I don't know if it is reassuring or not, but this problem is not new. Although I thought of it late, the passage in Acts is all about how the widows, the elders, were forgotten. And this case involves prejudice as well, as the widows, who were neglected, were of Greek, not Hebrew, ethnicity. But, when those who were overlooked were finally seen by the church, the church changed its ways and the work of the deacon, the office of servant to the church body, was created.

This present-day pandemic is showing us that, in some ways, our elders are being neglected. As I said, this is no one's fault, and yet we all share in the blame. For decades now we have relied on nursing homes to care for our aging and sick elders. There was a time when families and the church community took care of their own. The truth is, though, we are all living longer and at some point people age to the point that an individual family cannot manage the care their loved one needs.

The unfortunate truth is some people, for a variety of reasons, find themselves isolated in these homes or their own homes. No one visits. No one calls. For the most part, in the busy-ness of our lives, we have been able to overlook those so isolated. They aren't my family member – we say – or my friends, or my former neighbor. We just don't know them, so we don't go. Even for those I know, I feel bad about how busy I get, which keeps me from visiting church members and/or my friends as often I as think I should or would like to.

If there is any good coming out of this pandemic, it is how people are reacting now that they are seeing people in nursing homes or in their own neighborhoods. They are visiting – family, friends, former neighbors, and even strangers, even if the visit is through a window. They are waving and smiling and praying with and for those on the other side of the window. I am hopeful our vision is beginning to change, and we, like the leaders in the early church, will take on the task of caring for our elders.

Caring for our elders is how we honor our elders and that is what the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment is all about. We are to honor our fathers and our mothers, if we want to live long in the land God has given us. We are to honor our elders, if we want to live prosperous, full lives that God has given us, and desires for us and for all creation.

So, on this Mother's Day, in the midst of this shelter-in-place, physical distancing, think about ways you might honor the elders in your life and in your neighborhood. Call. Write a note. Stand outside a window, smile and say thank you.

If you want names and contact information for people connected to Amicable Church, just contact me.

Living into God's commandments is the best way for us to honor our mothers, honor our elders, AND fulfill God's desire for creation's well-being. Amen.