

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina  
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July 14, 2013

With our Whole Heart: The Value of Life  
Exodus 20:1-2, 13  
John 10:7-10

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

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Our journey through the Ten Commandments continues as we consider the sixth commandment.

Our focus verse for today is right to the point: You shall not murder. That word in the Hebrew can also be translated – and in other places used in scripture as – “kill.” You shall not kill.

Martin Luther said that when God speaks to us in the commandments, God uses “baby talk” in order that we can understand.<sup>1</sup>

Karl Barth is, perhaps, the most influential theologian of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His major life's work was a 13 volume series of books called *The Dogmatics* on which he worked until the day he died. The *Dogmatics* contain more than six million words. In 1962, Barth came to the United States to lecture. One of his stops was in Richmond, Virginia at Union Theological Seminary. After his lecture, Barth took questions from the audience. One especially bold student asked him if he could summarize his life's work in one sentence. Barth thought long and hard and answered him, “Yes: ‘Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Willimon, William and Hauerwas, Stanley, *The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life*, p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> Recounted to me numerous times – found on the web at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/01/did-karl-barth-really-say-jesus-loves-me-this-i-know/>

Sometimes clarity is important – especially if the message is essential to the faith. Rather than confusing the commandment with qualifications and nuances that might distract, the word God speaks is direct: you shall not kill.

It says something, I think, that the first word I want to add after that commandment is “unless.” You shall not kill...unless.

Yesterday, after a year-long trial, George Zimmerman was acquitted in the killing of Travon Martin. What happened on the night of Travon Martin’s death is a tragedy. The events that surrounded that night and the way this trial has played out to a national audience compounds that tragedy. This case reveals the deep pain of unresolved issues of race and racism, of fear and violence that continue to plague our society. In the end, George Zimmerman was acquitted of a crime because the jury found that he acted in self-defense. I bring this up, not to debate the merits of the decision, but to recognize that enshrined in our laws is an exception:

You shall not kill...unless your action is in self-defense.

One of the earliest Christian theologians, Augustine, coined the term “just war.” The just war theory echoes throughout the life of the church and has – on many occasion – found its way into the halls of government. Understanding that the world does not yet reflect the vision that God has for it and that there are people and nations whose sin renders them a grave threat to the well being of innocent lives, Augustine articulated strict parameters to be used for making the less bad choice to use lethal force to restrain evil. In a “Just War” – all options for a peaceful reconciliation must be explored and exhausted, the threat by the aggressor must be lasting, grave and certain, there must be serious prospects of success, and the collateral damage of war must not exceed the limits of the threat that caused the war in the first place.

John Calvin was one who adopted Augustine’s theory and argued for it from a Reformed perspective. In our own theological tradition there is an exception to the commandment:

You shall not kill...unless that choice meets the Just War criteria.

You don’t have to look too hard to find examples – even within the pages of Scripture – of exceptions to this seemingly clear commandment. Don’t forget that the reason the Israelites were wandering in the desert was because they were making their way to the Promised Land. When they arrived, the land was not vacant. “Possession of the land” required the loss of life.

What seems clear, perhaps, is not.

The past two weeks, the North Carolina state legislature has made national headlines as they debated and are in the position to pass more stringent requirements for clinics who carry out abortion – a move that will reduce the number of clinics in our state. For some, this is a clear victory in an effort to protect

the life of the unborn. For others, this is an intrusion on privacy and personal freedom.

In more cases than not, when the issue is capital punishment, the roles are reversed. For some, capital punishment is permissible because certain crimes demand the ultimate act of justice. For others, capital punishment is an example of overstepping the boundaries of where human justice ends and divine justice begins.

More and more, we are beginning to see – as the Apostle Paul said two thousand years ago – that the creation...this natural world that God has given us to inhabit and tend...is “groaning in labor pains”<sup>3</sup> under the weight of our choices and the growth of our population. That we are called to be stewards of the earth is not a question for debate. Yet, to some people, our lack of stewardship is not simply an area for improvement but a crisis that rises to the level of a threat to our survival.

*You shall not kill.*

If God spoke that word believing that it was a prohibition we could understand, then we have got a long way to go in our journey of faith.

Perhaps a more helpful way to read the commandment is to consider it positively – as a promise: *Because I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the house of slavery, you will not need to kill.*

It has been my experience that debating the “unless” of the commandment not to kill is an exercise that generates tremendous passion, tremendous conflict, and yet, very little growth. Whether the issue is war, or capital punishment, or abortion, or how to evaluate the degree of a crime – what often happens to us and to the culture around us is that we get preoccupied with winning the argument and we lose sight of the reason for the debate.

God gave us the law – these commandments – in order that we might know what it is like to live as God’s people, as a freed people....freed from the powers of a world where violence is so common that we no longer notice it; freed from the belief that this increased pattern of bombings and shootings is – inexorably – the way of the future; freed from the misguided thought that some lives – especially the lives of those we do not see – are expendable or unimportant.

God paints his vision of the future – a future into which we are called – by the promises of these Ten Commandments.

Jesus called it abundant life.

That is – life that is lived according to God’s abundance.

Anchored in hope.

Grounded in obedience.

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:22

Culminating in the realization of God's dream for what the world and our lives might be according to God's promises.

To follow the commandment not to kill is not to dig ourselves deeper into the trench of our own interpretation of what that commandment might mean.

No, as a wise pastor named Al Winn once said,

“Following the commandment takes us down the path of what might further the promise of life,

Not in asking, under what circumstances would I be justified in killed in self-defense? But, how can I defend myself without killing?

Not, under what circumstances would my nation be justified in going to war? But, how can my nation defend itself and its values without war?

Not, under what circumstances is capital punishment justified? But, how can we deal with crime without capital punishment?

Not, under what circumstance is an abortion permissible? But, how can we handle our relationships as women and men so that abortion is not needed as a way out?”<sup>4</sup>

That path – that furthers the promise and the value of life – starts with God's people. It starts with us. The Ten Commandments are not generic rules to be followed by all who can read them. They are a gift given to the community of the household of God.

In God's promised future, all of life is to be honored and valued and treasured. And as a people committed to giving our whole hearts to God, we are called to live as if that future is now.

*Let us pray:*

*God of our life and God of all life –*

*In the midst of a culture that seems bent on violence; that devalues those created in your image; that distracts your people from following your will –*

*In the midst of this culture, give us ears to hear your voice, and strength to trust your promises, and a willingness to start by honoring our own lives and those of the ones to whom we belong – as family, as faith community, as citizens in your heavenly kingdom.*

*Then, as we practice the promise of honoring life – may you use us as your instruments to bear that promise to the world that you also came to save.*

*We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.*

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<sup>4</sup> Winn, Al, *A Christian Primer: The Prayer, the Creed, the Commandments* (p. 232).

