

**People Like Us:  
Don't Take Life Lightly  
Exodus 20:1-13**

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***Thou shalt not kill.***

That is easy enough!

End of sermon!

Let's stand for the benediction!

In so many ways that is the case, isn't it? I mean, we don't kill people! We don't kill people in this congregation. We don't kill people in Nova Scotia! The latest statistics that I have found are from 2016. In that year there were 16 homicides.<sup>1</sup> 16! Now to be honest there were 26 more attempted homicides.

To help put that into perspective, there were 58 homicides in Charleston County, the country where we used to live, last year.<sup>2</sup> There have been 22 in the city of North Charleston alone so far this year!<sup>3</sup> See why we like living here?

Thou shall not kill!

Do we even have to talk about this one?

During these weeks we have been looking at the ten words, the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments that God gave to Moses. These are the words that spelled out the boundaries of the relationship between God and the Hebrew children; the words that gave them a distinctive relationship with God; the words that formed the foundation for the life Jesus lived; the words that form the basis for our lives; the words that help us know how people like us act, and behave, and live.

We have said that people like us worship God—the God that loves us so much, the God that comes to liberate us from our bondage—whatever it might be.

We have said that because we worship God we don't make idols, that God is the center of our lives, that we don't allow other things or other people to become primary. "Seek ye first the kingdom of God" is how Jesus put it. "Purity of heart is to will one thing," is how Søren Kierkegaard put it. We don't worship idols is how we put it! Nothing else takes God's place!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54960/s4-eng.htm>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.postandcourier.com/news/charleston-area-homicides-fell-in-leaders-hope-to-maintain-that/article\\_c7e1ff44-03ce-11e9-83ea-53299941e7d4.html](https://www.postandcourier.com/news/charleston-area-homicides-fell-in-leaders-hope-to-maintain-that/article_c7e1ff44-03ce-11e9-83ea-53299941e7d4.html)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.postandcourier.com/news/north-charleston-homicide-rate-up-from-last-year-here-s/article\\_6a98454c-eb8f-11e9-b34b-ab235480da91.html](https://www.postandcourier.com/news/north-charleston-homicide-rate-up-from-last-year-here-s/article_6a98454c-eb8f-11e9-b34b-ab235480da91.html) As of October 11, 2019.

We have said that we are careful with our language, that we don't allow our words to place us above God, to fall into the heresy that we can tell God what should be done; that we use words that are distinct, that speak grace and hope and peace to a world in which those distinctive are in such short supply.

We have said that we remember the sabbath to remind ourselves that life has a rhythm; that we need a way in life to tell us when we are. We remember the sabbath to remind ourselves that who we are is not dependent on what we do, that life can and does continue without us; that even God rests.

Two weeks ago we remembered that family is important, that honoring our parents, those who gave us life is not only the right thing to do, but may be the only way that we can have a productive life ourselves. We have to make peace with our parents in order to be at peace with ourselves.

We talked about the fact that the commandment about honoring our parents marks a transition point. Until then all the commandments are focused on God. Jesus reminded us that the greatest commandment is "*Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.*" That is what the first 5 commandments remind us. The rest of them remind us that we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves.

It seems simple enough, doesn't it? If you want to love your neighbor, a good place to start is to agree not to kill them! It is a simple enough commandment, don't you think? *Thou shalt not kill.* Just four simple words. We can reduce it by half, can't we—Don't kill!

But the shorter, the clearer the words the more we want to obfuscate them, don't we. We want to try to find some wiggle room. What exactly do you mean? What is being prohibited?

Killing, sure.

Murder, of course!

But what about war;

Abortion;

eating animals;

What about an accident, like when an axe handle comes off and hits someone in the head?

Oh, like all the commandments, even, especially when they seem so straight forward we want to parse the words. We always have!

The Hebrew word is *ratsach*. It is only used 47 times in the Bible, and it is clear that it doesn't refer to capital punishment, or the killing that takes place in war—and God knows that so much, too much killing has been done that way! It is interesting that most of the translations done in the 20th century, the bloodiest, most violent century in history, translate *ratsach* as murder. It is as if we are trying to wiggle out of any responsibility, any guilt.

The truth is that scholars are divided about the exact meaning, but it must be clear that this “word” seeks to protect people from acts of violence.<sup>4</sup>

The practical truth is that we have failed.

We have failed to protect people, our neighbors, our friends, in some cases our very families from violence. Especially violence from guns. Most of the time we just put it away. It is a story on the news, somewhere far away, to other people. So it doesn't affect us.

But there are those times.

June 14, 2015 was one of those magical wonderful days in the life of our family. It was one of those times when everyone was gathered together—all my family, all of Anita's family. We gathered to celebrate Savannah and Jon's wedding. On the banks of Charleston Harbor we watched as they made their promises to each other, we celebrated and danced into the night. It was wonderful! And it stretched into the following week as some family stuck around for vacation.

On Wednesday afternoon Anita's brother in law called and said they were going to baseball game and invited us to join them. It was one of those warm summer nights on the bank of the Ashley River. We had boiled peanuts and a pretzel—all the healthy food you have at a ballgame! And the Riverdogs won!

Late in the game I got a text from a friend saying, *“Is there anything I can do?”* To be honest I thought it was a mis-text, one of those that was suppose to go to someone else.

Little did I know that while we were enjoying a wonderful evening at a baseball game, less than 5 miles away, Dylan Roof had wandered into a bible study at Emanuel AME Church in downtown Charleston, a historic African American congregation, sat there until the closing prayer and while heads were bowed, opened fire killing 9 individuals.

That event tore that congregation, our town, our state wide open. How could such a thing happen? In a church of all places?

But we shouldn't have been surprised. Not really.

The grounds of Virginia Tech are special to our family. That is where Anita and I met. She was a student, I was a campus ministry intern. She turned me down three times before saying yes! That is where we fell in love. Those grounds are special to us. We have wonderful memories there.

But on April 16, 2007, Seung Hui Cho turned turned those grounds into a killing field. He went on a rampage and killed 32 people and wounded 17 others. A former colleague's son was in class that day; they were heading towards final exams. It could have been Hanes, it could have been Anita.

Eleven days before Christmas in 2012 Adam Lanza walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed 20 children and 6 adult staff members. In an elementary school! It could have been our children's school. Our daughter, Alison, knows what it is like

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<sup>4</sup> Thorwald Lorenzen. *Towards a Culture of Freedom: Reflections on the Ten Commandments Today*. (Cascade Books:Eugene OR, 2008.) 97.

to cower behind a locked door with the lights off, her students huddled silently against the wall because of an active shooter drill—or was it?

Once upon a time these were anomalies in the world. But today in the US? Today the line goes, “There were only 4 killed....” Only? I so understand the sentiment I heard just the other day. I noticed a man at the gym wearing a T-shirt from Greenville, SC and asked him he was from there. No, it was where his brother in law lived.

Have you visited him? I asked.

“No,” he replied. “My wife has, but we aren’t going anymore. It’s too dangerous.”

I wanted to protest, but... It isn’t...but it is. The fact is 91 Americans every day are killed by guns—a death toll equal to 9/11 every single month.

You can understand that guy at the gym.

But before we get too smug and complacent here in Canada we have to remember our own recent history.

- A 2014 shooting in Moncton that left 3 RCMP officers dead and 3 other wounded.
- A 2014 shooting in Edmonton that left 8 dead, including the shooter.
- A 2016 shooting in La Loche, Saskatchewan that left 4 dead.
- A 2017 shooting in a mosque in Quebec City that left 6 dead.
- A shooting last year in New Brunswick that killed 4
- So far this year we have had 3 shootings in British Columbia, and Ontario that have left 11 dead.
- And this doesn’t count the van attack in Toronto, or the crossbow attack, or the stabbings<sup>5</sup> or the individual murders that soon get lost in the news, but are never lost on families.

Oh, we too need to hear this commandment.

Thou shalt not kill.

And quickly we protest! But that isn’t us! We don’t do those kinds of things!

And we don’t. But as we have seen, the problem with these commandments is that they can never be taken at face value. There is always a deeper meaning if we take them seriously. Martin Luther once said that the commandments are “baby talk.” They are wonderfully simple and come to us in a gross and uncultured manner so that even the small and less intelligent can understand! As wonderful as it would be for us to live peaceably in all our dealings, God knows us. God knows that there are times when our anger might get the best of us. It is for those times that God just commands us, Don’t kill! Start there! Then,

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<sup>5</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_massacres\\_in\\_Canada](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_massacres_in_Canada) as of October 15, 2019

then maybe we can work on patience and courage and all the other wonderful virtues. But for right now, don't kill!<sup>6</sup>

We need that word don't we? Can we just confess that

This commandment is the lowest common denominator. It pertains not only to our lives in the world, but also our life in the church. How often have we been content to live out the least of the laws requirement. As long as we don't kill someone, as long as we don't commit murder, then we are fine, right?

But what about the ways in which we kill over time through our negligence. Oh, we aren't killing anyone, but as we stand by and allow our world to slowly be suffocated by CO<sub>2</sub>, as we allow whole communities, islands, even nations to be drowned by rising sea levels and don't do anything that might inconvenience us. Are we not guilty of violating this commandment?

This is another one of those commandments that is phrased in the negative. It tells us what not to do. Don't kill! But what if we phrased it positively? How would you put it?

John Calvin in his *Institutes* put it this way:

*All violence, injury, and any harmful thing at all that may injure our neighbor's body are forbidden to us. We are accordingly commanded, if we find anything of use to us in saving our neighbor's lives, faithfully to employ it:*

*if there is anything that makes for their peace, to see to it;*

*if anything harmful, to ward it off;*

*if they are in any danger, to lend a helping hand.<sup>7</sup>*

It is not enough just not to kill. As Easter people we are called to bring life—even in the darkest of places, in the most hopeless of situations. We are called to help people live have abundant lives. We are called to live out the prayer of St. Francis.

*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.  
O 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,*

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<sup>6</sup> The Truth About God: The Ten Commandments in Christian Life by Stanley Hauerwas, William H. Willimon  
<http://a.co/hnFb8Ci>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

*It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
And it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.*

May that be our prayer this day and forever.

Amen and amen.