

The Sixth Commandment

Sermon preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

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Genesis 4:1-16 ESV

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground.

In the course of time, Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it."

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the LORD said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground. And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth."

Cain said to the LORD, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground, and from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me." Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, lest any who found him should attack him. Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.

Matthew 5:21-26, 43-48

[Jesus said,] You've heard that people long ago were told, "Do not murder, and whoever commits murder will be subject to judgment." But I'm telling you: Everyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment; and whoever says, "You jerk!" to a brother or sister will be subject to the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, "You moron!" will be subject to Gehenna and its fire.

So if you are offering your gift upon the altar and you remember there that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, go first and be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.

Settle quickly with your legal adversary, while you are on the way with him, otherwise your adversary will hand you over to the judge and the judge will hand you over to the court officer and he will throw you into jail. I tell you the truth, you won't get out of there until you have paid the last cent.

You've heard that people were told, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy." But I'm telling you: Love your enemies, and pray for the people who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, since he causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and rain to fall on the just and the unjust.

If you love the people who love you, what reward do you have? Don't even tax collectors do the same thing? And if you only greet your brothers and sisters, what are you doing that's special? Don't even Gentiles do the same thing? So be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Children's Story

Years ago I read a story about people who live on a certain island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. They have their own way of cutting down big trees. They do it by yelling. They sneak up on a tree just before the sun rises. And they yell at the tree as loud as they can. They do this every day for a month. Then the tree dies and falls over. The people say that the yelling kills the spirit of the tree. They say it always works.

Here in Ohio, we don't yell at trees. We yell at the TV when soccer referees make bad calls. We yell at traffic when we're going to be late for school. And we yell at people when they bother us. Some of us yell a lot. Not that it does much good. Yelling doesn't change the soccer game. Yelling doesn't get us to school on time.

Yelling at people? The people from that island in the middle of the ocean know something about that. They know that yelling at living things can kill the spirit in them. Sticks and stones break bones. But yelling? That kills people inside.

adapted from
All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten by Robert Fulghum

Sermon

In 1984 Ronnie Gardner shot and killed a man. In 1985 Gardner tried to escape from a Salt Lake City courthouse. In the process he shot and killed another man. A few days ago, Gardner was put to death by the state of Utah, executed by firing squad.

It's clear that Ronnie Gardner had violated the Sixth Commandment. "You shall not murder," says the commandment. And Gardner had done just that, not once but twice. So Gardner clearly violated the commandment. How about the state of Utah?

"You shall not kill," says the commandment. But the state of Utah ordered the killing of Ronnie Gardner, pinning a target over his heart, aiming five rifles and four bullets at him from a distance of twenty-five feet, and opening fire. Clearly the state of Utah violated the commandment.

It gets complicated though. First of all, it's not clear how to translate the commandment. It's only two words in biblical Hebrew. The first word means "no" or "not." The second word names the forbidden action. That second word certainly forbids what we call murder. We see that in the various biblical laws and stories that proscribe premeditated killing. If you plan to kill someone, if you lie in wait, if you rise up and strike that person down, you have violated the commandment.

But as the Old Testament unpacks the Sixth Commandment, it has more than murder in mind. Accidental killing is also in view, for example. When you kill someone by accident, you are accountable and there is a price to pay.

In essence the commandment regards human life as precious, all human life. Each and every human being is created in God's image. To end such a life, whatever the motive, whatever the means, whatever the circumstances — to end such a life, the life of a creature made in God's image, is never less than a disruption of how things are supposed to be and is often much, much more than that. To it all, the Sixth Commandment says, "No!"

That picture gets complicated, however. It gets complicated because there is so much killing in the Bible. The killing starts already in the fourth chapter of the Bible with a murder. Cain kills his brother Abel. He is, of course, found out. But in a way, he gets away with it. He goes off into an exile of sorts, and there he builds a new life for himself — under divine protection no less! That protection is not for everyone, however. The final chapters of the Bible are filled with killings and death.

Some of the killing in the Bible is a matter of lawlessness: Cain's murder of Abel in Genesis 4, the rape and murder of the Levite's concubine in Judges 19, David's conspiracy against Uriah the Hittite in 2 Samuel 11, the slaughter of the young children of Bethlehem in Matthew 2. On the other hand, some of the killing in the Bible is a matter of law: murderers are executed, adulterers and blasphemers are stoned to death, soldiers kill and are killed in war after war after war. On yet one more hand, some of the killing in the Bible is a matter of God's explicit command. God told the Levites to kill brothers, friends, and neighbors who had worshiped the Golden Calf (Exodus 32). God told the Israelites to slaughter every man, woman, and child in the city of Jericho (Joshua 6; see Deuteronomy 7:1-2; 2:34).

It gets complicated, the Sixth Commandment does. Complicated because there is so much killing in the Bible — some of it tolerated by God, some of it sanctioned by God, some of it ordered by God — and because at the same time the Bible puts a premium on human life. But that premium is often expressed in a life-for-life fashion. "Take a human life, and your life will be taken from you" (cf. Genesis 9:6). That seems to be the way.

Yet Jesus has come, and that changes everything. That changes everything. Doesn't it?

Let's listen to what Jesus says. He says, "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44). What that means for the state of Utah, for the state of Ohio, for the United States, or for any nation, I'm not sure. There are dark and ugly realities that must be dealt with, and Scripture itself

proposes some stern measures for dealing with them. Yet if we are going to privilege any voice in Scripture, then it will be, it must be, not the voice of Lamech, not the voice of Levi, not the voice of David, not even the voice of Moses — if we are going to privilege any voice in Scripture, then it will be, it must be, the voice of Jesus. And he says, “Love your enemies.”

At the very least then, there must always be some hesitation over war or execution. We can't go to war in a fit of anger and without deep regret. Nor can we put someone to death without sorrow. That's the very least. Jesus' words should give us pause, great pause, especially those of us who pray for and seek first the kingdom. In the kingdom, enemies are forgiven. In the kingdom, the king dies for his enemies (Romans 5:10). Surely that changes things, doesn't it?

All those biblical laws and stories in the Old Testament, that's before Jesus dies for his enemies. Now that that has happened, the world is not “just the same” any more, is it? The death and resurrection of Jesus, they make a difference, don't they? Maybe in the world as a whole, nothing has changed. Maybe. But we have changed, haven't we? The transforming Spirit has come, the Spirit of the One who lived and died and rose. At the very least, that changes how we live in the world, doesn't it? That changes what we hunger for. Not for war, not for vengeance, not for death. But for reconciliation, for forgiveness, for peace. And that changes how we see the world. Even the most heinous killer, even the most hate-filled enemy, still bears the image of God. Their deaths, too, leave us with sorrow and regret.

And there's more to the Sixth Commandment. Listen to what Jesus says. He says, “Everyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment; and whoever says, ‘You jerk!’ to a brother or sister will be subject to the Sanhedrin; and whoever says, ‘You moron!’ will be subject to Gehenna and its fire” (Matthew 5:22). This is an important step for getting a handle on the Sixth Commandment.

The Sixth Commandment is not just for pathological killers and warmongers. It's not just for people in situations where they have to pull the trigger or throw the switch. It's not just for extreme circumstances that call for regrettable but necessary actions. The Sixth Commandment is also for everyday life. It's for the benefit of the people we love and live with. It's for the benefit of the people we pass by or bump into or work with every day. It's for the benefit of the people we pray for and worship with.

The Sixth Commandment is for everyday life, because killing takes many forms. We're all murderers. We kill people nearly every day. We don't do it all at once, though. We kill people by inches. With us it's death by a thousand cuts — paper cuts with lemon juice poured over them. How do we do that? Jesus points the way, and our Catechism amplifies his direction (A105): we belittle people, we insult them, we hate them, we kill them with our thoughts, with our words, with our looks and gestures.

I'll never forget the look on my cousin Adu's face years ago. I was about ten years old, he was in his twenties. We were just driving away from Friendly's restaurant, my family and I. I was in the backseat, looking out the rear window of the car. There was my cousin. So I gave him a thumbs up and smiled. He smiled back at me. Then I turned my thumb down. My cousin's face melted. It was forty years ago, but I'll never forget the look on his face. The power of a gesture!

And, oh, the power of words! The things we say to our kids. The things we say to our parents. The things we say to a husband, to a wife. Again, we kill them an inch at a time.

Jesus identifies the problem, first of all, as one of anger. Our Catechism expands that a bit, too, drawing on additional Scripture. It says that envy and hatred, along with anger, are the root of murder (A106). Envy, hatred, and anger are the root of murder. So the Sixth Commandment is not a commandment we get a pass on because there's no blood on our hands. In the subtle ways that Jesus points to and the Catechism expands, we are, most all of us, serial “killers” and mass “murderers.” Are we as bad as dictators or the denizens of death row? No. Not at all. But what they express in full flower — envy, hatred, and anger — has dug its roots into us too.

So, here's what we do — I think the Catechism puts it well: Praying every day for the Spirit's transforming presence, we make every effort “to love our neighbors as ourselves, to be patient, peace-loving, gentle, merciful, and friendly to our neighbors, to protect our neighbors from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies” (A107). That's where the Sixth Commandment aims us. And Christ himself has led the way.