

September 4

Sanctity of Life and Marriage

Exodus 20:13-14, Luke 6:9-10

At first glance when it comes to the sixth and seventh commandments it seems as if we have little to talk about. They are plain and uncompromising. Killing and adultery are ruled out, period! Yet questions remain, as we will see. Before we get into them we need to step back and see the positive values these two commandments were trying to instill in these newly released slaves. The first was that life was sacred. We think, well yes...but for former slaves who could be killed for a minor infraction, life was not seen as very precious. They had been worked to death. They had been under the unjust edict of Pharaoh who had decreed all male children should be killed. As we will see, this commandment does not rule out all kinds of killing but it was trying to help them see that life is sacred and belongs to God. It is a concept that we still struggle with even to this day. And the commandment against adultery was more about lifting up the value of a stable home life and the honoring of women than it was about sex outside of marriage. Again, they were encouraging the people to value each other and live in ways that support community. Now to the questions.

We hear, "Thou shalt not kill." What kind of killing is being prohibited? It wasn't against all killing because other laws talk about how someone could be stoned to death for certain infractions. So state sponsored capital punishment was not ruled out and neither was the killing that happens as a result of a country going to war or having to protect itself from aggression. So what was intended?

The Hebrew word, translated kill, carries with it some intention. So we know the commandment is against murder. The first recorded killing in the Bible is Cain's deliberate murder of his brother, Abel. Cain is punished severely by God because life, all life, belongs to God. If it was only about this kind of action the commandment would have been, "Thou shalt not murder." Some translations as of late have written it this way but that is too limiting. It is sharing the bigger piece that our lives belong to God.

So what does this mean today? When it says life belongs to God are we talking about all creatures, not just human? Does the deliberate polluting of our environment which leads to the early death of many, particularly the poor, come under this command? What about the death penalty? What about military actions? We don't go to war any more, we have actions, like drone strikes. What about police actions and reactions? What about abortion? What about end of life issues? If life is sacred and life belongs to God are we bound to squeeze every moment of life out of these bodies? Do hospice protocols that focus on keeping us pain free but also shorten our life fall under this command? Are we supposed to undergo chemo therapy that will not cure us or surgeries that will not heal us just because they are options and give us a few more weeks or months of life? There are no clear answers to any of these questions.

If we go back to the basic affirmation that life belongs to God and life is sacred how do we live so that we honor this command? This is a major topic that we are facing today in the Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter or All Lives Matter debates and confrontations that we are seeing. This issue has been politicized by many until there feels as if there is no middle or common ground. This commandment reminds us all life is sacred. This means we should work at systemic racial injustices that are behind some of the Black Lives Matter issues. We need to support our police who do an incredibly tough and sometimes dangerous job while holding them accountable, for that is how you build respect. We need to work on issues of poverty, drug addiction and mental health, for that makes all of our communities safer, and celebrates all lives as being of worth.

How do you honor this commandment with end of life issues? That is going to be answered differently for each individual. But again if we are talking about the sanctity of life for me, at least, we have to also talk about the sanctity of dying. Death is a part of life and so if we honor the sanctity of life we need to also honor how we leave this life. That is why I believe that it is fine to refuse some treatments and surgeries and to embrace hospice pain killing drugs. For me, to try and squeeze every last moment out of this tired body is challenging our faith that says we are going to a better place. Now I am in no hurry to get there but in faith I will also embrace that leg of my life journey

when the time comes. The issues around assisted suicide are many and complex and are one of those areas where I see no clear answer to this command to see life and our death as sacred. When we get to capital punishment and war, again people line up on different sides of this issue all claiming Biblical precedent for their stance. It is all confusing and makes us think and make choices.

The questions we had with the command about killing are also there when it comes to adultery. In Biblical times there were different rules for men and for women. Remember the woman taken in adultery who was brought to Jesus? They told Jesus we have laws that say it is legal for us to stone her to death for this sin. Have you ever thought, "Where was the man?" The rules for a man were different. If the woman he committed adultery with was unmarried he was supposed to marry her as a second wife. If she was married he was to pay a fine to her husband. The husband could take the money and still have her stoned to death because he was the injured party and she was the sinner! This law says nothing about two unmarried people have sex. So, Jesus goes even further and says if you lust you have committed adultery! Jesus was trying to get the people of his day to see women as being people of worth not just property. Jesus would continually, in so many different ways, support women and their worth and importance, for he realized that as they were honored the family structures were strengthened. That is what this commandment is all about. It is the value of family and all within it.

Today we want to know if any sex outside of marriage is acceptable since everybody is doing it. The bigger issue is that of family relationships. We are reminded that they are sacred and we need to live accordingly. For me the big question is not about sex but how do we create loving and life affirming relationships. It is a challenge for husbands to love and respect their wife. This means having sex outside of marriage destroys that respect and is wrong. Wives need to love and respect their husband and so the same sexual rules apply. But even more, it is about listening to the other, being willing to have some give and take, and to affirm the other person for who they are, not how you wish they would be. It is also about how we support children and grandchildren in their relationships. I see people talking about the man/woman their child or grandchild

married in derogatory ways. Isn't that a form of adultery for you are placing your affection outside of their relationship?

We want these rules to be simple. We want to hear that they say you shall not murder or have sex outside of marriage. Those are easy and clear and mostly we can say I follow them. When it gets to these bigger issues of seeing life as sacred and relationships as sacred it gets messy and we sometimes find we fail.

In closing let me share one story. She came to see me because she was upset with her husband. She felt he was being totally unreasonable. He mentioned to her that he felt she was spending too much time with her girlfriends and so they didn't have as much time to do things together. She was angry and wanted to tear him down for being self-centered and all the rest. I asked about the issue that had caused this conversation to arise. She said, "Three of us are planning a girl's week away. It is something we have done for years and now he doesn't want me to go." I asked if he had felt this way in the past and she said no. So what was different? It seems that his vacation schedule had been changed this year and he would be off at this same time. He didn't want to do something by himself or just stay home. He could not change it. He felt that since she always did this with her friends that this year she could let it go. She said to me, "See how unreasonable he is. I shouldn't have to give up my time with my friends for his vacation." Do you see how she had changed the priority of her affection? His request was reasonable and logical. He didn't resent her going away most of the time. Her values had gotten out of sorts. I said that perhaps she should talk with her friends and see if they could reschedule their time because of her husband's changed vacation schedule. She looked at me and said, "You men are all alike. I should have figured you would take his side." She went on her trip, he stayed home but you could tell something serious had changed in their relationship.

Life is sacred. Relationships are sacred. Do what you can to affirm them both. This is what these commandments ask from us as we keep God central in our lives.