

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

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Matthew 5: 17-26

Sacred Life

(Sixth in series, The Ten Commandments: More Than They May Seem)

You shall not murder. –Exodus20: 13–

We have come this morning to the section of Commandments, numbered 6 through 9, which are brief, abrupt, negative, and on the surface at least, simple. People inclined to think that truth and simplicity often go together might call Commandments six through nine the no nonsense commandments. *You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.* Simple enough, right? Well, maybe not.

I think preachers in general, as well as other orators and writers, don't always think right and wrong are clear and concise. That I agree with that thinking is evident in my giving to each of the Commandments six through nine a sermon of their own. If I thought they were self-explanatory there might just be the scripture reading today. *You shall not murder.* That would be it. But I have never been of a mind to think that right Christian behavior requires little thought and I am wary of those who take a point of view like one I have heard from time to time. "The Bible says it! I believe it! That settles it!" I want to ask, *Are you sure about any one of those statements?* I think such mantras often reveal self-righteous prejudices more than strength of faith.

If you agree with me that there is sometimes more to right and wrong than what first appears, then we are in good company. Jesus thought so too. Five times in the Sermon on the Mount he started a subject with the words, "You have heard that it was said...but I say unto you," and then he would explain some additional considerations in the matter. Three of these "you have heard it said...but I say to you" statements in the Sermon on the Mount apply to the sixth, seventh, and ninth Commandments. One was read in this morning's scripture.

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder, and whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say you fool, you will be liable to the hellfire." (Matthew 5:21,22)

It is clear from these verses that Jesus did not think the sixth Commandment was only concerned with murder. And murder is the right word to use here. The ancient Hebrew verb in the Commandment means to murder and not just to kill as the old King James Version renders it.

But the larger point of Jesus' elaboration of the Commandment is his putting it into a broader context. He not only condemns the action of taking an innocent person's life but the causes of it as well. If you are angry with someone, Jesus said, even then you are in danger of judgment.

But we might want to be careful here not to look at this injunction against anger as a matter any simpler than that against murder. Certainly Jesus was not opposed to all anger. If he was, he condemned himself. Over and over in the Bible we read of Jesus being angry.

Remember when the disciples tried to shoo the children away from Jesus? (Mark 10:13-16) The story tells us that Jesus was indignant with the disciples then and ordered them to allow the children to come up to him.

Then there was the time when Jesus made a whip and drove the animals and money changers out of the Temple because they were profiteering in it. (John 2:13-16) He may not have acted like a mad man as I have heard some suggest but at the least we might think that he was angry.

On another occasion, after a long acerbic harangue against the Pharisees, he said to them, *you snakes, you brood of vipers! How can you escape being sentenced to hell!* (Matthew 23:33) Words, it may surely seem, from an angry man.

Now, do we think that Jesus was guilty of murder in those situations? Of course not! Many of us might say that the anger he felt on those occasions was even righteous indignation. In other words, he should have felt angry if he cared about the right things.

But there is also another kind of anger, isn't there? It is the anger not of indignation against injustice, but rather the anger of jealousy or spite, the kind which might smolder for long periods and then finally explode in violence; the kind of anger stirred not out of love for God and people but out of selfishness and greed. That is the kind of anger in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* in which a young man feels that in his poverty life has been unfair to him. There is an old woman who is his neighbor who the young man concludes has more than she needs. The young man considers therefore that he has a right to murder her and take what she has and put it to use, his use! His was an anger born of resentment and it led to murder. *If you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment.*

Yet, just the feeling of even selfish anger is not murder, is it? No, but when it does not lead to a single violent lethal act it might be responsible for a more gradual kind of human destruction. Isn't there an over time type of murder that gradually wears a

person down through the contempt and disapproval of others. There is the cruelty of humiliation and unfair and unkind public disapproval that isolates a person from others. There are many types of bullying and it can make life feel unbearable for the victim. Anyone can be a victim of such mistreatment, rich or poor, old or young, straight or gay, male or female. It can cause a person not to want to live anymore. I think Jesus was saying that such behavior is sometimes as bad as outright murder. *If you insult a brother or sister you will be liable to the council.*

We try to teach our children not to care so much about what is said about them or what names they called. *Sticks and stones can break my bones, we tell them to respond, but names will never hurt me.* Well, we all know that there are ugly adult words for just about every race and ethnic group, and sexual orientation, and personality type, and body particularity. I don't need to say now what those words are. We know them. We have heard them. We may shudder at them. God forgive us if we have ever used them. For someone already wounded, names can hurt, they can hurt bad. They may not kill the body but they can deeply damage the soul. *If you say you fool, you will be liable to the hellfire.*

Well...perhaps enough of *thou shalt not* for one sermon. If murder is what we should not do, what is it that we should do? The opposite of committing murder would be to uphold the sacredness of life. Is not life a miracle in every form? In human form it is precious beyond all else on earth. The Son of God came to earth that we might have life in all its abundance. (John 10:10) What an extraordinary thing it is just to be alive!

There are other issues that apply to this theme this morning of human life and its extinction at human hands. You may know from previous things I have said and sermons I have preached that I am opposed to capital punishment ultimately based upon my reverence for life. And yet, I confess, that when I heard of the death of Osama Bin Laden by American marines, I felt no need to object. There are also the issues of euthanasia, and war, and abortion, and in each case there may well be times when it is best to choose them. But here is a word concerning their use about which we might agree: Sparingly, Sparingly.

There is not time this morning but to mention some other issues relevant to the Commandment such as climate change, and poverty, and health care. All such matters effect the quality of human life, enriching it or diminishing it, strengthening it or weakening it, saving it or destroying it. They are complex concerns but Christians might not shy away from them. Because they have a direct impact upon human life they are sacred.

At least the starting point is simple.

You shall not murder.

