



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, March 10, 2013
The Fourth Sunday in Lent (Laetare)

Festal Evensong
at 4pm

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Michael D. Spurlock
on
Exodus 20:13 and Deuteronomy 5:17

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Sermon Series: Commandments as Good News
SERMON 7: NO MURDER

To understand God's prohibition against killing or murder¹, as the sixth commandment is variably translated, we must begin in the beginning when there was only God and besides God there was only nothing. Out of that nothing, God created everything that is, including the earth. God populated our world with living creatures and one of those creatures was especially fashioned in His own image and was animated by His own breath. And in all that work, one cannot attribute a scrap of destructiveness to the hand of God; he reveals himself to be entirely creative; life giving; life affirming.

In the creation account in the book of Genesis, the goodness of life is affirmed by God and the very goodness of man and his place in creation is also affirmed. This goodness is contradicted by the painful experience of death which creeps into the world as a result of the Devil's envy and by the sin of our first parents. (Gen 2.17-3,9) Death crept in by this cooperation of Adam, Eve and the devil; it crashes in when Cain slays Abel in the glade. (Gen 4.8) This first murder is found in a single verse of scripture but it is a verse that has been rewritten every day since with degrading frequency; degrading, because killing reduces human life to the level of a thing rather than the supreme gift of an entirely creative God.

What is established in Genesis is reaffirmed by the sixth commandment given in Exodus. A four corner fence is erected around human life, thou shalt not kill. To trespass on this point is to defy God, to revolt against him and to devolve into a deadly revolt of man against man. Any act of violence, even when it does not result in death, but especially when it does, aligns humanity closer and closer with the devil's way of thinking, who Jesus called "a murderer from the beginning." (John 8.44)

It is good for us to understand where life comes from and why it is good. It is good for us to see that scripture affirms the sacredness of life from Genesis to Revelation, It is good to see that scripture is in accord with our own experience that life *is* good and worthy of protection. And if that were all there was to it; the sixth commandment makes perfect sense and presents no difficulties. But the fact of the matter is; there are difficulties; both in scripture and in human experience. I alluded to the most obvious one in the the beginning of this sermon when I said, to understand God's prohibition against killing or murder, as the sixth commandment is variably translated, we must begin in the beginning...

The difficulty? Did God intend for us to make a distinction between killing and murder? And if so, which did God intend to prohibit when he issued the command? It seems that there is a distinction to be made between murder which is the intentional taking of an innocent life, and killing which is prescribed as just punishment for any number of offenses to the Mosaic law, in the book of Exodus these prescriptions of death as just punishment come near the heels of the initial command to not kill.

One tragedy of the human condition is that situations often occur in the lives of individuals, communities and nations, in which it is difficult to uphold God's values without taking a paradoxical action to defend God's values. Legitimate self-defense is just one example. Defense of an innocent human life has sometimes involved taking the life of an aggressor. Thomas Aquinas summarizes: the right of self defense can have a double effect, the preservation of one's own life, and the killing of the aggressor. The one [defense of life] is intended, the other [death of an aggressor] is not." (*Summa* II.II.64.7) Thus, the sacredness of life is actually affirmed in legitimate self-defense even though it results in the death of another human being.

Another example on a broader scale is when entire communities are threatened with extermination at the hands of an aggressor state. In such cases, the legitimate defense of the innocent becomes more than a right but a grave duty for someone responsible for another person's life or for the common good of family, community or the State. In these situations, in order to protect the lives of others, an individual or state may need to kill an aggressor to ensure the lives of others. In such cases, whether they are between individuals or nations, the fatal outcome is attributable to the aggressor whose action brought the situation about. And if that wasn't paradoxical enough, a bystander, be it person or nation, able to prevent the loss of innocent life and doesn't, is liable to judgment for not killing an aggressor.

To further complicate matters, for Christians in particular, it has not been enough to grapple with Old Testament understandings of the meaning of the sixth commandment, but we must also grapple with the further complications introduced by Jesus' own strengthening of the command to include the prohibition of anger, hatred and vengeance, going so far as to command turning the other cheek and loving our enemies. (Matt 5.22-39,44)

I despair at arriving at any satisfactory conclusion to such a difficult and nuanced subject. Suffice it to say that over the centuries as much or more ink has been spilt in addressing these difficulties as perhaps human blood has been spilt in addressing these difficulties. So I conclude by suggesting this. That we take Jesus' words to love our neighbor seriously. This is an easy place to begin: our Lord said that even the heathen are capable of such sentiments, but then move beyond love of neighbor to the discipline of loving an enemy. If we can find it within us to do that then we can truly say that we have a profound respect for the inviolability of human life.

Then, once having achieved that grace, we will be loathe to exercise our rights to the exceptions to the sixth commandment. But should we ever find ourselves in the position, either as individual or as a citizen of the state, we may still be found to be standing upon holy ground.

ⁱ I have drawn heavily from the Holy Bible; Thomas' *Summa* II-II.64; and *Evangelium Vitae: On the Value and Inviolability of Human Life*, John Paul II, 1995.