“You Shall Not Murder”
Exodus 20:13

A Sermon Delivered by
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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer. Amen.

Our Old Testament reading today comes from the 10 Commandments or the Decalogue which constitutes one of the foundational texts of our faith as Christians, and perhaps THE foundational text in the moral march and development of humanity. The first five commandments have to do with our obedience to God; and the second five, with our relationships to one another. In Exodus 20:13, the 6th Commandment states very clearly, “You shall not murder.” We don’t often hear sermons preached on this specific commandment. I don’t think that I’ve ever preached one; and if you have heard a sermon on the 6th Commandment, it was likely in relationship to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount where he gets at those inner-attitudes of the heart that cause us to malign or “murder” another person’s character.

“You have heard it said,” Jesus remarks in Matthew 5, “that whoever murders will be liable to judgment. But I say to you whoever is angry with his brother, will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool,’ will be liable to the fire of hell.”

These are powerful words! In fact so powerful are these words, and so immediate their application to our lives, that we rarely speak of murder in its strict and most literal sense – I mean the unlawful taking of a human life. It seems adequate to let the seriousness of the crime speak on its own. It seems enough to just make the obvious point – Murder is wrong, don’t do it! And yet, we may be entering an era when merely alluding to murder is not sufficient. The subject of murder, while as old as humanity, has taken center stage in our world as we’re now witnessing an uncontested savagery in the Middle East and other places, that’s becoming a defining image of our generation.

I grew up like many of you, during the Cold War. And we certainly knew our measure of fear and anxiety in those days. In that case it was the fear of mutually assured destruction. I still remember as a boy being afraid that the world would end in a mushroom cloud; that one day I would walk out to see our missiles hurling up towards the sky; and of course the greater fear that missiles would soon be falling on us. And yet, for all the tension and anxiety that that era produced, there was, right or wrong, a certain logic and restraint that tempered it. As horrific as the prospect of nuclear war was (still is); it remained, thankfully, a distant prospect. The world powers seemed to embrace a basic rationale for NOT ACTING.

But all that has changed. Some would say that we are now staring down the barrel of a new and enduring age of brutality and murder. With the march of ISIS and others like them, we are witnessing “an expression of some of the most virulent hatreds that have ever corroded the human breast.” As one man has said, “Every bond of decency between men” perishes beneath their swords. The images I remember as a boy were the occasional pictures of Soviet Bombers being escorted by American fighter jets. But the images we see
today, the images that flood the internet that our Midshipmen have to wrestle with, that our children see, are of the very worst sort: Just a few weeks ago we learned of 21 Coptic Christians beheaded on the shores of Libya. Against such brutality, the 6th commandment speaks unequivocally. God says: YOU SHALL NOT MURDER.

Some of you may have the King James Version of the Bible which renders this, “Thou shall not kill.” And as much as I love the King James Version, this is not precisely accurate. The word used is actually “ratsakh” which in Hebrew does not mean simply “to kill,” but rather “the unlawful or immoral killing of another human being either from malice or through careless or negligent behavior.” The word is never used in the Old Testament of killing in war; which is to say the 6th commandment makes an implicit distinction between what we would consider justified and unjustified killing. When taking a human life in order to protect innocents, defend others, or halt the advance of evil, killing is lawful in God’s economy – at least in the Old Testament code. When taking a human life to punish one who has murdered another, this too, according to the Hebrew code is lawful.

But the kind of killing about which the 6th commandment speaks, the kind of killing we are witnessing in the Middle East, among other places, is murder in the truest sense. It is indiscriminate, it preys on innocent civilians, it is brutal and calculated, marinated with hatred; and it uses victims as a means to an end. These actions are not tempered by any larger devotion to freedom and civility; but they’re intended to create fear, dread, and in the end the tyranny of a world where everyone conforms, either on bent or broken knee. This is murder.

Now to be fair, murder has been around from the very beginning. We may be staring down the barrel of a new age of brutality, but this is an ancient curse. The classic story of murder is told in the opening chapters of Genesis, with the story of Cain and Abel. It’s really a remarkable story. And every time I read, I find myself wanting it to end differently. After the two brothers, Cain and Abel, present their offerings to God, we’re told that God accepts Abel’s offering, but not Cain’s. We don’t exactly know why. We know that Cain offered the first fruits from the land, while Abel offered the firstborn from his flock. So we don’t know if the issue had to do with nature of their gifts, or their attitudes in how they approached God. But in any event, after God rejects Cain’s offering. He doesn’t judge Cain or rebuke him too harshly; but in fact speaks gently to him about another chance, about not letting sin and resentment crouch at his door, about doing well and honoring God, about being a better man. Cain won’t hear it. Rather than submitting himself to God, loving his brother, and doing better, Cain does away with his brother – and destroys the one who, for him, had become a threat. And so God comes to Cain and asks him, “Where is your brother?”

Cain’s answer still reverberates down though history - “Am I my brother’s keeper?” “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Of course the answer is yes, we are our brothers’ keepers. We are responsible for one another no matter one’s race or religion. We value human life because it is the gift of God, and every man, woman, boy and girl is made in the image of God. We value human life because it’s the human life that can become the temple of the Holy Spirit. It’s the human life to whom God speaks in the deep chambers of the heart; and from whom God calls forth love and purpose and friendship. The human life is the crowning work of God’s creation. It’s the human life that Christ enters and makes a home, redeeming and quickening the spirit and offering one hope and peace and joy. Human life is sacred. Every human life is sacred. This is why we when we hear funeral bells, as John Donne said, “we don’t ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for each one of us.” We all share in each other’s humanity. “Every man’s death diminishes me.” But until that day, life is precious, and unless we are protecting or defending or saving life, we do everything we can TO NOT KILL.
This is one of the reasons why I love our Marines and Sailors and Soldiers and Airmen. The pains our
men and women go through to NOT TAKE LIFE, to AVOID CIVILIAN DEATHS, to treat even our enemy
prisoners of war with respect and honor –to feed them, warm them, and care for them. Many today are trying to
explain the acts of these murderous men in the Middle East, or trying to “get behind” what motivates them, and
“understand” what their grievance are. Whatever their reasons are, they’re irrelevant to the issue at hand.
Murder is murder. And murder comes from one source –that ancient enemy who is the father of all murder,
Satan. Jesus says, “Satan was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no
truth in him. Jesus tells us that Satan is “a thief who has come to steal, kill and destroy.” Peter calls him our
adversary who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”

Satan is at the source of every murder because murder is the breaking of God’s clear law. And that is
the dominating desire of evil - to break God’s law. Sadly, these men, by their heinous actions, are actually
breaking themselves upon God’s law – “searing their consciences as with a branding iron,” killing their own
souls. I grieve for the young boys who are being brought up in that culture and society to believe this is the
right way. Proverbs 14: “There is a way that seems right but in the end leads to death.” When I was in
Afghanistan, one of our units on patrol was attacked by a 10 year old suicide bomber…We later learned, this
boy had been taken from his family when he 5 years old, taken across the border…and for 5 years was
indoctrinated by men whose sole purpose was to prepare him to detonate himself at their bidding.

The Scriptures speak about such men – men who prey on the weak and destroy peoples’ lives. 2nd
Timothy tells us such men are: irreconcilable, malicious… brutal, haters of good, treacherous.” In Revelation
21 John speaks of murderers in the same breath as cowards, faithless, detestable…idolaters, and liars, whose
“portion” unless they change is “the lake of fire.” You shall not murder.

Some of you may be wondering why I would preach a sermon like this. I do so because the scripture
says that when we’re confronted with evil, we are to “point these things out as good servants of Jesus Christ,
nourished on the words of faith and sound doctrine.” This means that as Christians who have the mind of
Christ, we have the capacity and the obligation to interpret this world as to its true state of affairs. As Charles
Spurgeon said, every preacher, every Christian ought to have a Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.
And “what the Lord tells us in the darkness, as Jesus said, “we’re to speak in the light; and what he
whispers in our ears, we’re to proclaim upon the housetops.” (Matthew 10:27)

I believe the Lord is saying some things to us from this 6th Commandment…

First, he’s telling us pray. We must pray for our brothers and sisters in Christ who are in chains or
being killed for their faith. In Ephesians 6, the Apostle Paul asks his fellow believers to pray for him “that
utterance may be given him to open his mouth boldly and make known the mystery of the gospel for which he
is in chains.” I can’t imagine the fear and anxiety many of these Christians must feel who fall into the hands
of these captors. But let us pray that they would meet their captors with courage, conviction, love and grace, and
that their witness would be a bright testimony to the power of Jesus Christ. Let us pray that the cross would be
lifted up “for if Christ is lifted up, he can draw all peoples to himself.”

There’s a famous story from the 16th century of two English Christians who were being burned at the
stake for their faith under the reign of Queen Mary - Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley. As they were led to
the pyre and as the flames began to rise and engulf them, those watching heard Latimer call out to his friend,
Ridley: “Be of good comfort Mr. Ridley and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God’s
grace…as I trust never shall be put out!” We’ve seen this throughout history - when believers are persecuted for their faith, and when they are enabled by God’s grace to confess Jesus Christ before their captors, the gospel begins to spread. Tertullian - “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.” So let us pray for these Christians who suffer; for one day, we may be the ones facing great suffering, looking to each other, saying “play the man, stand firm, let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.”

I believe the Lord is also reminding us that during times such as these, some may have to go into harm’s way to address this evil. Earlier I mentioned the distinction between justified and unjustified killing in the Old Testament. We should also be familiar with the concept of “just war” or the just use of force from the New Testament. It principally comes from Romans 13 where Paul says:

“For the government official [and by extension the military man or woman] is God's servant for good…for he does not bear the sword in vain…he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.”

These words tell us that there is a time and a place for good men to take up arms and go into harm’s way. And when they do, when it’s in the service of a just and decent cause, it’s not merely a necessary evil, but it is a good, honorable and praise worthy endeavor. It’s even an act of love. “For greater love hath no man than this - he lay down his life for his friends.”

Finally, the Lord is saying that during times like these, we are to lovingly and faithfully proclaim the gospel. 2nd Timothy 3 and 4 tells us that “in the last days…evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of…preach the word; be ready in season and out of season…be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.” As the world has becomes acutely aware of religion as a source of violence, Christians can be tempted to recede or fall away, or almost apologize for being a person of faith. But this is to completely miss the nature of the Christian message.

The gospel is not about “coercion.” It doesn’t spread by force or domination - if it ever did that was not the Spirit of Jesus. It’s not an “armed doctrine” that relies on elbows to advance. The heart of our faith as Christians, the heart of our message as believers is NOT that God pursues and condemns his enemies, but he longs to save them. The Bible tells us that “God demonstrates his own love in this, that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” “God did not send His Son to the world to condemn it, but that through him, the world might be saved.” The cross is the center of our faith. And the cross says whoever you are, whatever you’ve done, there is One who loves you and has given his life up for you. It’s the story that none of us would’ve ever written; the story of One who in his dying moments, prayed not for revenge or punishment, but prayed “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.

Such love is “foolishness” to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God. And this is the reason that even in the midst of a brutal age, we can have the brightest hope! For in the middle of it all…There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins, and sinners – all sinners - plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains. God knows who are his; and “he is able to save to the uttermost” those who come to Him, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.