

Just Don't Murder

Exodus 20:13

Cradock Presbyterian Church

October 21, 2012

There is one more scripture you need to hear, to put this all in context; and that's Matthew 7:12. "In everything do unto others as you would have them do unto you; for this is the law and the prophets." There you go. That's all you need, this and the other Matthew passage, which you just heard read.

First, you need to understand: this isn't a commandment about *results*, it's one about *intentions*, about what's in a man or woman's heart. There are some literalists out there who insist that *any* death that a person causes, even if by accident, is a breach of this commandment. They haven't read their Bibles very carefully; at some places, God commands Israel to kill off entire towns, every single person in them, as they go into the Promised Land. God also sends Israel off into wars, and finally, in the very Law itself, which commences after the 10 Commandments are given, there are several infractions calling for a death penalty. And included in this Law as well are provisions protecting people from punishment for accidental killings, or for defending themselves. No, it isn't about "Thou shalt not *kill*," based on the results. It's about intention.

The language supports this. The Hebrew verb *rasah* carries a note of malice or evil with it. There are other verbs for taking a life, that are more mechanical. This one takes into account the motives, the intentions, of the person responsible.

Now, how does that work? How can you know what a person's intentions are? Even at this early stage in Israel's life, we already see that a primitive sort of "court system" was developing. The elders of the nation would be gathered together, and the case brought before them. Where there was a doubt, the law said clearly, malice or evil

intent couldn't be assigned. There needed to be unbiased witnesses, more than one. There will of course be a commandment later to insure truthful testimony. But the point is, this commandment is not meant to be a burden, but a help. It's not "an eye for an eye," but a protection. God doesn't wish to take lives; just look at all the precautions God took at Mt. Sinai, to make sure the people didn't accidentally come up to the mountain, see him, and end up dead. What this commandment does is tell you how *important* life is – to God and therefore to his people. That's the bottom line, and it makes sense: God wants people to be alive, so they can glorify his name, and tell of his deeds to the world.

There is, however, another, maybe bigger issue behind all of this. It's what underlies all the 10 Commandments, as well as all of Israel's law. God had two intentions: to make a strong nation, as we said, AND to make everyone's life the best it could be. And we might as well get to that now, since we're at the beginning of the commandments that deal with humans and our interactions. It's really a two-part issue. The first part is what I mentioned at the start of this sermon, that we should "do unto others as you would have them do unto you." It's like all good universal morality; if I consider what the best thing is to do, in every situation, and then do it, the society, the group of people I belong to, will be stronger. Jesus makes it simple! You'll know what the right thing is to do, because you know how you'd like it if someone else was preparing to act in regard to you. This goes well beyond something as blatant as *murder*; even in little things, you need to keep this principle in mind.

The second part is what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, especially in chapter 5, which you heard read earlier. It's not enough to worry about the mechanics of things. Not killing someone is good; but what if you have and hold enough hate to do it? – and you just haven't acted out yet for various reasons like, say, fear of the death penalty. You ever heard the phrase "murderous thoughts?" There might be something deeper, something underlying, that needs to get fixed. Because here's the thing: if anyone, ancient or 21st century, holds onto anger against someone long enough, it's a killer. It eats you up inside. You shorten your own life – which is another way of killing, isn't it? You poison your relationship with that other person. And we have seen that anger held onto for a long while quite often becomes uncontrollable. You just might wish someone harm, and then harm them! No, if there is anger at a person, then you need to drop everything and fix it, right away.

And what if it doesn't get fixed, then what? You can injure someone in other ways besides violence. You can exclude them. You can talk about them behind their backs. You can discount their contributions to your group or society. Maybe worst, you can refuse to help them in their time of need – a real no-no for those ancient Israelites.

I'm afraid this last kind of "passive aggressive" behavior really is deadly. It's the kind of thing that erodes people's desire to be a part of a group or a society. It creates factions, which often end up being warring factions. That undermines the stability of the group, and that means violence, and that means, sometimes, death. We don't even have to go as far as killing for life to be murderous. Neglect, exclusion, making life too hard to survive, are all extensions of the command covered by the verb *rasah*, it seems

to me, all about anger and hostility and hate. Are you responsible for the demise of someone, when you knew how to do things to help them, but out of your hostility and hatred you refused? You probably are. So even if you didn't strike a blow, or poison the cup, or set up the booby-trap, you can still be a murderer. If you knew how to save a brother or a sister and you didn't do it, or you prevented someone else from doing it, you'd have broken this commandment. If you spewed enough hatred and hostility and anger from your lectern or your pulpit that those who heard caused someone to die – you'd have broken this commandment. And if you had the means to spare another by being generous, and you didn't do it – you'd have broken this commandment for sure.

So maybe we ought to change our sermon title, and possibly the commandment, to “Just Don't Be Murderous.” And the way to do that is to avoid holding onto the “murderous” thoughts. Once again we turn to that message from Jesus. You know, offering a sacrifice to God on the altar at the Temple was the highest duty a good Jew could fulfill, at least in their thinking. But Jesus said that this was to be set aside if you had anger with your brother, or he with you. Drop it immediately at the foot of the altar – meaning you haven't yet offered it to the priest for the sacrifice – and go to the one with whom you are angry or who is angry with you. Take care of this immediately! Because to hang onto the anger is, or could be, murderous.

“All nice talk, Don, but this is 2012! That don't apply to us!” Oh, but I beg to differ. God's intentions for us are just as powerful now as they were those people in 1300 B.C. And we have many more ways to be “murderous” than those ancient folks did. So we have to be careful. We have to look into our hearts and see what our intentions are,

what are desires are. Then we have to turn to this commandment, in the fullest sense, and let it govern our lives. If we can turn our anger into reconciliation; if we can learn to reach out for others instead of lashing out, or pulling back; if we can indeed put others in our place, and treat others the same way we'd like to be treated, even on our worst days – if we can do those things, then we'll all be just one step closer to the life God has in mind for you and me.