Today's Old Testament lesson is the Fifth Commandment. It is a commandment which is a bridge between the first and second tables of the Decalogue. In the structure and movement of the Commandments, this Fifth Commandment continues our thinking about how we relate to God even as it opens up relationship to the neighbor. (1)

Bill Moyers has written, “Once in East Africa, on the shores of an ancient lake, I sat alone, and suddenly it struck me what community is. It is gathering around a fire and listening to someone tell a story.” (2)

One could say that it was gathering around a fire and listening to someone tell a story that shaped the people who call themselves Jews. Gathering around the glowing embers of the campfire after supper, the little children would nestle in the laps of their mothers. The older children, sweaty and chattering and laughing after an early evening game of tag would elbow their way into the circle and settle in the crooks of their fathers' bent arms. Young and old, all the members of the household would gather under the stars which brightly punctuated the desert darkness and tune their ears to listen as the craggy-faced patriarch of the tribe cleared his throat and said, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”

The boys and girls, the young men and young women, heard the story of God’s creating the universe and other stories of God’s mighty acts told over and over again until they knew them by heart. And in learning these stories, they learned also that they were a part of something far, far bigger than themselves. Around the campfire, listening to the stories related to them by their mothers and fathers, they came to know that they were God’s children, members of a vast household of faith, knowing that, as the apostle Paul would put it many years later in his Letter to the Romans, that they did not live to themselves and they did not die to themselves for they followed a light brighter than the faint glimmer of their own solitary candles.

Keeping in mind this image of the Israelites gathered around the campfire listening to the stories of their elders is important as we listen to the commandment which reads, “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you,” is important.

It is important, first of all, for it reminds us of the ways that the ancient Israelite society was quite different from modern Western society.

For instance, the culture in which this commandment was given was highly patriarchal. The commandments in their origin were directed toward the male members of the community. The use of singular first-person masculine verbs and pronouns in the Hebrew make that evident. Although one could not presume to say that only males were meant to receive these divine words, the Fifth Commandment was addressed most directly in those days of old to adult males. (3)

Another matter to keep in mind is that in that ancient world, family solidarity and economic well-being were tightly knit together in way that is usually not true for us. This adds an additional layer of meaning for it orders adult children of elderly parents not to abuse their parents economically or in any other way when they became old and unable to work for this was a way of preserving the land and, thus, the nation of Israel. (4)
Yes, it is important to keep the image of storytelling around the fire in our minds for it reminds us of the ways that we are different from those who first heard the commandment.

But it is even more important, I believe, for us to keep the image in mind for as we draw close to the fire with our ancient forbears, we are reminded of the ways that we and they are alike and thus the ways that the Fifth Commandment can speak to us today.

The Hebrew word which is translated “honor” means “to be heavy,” “to give weight to.” (5) The commandment says to us that when we give weight to our mothers and fathers in the faith and the stories of faith that they share with us, we discover the truth of who we are, just as the Israelites of old did. Like them, we discover that we are people in community with God and with one another. Like them, we discover that we are a part of something so much larger than ourselves, something huge and grand and beautiful, something that grants purpose and meaning to our living and our dying.

Now certainly an important way for us to read the commandment in our own time is as it was in day of old, an encouragement to individuals and to families to work at building community with God and one another. Whatever our ages, whatever the ages of our parents, there are ways that we can honor them. A child saves allowance money and instead of spending it on Ninjagos for himself, he buys an extra-special birthday gift for his mom and wraps it himself—this is honoring parents. A middle schooler spending time with friends at the mall stops to text her parents before they text her to tell them where she is and when she will be home and she ends her text with “I love you”—this is honoring parents. A college student studying for a test when friends drop by and invite her to go to a movie remembers her parents have worked hard and sacrificed a great deal to send her to school so she refuses the invitation and returns to her books—this is honoring parents. (6) An adult caring for his elderly mother responds to her pained apologies, “You changed a lot of my diapers. Now it’s my turn.”—this is honoring parents. Someone whose parents have died contributes a portion of the inheritance that she has received to her church for its preschool ministry—this is honoring parents.

Certainly the commandment encourages individuals to honor our parents and promises that such acts will contribute to greater meaning in our lives. However, every thoughtful person of faith also must acknowledge that there is quite often a tension in the honoring of our parents and our call to discipleship. We see this in Jesus’ own life when he was the cause of his parents’ pulling their hair out with worry for three whole days before they found him in the Temple hanging out with the teachers without even bothering to let his parents know where he was headed. We see it in the way that he called the sons of Zebedee to leave their nets and the family fishing business in order to fish for people as Jesus’ disciples.

And certainly a sermon on the Fifth Commandment could never be preached faithfully without recognizing that there is probably no biblical text which has inadvertently sanctioned the abuse of children more than this one. It is a fundamental irony that this commandment whose purpose is centered on the protection from abusive behavior has been used in this manner. (7) Not this commandment….nor anything else that is written in the Bible…permits abuse of any human being. I repeat—NOTHING in the Bible permits abuse of human beings. It is entirely biblical to say that we must reject parental authority when it turns against the love of God and love for others. (8)

It is true that the Fifth Commandment encourages us to honor our natural and adopted parents and promises that such acts will contribute to greater meaning in our lives. However, if we read this commandment and think only of individuals and families related by blood or marriage or adoption, we deny ourselves some of the richness that is embodied in this commandment which was conveyed through generations of nights spent around the campfire listening to someone tell a story.

Many of you have read Anne Lamott’s book Traveling Mercies. My favorite chapter in the book, entitled “Why I Make Sam Go to Church” speaks of what honoring mother and father in the household of faith looks like and means to her. She wrote of her son Sam, now a young adult with a son of his own named Jax, and of her church, St. Andrew Presbyterian in Marin City, California. She wrote, “I saw something once from the Jewish Theological Seminary that said, ‘A human life is like a single letter of the alphabet. It can be meaningless. Or it can be a part of great meaning.’ Our funky little church is filled
with people who are working for peace and freedom, who are out there on the streets and inside praying, and they are home writing letters, and they are at the shelters with giant platters of food.

When I was at the end of my rope, the people at St. Andrew tied a knot in it for me and helped me hold on. The church became my home in the old meaning of home—that it's where, when you show up, they have to let you in. They let me in. They even said, 'You come back now.'

My relatives all live in the Bay Area and I adore them, but they are as skittishly self-obsessed as I am, which I certainly mean in the nicest possible way. Let's just say that I do not leave family gatherings with the feeling that I have just received some kind of spiritual chemotherapy. But I do when I leave St. Andrew…

Sam was welcomed and prayed for at St. Andrew seven months before he was born. When I announced during worship that I was pregnant, people cheered…Even the women whose grown-up boys had been or were doing time in jails or prisons rejoiced for me. And then they almost immediately set about providing for us. They brought clothes, they brought me casseroles to keep in the freezer, they brought me assurance that this baby was going to be a part of the family…

[And Mary Williams] brought me plastic Baggies full of dimes, noosed with little wire twists…Mary Williams always sits in the very back by the door. She is one of those unusually beautiful women—beautiful like a river. She raised five children as a single mother, but one of her boys drowned when he was young, and she has the softness and generosity and toughness of someone who has endured great loss. During the service she praises God in a nonstop burble, a glistening dark brook. She says, 'Oh, yes…Uh-huh…My sweet Lord. Thank you. Thank you.'

Sam loves her, and she loves him…Every Sunday I nudge Sam in her direction, and he walks to where she is sitting and hugs her. She smells him behind his ears, where he most smells like sweet unwashed new potatoes…and that," Anne Lamott concludes, "is why I make Sam go to church." (9)

Sam didn't know it back then, but he was living the Fifth Commandment in a true and profound way. When he went to Mary Williams and gave her a hug and she hugged him back, he was drawing close to the fire and listening to someone tell a story, an old, old story that even as he raises his own child is helping him to understand that he and his son Jax are not just the son and grandson of Anne Lamott, but they, and she as well, are all God’s children.

The Fifth Commandment gives us to know that like Sam and Anne and Jax and Mary Williams, we all need a household of faith, a church. Some of us come from families like Annie’s. We love them, but they just don’t provide the spiritual chemotherapy that we need. Some of us come from families that are far worse, families that have wounded and scarred us in terrible ways. Some of us come from families that are truly wonderful, families who have surrounded us with the light and air and grace and love of God. However, even the best, even the most faithful of families, can’t keep the story alive all by themselves.

We all need a safe place where we can come and gather around a fire and listen to the story of our mothers and our fathers, the old, old story that tells us over and over again that we are at home in God. By God’s grace, may Davidson College Presbyterian Church to be that kind of home for you. And for the times when we are not, and yes, there are many times that we fall short, let us ask earnestly for God’s forgiveness and pray continuously for the Spirit to show us a better way.
7. Miller, 168.