

Ten Words and Right Relationships
Sunday, February 14, 2011
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church
Rev. John M. Cleghorn

Scripture: Leviticus 19:17-18
Matthew 5:21-26

With his characteristic square jaw but uncharacteristically weary eyes, Col. Parker Schenecker looked out at those who had gathered to mourn the deaths and celebrate the lives of his two teenage children.

He placed his notes on the pulpit, took a deep breath and began.

“Silence, brothers,” he said, his voice clear and strong, “innocent spirits have passed by.”

For about 30 of us there, his use of the word “brothers” had a particular poignancy. We were, in fact, brothers, having built lasting bonds of friendship in college in the early 1980s. Many of us were fraternity brothers of Parker’s. Others were close friends from what was then an all-male school. In those years, we spent some productive hours in the library and the classroom and our fair share of, shall we say, less productive hours together off campus.

Seeing our friend Parker at a memorial service for his children punctuated an emotional odyssey that began 10 days earlier, when news of the tragedy first broke. Parker, a senior intelligence officer in the Army, was in Qatar in the Mideast on a brief assignment. His wife, obviously struggling with unspeakable demons, shot and killed their daughter, Calyx, and their son, Beau.

Little is yet known about her mental condition. More is sure to come out. Until then we are left with the brutal realities of what has happened.

Last week at Caldwell, we began a short series of sermons on the Ten Commandments and their role in our contemporary lives. It was a series I’d been considering for a while. We covered the first four commandments last Sunday, those that frame the covenant relationship between God and us and us and God.

So today we find ourselves at commandments five and six: Honor your father and your mother; and, you shall not murder. These are the first of what make up the second tablet of God's laws, God's will for how people should live together.

Sisters and brothers, I don't mean to impose the lens of my own past few days on you and how, together, we consider these two commandments. The topic of murder is difficult under any circumstances, more so in a case like this that stirs so many emotions and raises so many questions. I understand that – I share those feelings.

But, perhaps as providence would have it, that is where we are. And, in addition, the lectionary's suggested gospel reading for today is the passage from Matthew we heard a moment ago. In that passage, Jesus reinterprets the Old Covenant, the Law, updating it with the even more radical, all-encompassing ethos of compassion fashioned after Christ's own grace.

If anything, the story of Parker Schenecker and his children does provide particular context and clarity to us today. In it, we can see the depths of human brokenness and the even deeper love of a God who mourns with us amid tragedy. We also see the God who wills for us to live in right relationship with each other and who gave a part of himself to inspire our faith and trust in God's divine design for this world.

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As I said a moment ago, we looked last week at our Creator's first four commandments: You shall have no other god before me. You shall make no idols. You shall not misuse the name of the Lord your God. And, you shall keep the Sabbath holy. They declare God's claim on us and what it requires of us in how we relate to God.

The remaining part of the Decalogue, the "ten words" God gave Moses, speaks to how we are to live with each other. They outline our ethics as Christians, how we are to respond to the great good news of an adoption we could never earn.

The commandment to honor our mother and father is the very basis and model for how we are to live with all people. A quick survey of other world religions and cultures shows that this is a universal value.

An African proverb says this: "If your parents take care of you up to the time you cut your teeth, you take care of them when they lose theirs."

The Talmud of Orthodox Judaism says this: “There are three partners in man, God, father and mother. When a man honors his father and mother, God says, ‘I regard it as though I had dwelt among them and they had honored me.’ ”

The Qur’an adds: “We have enjoined on man kindness to his parents.”

In all of these traditions, honoring one’s parents is, by itself, a basic expectation, a way of sustaining family generation to generation and of contributing to the larger society. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is a way of honoring God. We honor our earthly parents to show how much we honor our heavenly parent.

That response to God for adopting us extends to the community and, as such, this commandment serves as a bridge to the remaining commandments that speak to a broader range of human relations.

Much civic and religious debate has been given to the next commandment, the one against murder. First, we should note that the commandment as stated in the Decalogue is against murder, not killing. Here the commandment speaks to a form of killing deemed socially unacceptable. Another word for it would be homicide.

Sibley Towner, an Old Testament Scholar and Union Presbyterian Seminary Professor Emeritus, notes: “The ancient people did not consider warfare, capital punishment, or even revenge killing to be threatening to the very existence of the community, as long as restraining rules were followed.”¹

Other faiths today still sanction violence under certain conditions. And there are, of course, Christians who make an argument for capital punishment and “just war” as necessary parts of our social construct. So, for any believer, this commandment becomes a touchstone of personal faith. It calls the question on each of us – “As a follower of Christ, what do I believe?”

In the passage we heard from the Gospel of Matthew, Christ is speaking in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. The verses that precede today’s text include those familiar commendations: “You are the salt of the earth” and “You are the light of the world.” Being salt and light, Christ says, calls us to live lives set apart from the world’s ways, even if it means we get labeled as fools.

¹ Commentary on Exodus 20:1-17, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2

Christ then emphasizes just how radical we are to be in the way he reinterprets the Old Testament Law:

“You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you will be liable to the hell of fire.” (Matthew 5:21-22)

In the verses that follow Christ admonishes those in any kind of conflict to seek reconciliation, whatever it takes. Apologize, even if you are not in the wrong; make amends rather than go to court, all in the interest of restoring right relationship.

Christ might as well have added, “I never said it would be easy to follow me.”

Jesus does not rescind the prohibition against murder. To the contrary, he extends it to radical lengths. He says we must manage our anger, not just to avoid murder but to resolve conflict of any kind. Jesus doesn't pretend that we do not get angry, that there is not conflict between people. He got angry himself, at times. But, as children of an omnipotent God, we are to live as peacemakers to manifest the kingdom of heaven on earth. Life is not without judgment, Christ was saying, but judgment belongs to God.

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Friends, we cannot consider this commandment without also thinking, albeit briefly, about issues of capital punishment or whether there is such a thing as a “just war.”

With both, it's inviting to take the easy way out on either end of the argument. On one hand, we can make a simplistic case that “love is all we need,” as the Beatles said. That's true on one level, would that it be so. But it avoids the realities of the world we live in. We know there is evil in the world. There was Adolph Hitler in the 20th century. In the 21st, there are terrorists who work solely in the name of anarchy, such as those who strapped a bomb to a 13 year old last week that killed the latest civilian victims in Iraq.

Faced with the reality of such evil, many of us should confess that the instinct to use might, to strike -- even if we think it's in the name of peace -- lies deep within us. The human capacity for killing is as old as Cain and Abel.

But Christ asks for more. Christ requires more. Christ's instruction is that we are to try every avenue of reconciliation possible, every conceivable alternative to any form of

violence we can find. When we kill the killers – whether it is war or capital punishment – we sink to the lowest form of our being and we must confess to our God that we have failed. We have failed, among other ways, to put in place political, economic and social systems that can sustain peace by providing equity and justice.

For example, while it did not come without some harm, the triumph of the largely peaceful protest in Egypt is a great encouragement. It shows that violence and military might are not the only ways to effect needed change. Let us pray that a fair, representative and just system of government is born out of this month's remarkable events.

With Christ's admonition ringing in our ears, as individuals and as a nation, in our interpersonal relations and in our national diplomatic and military relations, let us also recommit to ways of conducting ourselves that, in the words of Christ, "make the way for peace" in all aspects of our lives.²

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At the service last week for our friend Parker's teenagers, we read a passage from 1 Corinthians. It was that passage from chapter 13 that recognizes straight-on that we will encounter unanswerable questions in life, questions such as why a mother would murder her own children. If you have faced those kinds of questions, you know these verses:

"For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when the complete comes, what is in part disappears . . .," Paul writes. "For now we see as if through a dark glass, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known."³

We also sang that lovely hymn, "It Is Well With My Soul," which includes these words.

And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trumpet shall resound and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

² Luke 19:42

³ 9-10 & 12

And we celebrated the lives of two teenagers who left the world a better place because there were here.

Calyx was 16, a cross country star and a good student, a servant leader who helped raise \$100,000 to fight cancer and planned to run a marathon in Thailand to benefit orphans. Beau was a high-energy 13-year old who loved soccer and was a loyal and considerate friend.

As our group of college friends spent time together before and after the service, there was more talk about God than our past gatherings. Maybe that's because we were all trying to sort out this ugly event. Maybe it's because we're all getting older. Probably some of both.

We talked about what fate awaited the teenagers' mother. We all agreed that she is a very, very ill woman, beset with mental problems that exceed our grasp. We agreed that she would face final judgment, but that judgment would be decided by a God who balances justice with grace, a judgment whose sum would be known only to that God.

We didn't try to analyze or understand the tragedy any further. We knew we didn't have any more answers. Instead, we told stories about our time together more than a quarter-century ago. And we laughed, a lot, so that we wouldn't cry. We recognized and gave thanks for the abundant blessings in our lives -- our own families, our own teenagers. And through it all we kept thinking of Parker, who said he would spend the rest of his life honoring his children because they had honored him with theirs.

It's been said that the Ten Commandments are an exercise in faith. It's true that they label our sins and mark them brightly for us -- because we need it. But the Ten Commandments also are an exercise in faith -- because they require us to trust in the God who gave us this design for living, because, at some time or another, life presents each of us with moments when nothing makes sense. In those moments, what else do we have to hold onto other than our trust in God, who came in Christ Jesus so that we would know what God wants for the world?

In response, God calls us to live in right relationships -- in our families, our society and our world -- seeking to honor those who deserve our honor, reconcile with those with whom we differ and sustain life for God's children of every age.

Would you please join me in prayer as I read the words of St. Francis?

Oh, Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
Where there is hatred, let me sow love,
Where there is injury, pardon,
Where there is doubt, faith,

Where there is despair, hope,
Where there is darkness, light,
And where there is sadness, joy.

Oh, divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek
to be consoled, as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Amen and Amen.