

Respect and Reverence for Life
The Sixth Commandment
Exodus 20:1-17

A pastor was asked to attend a meeting of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) with a parishioner. It was "open" meeting where people give testimonies and celebrate their anniversary of being sober. That night the church member was to give his testimony.

As he did, he shared how his life had been in shambles. How he had almost killed himself and another person while driving home one night from a bar. As part of his sentence and probation he was required to attend weekly meetings of AA. He said that when he began to attend the meetings, he was an agnostic at best. But he kept hearing people talk about a "Higher Power."

At first, he was uncomfortable with that kind of talk, but since his life was in such a mess, he was open to anything or anyone that could improve his life. The group he went to closed the meeting with the Lord's Prayer and the Serenity Prayer. Being agnostic, he mouthed the words, went through the motions, because that's what you did.

But slowly, over time, he began to see signs of renewal and hope for his life. He began to hunger and thirst for different things in his life. And then one night as they closed with the Lord's Prayer the lines, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" something occurred to him that he hadn't ever considered.

He realized that he was now a citizen of a new and greater kingdom, a kingdom ruled by a loving King. That over time he had changed the direction of his life from one of darkness and death to one of light and abundant life. He said "It was as if a trumpet had sounded, and a door had opened."

This God he had been mouthing the Lord's Prayer to had given him power for life. This God cared about his life. And this new revelation became the driving force of his life, giving him a new world view, allowing him to see everything differently. Including his understanding about murder, killing, suicide, abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment.

This God made life sacred and special. Hardness was replaced by humility and compassion. This morning our focus is on the sixth commandment - "Thou shall not murder."

In giving the people the 10 commandments, Moses was speaking to a nation that had been subjected to the cruelty and bondage of slavery. God, speaking to and through Moses, was presenting to them a vision "of a greater and more excellent way." God was teaching them to say "No" to one way of life in order to say "Yes" to a greater way of life.

Much like the man at the AA meeting, a total transformation had to take place.

They were now in a different kingdom with a different king on the throne. And this throne also included the human heart as well. This new insight would affect the totality of their experience as a people.

And just as this commandment was necessary for the Israelites in Moses' day, it's necessary and relevant in our day. We hear the words "murder" and "senseless killing" every night on the local newscasts. The attitude "Life is cheap" permeates so much of life.

But **you and I belong to a different kingdom**, and the sixth commandment teaches us that only God has the right to take life. We have the might and the sophistication to

do so, but only Almighty God has the right. I belong to the kingdom of God, not the Hemlock Society, and I prefer the witness and work of Albert Schweitzer to Jack Kevorkian.

Long before the United States constitution was written guaranteeing us the right of life liberty and the pursuit of happiness, the Bible tells us that God picked up the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life into it. I'm thankful as an American for my constitutional rights, but even more grateful for my identity as a child of God.

The sixth commandment provides the higher ground for humanity to step up to be a civilized people. It provides a foundation for life to be lived with respect and reverence. Humanity and life are not an accident of nature but a reflection of the presence, power, and purpose of God. With this commandment we better understand that every life is valuable to God, not just the strongest or the fittest.

And one reason human life is sacred is because God became human in the person of Jesus Christ who entered this world as the New Adam to restore what had become corrupted because of sin's dehumanizing power. If you believe that God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten son, then you must also believe that human life is sacred and precious.

Jesus knew these Ten Commandments. He was a child of the covenant and a student of the Torah. He never spoke against them but observed them and respected them and lived them out in their fullest sense.

Jesus knew that the Ten Commandments were not pious embroidery for the Jewish people. They were to awaken God's people to a radical new way of life and thinking.

Recently our nation mourned the lives lost in the collapse of the Surfside condominium. To date, 97 people are confirmed dead. There were nearly 500 homicides in the city of Philadelphia last year, and more than 2,200 people shot. Closer to home, last year more than 160 people were murdered in the Hampton Roads area.¹ And nobody seems to notice after a while. We go on with our lives. Where is our reverence and respect for life in situations such as these?

In the Sermon on the Mount **Jesus expands our understanding of this sixth commandment by addressing the heart of the matter, the root cause** – Anger. Jesus teaches that before we ever actually commit the act of murder, the act first takes root in our heart and mind where we allow the power of vengeance to control us.

It is anger that allows hate to develop to such a degree that an inner rage propels us to act and plot and plan and kill. Without the high standard the word of God gives us, we pay a high price for a low view of life.

The church of Jesus Christ moves to a different drummer from the legions of death and doom. We take our marching orders from King Jesus who said, "I came that they may have life and have it to the full" which propels us forward in mission and ministry. Because we are a different people with a different vision about life.

Now, I must confess that I struggle with this commandment. Not because I want to murder someone. I struggle with this commandment as I apply it to all aspects of life.

If life is sacred, then capital punishment is wrong, for surely God can redeem the life of a person incarcerated for heinous crimes.

And if life is sacred, then abortion is wrong – early term, late term, any term - for surely God who created the life of that unborn child has plans for her or him. Which is why, as a citizen of a new and greater kingdom, a kingdom ruled by a loving King, I

cannot in good conscience vote for any person – left, right, or anywhere in between – who supports abortions.

So for me, at this point in my life and spiritual journey, **the key to understanding the words and spirit of the sixth commandment is this: WWJD** - if I can't do something in the name of Jesus, perhaps we should not attempt it in the first place.

Which brings us to the Lord's Supper and this holy celebration today. When Jesus was betrayed by his own disciples, he did not let that "anger" control his spirit. He washed their feet. He invited them to a holy table to share a meal with him. He committed his life to God and trusted God, not the sword, for his final destination.

This meal is about life.

This meal is about the greater, more excellent way.

This meal is not about dead men walking, but about God's people living.

This meal is about a great kingdom ruled by a gracious king.

ⁱ <https://www.13newsnow.com/article/news/crime/hampton-roads-sees-high-homicide-numbers-in-2020/291-a1afa303-4222-4113-99ba-6d3cbf1fbfba>