

I

As part of my preparation for entering the ministry, I spent about six months as a chaplain intern at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta. Grady is the largest public hospital in the Southeast, and it's known the world over for its Level I trauma center.

In those six months at Grady, I experienced more death and dying than I had in my life before or since. And to tell you the truth, some of it I got used to it pretty quickly. When you work in a public hospital with a large trauma center, it's a simple fact of life that not every patient who comes through the doors is going to pull through. And I accept the notion that life comes with a certain amount of inherent risk. People have heart attacks. People have strokes. People have car accidents. Life is precious and can turn on a dime.

But the part I never got used was the injury and death that we human beings inflict on one another. Sometimes, the death we visit upon one another comes quickly and violently, from guns and knives and sticks and stones and fists.

But sometimes the death we visit upon one another comes slowly and silently, like when a patient died from a treatable disease simply because she could not afford the treatment. The death visited upon her came not through violent acts, but through the public policies by which we have chosen to govern ourselves. I never got used to the

reality that that in the 21st century right here in Georgia, in the wealthiest country in the world, some of our brothers and sisters have a statistically lower life expectancy than others based upon their zip code.

II

And then yesterday afternoon, 20 of our brothers and sisters were murdered while they shopped at a Walmart. Last night, nine of our brothers and sisters were murdered in Dayton, Ohio. In both cities, scores more have sustained life-altering injuries.

And it strikes me that our national response to these events has become a ritual. By definition, a ritual is the means by which communities make meaning together. And so we send our thoughts and prayers and we commend the first responders. We argue about mental health and the meaning of an amendment to the Constitution. And then as we browse our social media feeds, we notice, just in time for back to school shopping, an ad for a bullet-proof backpack. And then we say a little prayer that it won't happen in our town, to the people that we love, and we go back to our regularly scheduled lives and wait for the next event.

I may just be a naive preacher, but I refuse to become accustomed to this sad little ritual. I refuse to become used to the death that we inflict upon one another, whether that violence is fast and loud or slow and silent. I refuse to believe that the nation that just 50

years ago landed on the moon is incapable of reducing the gun violence that is tearing apart our streets, our classrooms, our houses of worship, our very souls.

III

This summer, we're making our way through a series of sermons entitled "Words to Live By: The Ten Commandments." And today we come to the sixth commandment, "You shall not murder."

If you've been paying close attention, you may have noticed something about the sixth commandment that makes it different than the five that come before it. In the first five commandments, God gives a rationale or a warning or a promise. For example, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, therefore, have no other gods before me."

Or, "Do not make for yourself an idol; do not bow down to them or worship them, for I the Lord am a jealous God."

Or, "Do not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for God will not acquit anyone who misuses the name."

Or, "Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, because I made the entire cosmos in six days, and rested on the seventh."

Or, "Honor your father and your mother so that it may go well with you in the land."

But then we come to the sixth commandment, just four words. You shall not murder.

As we've been saying all along, these commandments are rooted in the larger biblical story – the story of the liberation and redemption of God's covenant people, collectively called the Israelites, to whom we trace our heritage of faith through Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ.

These are *our* stories. And when the book of Exodus opens, our ancestors are not living in their homeland, but rather because of a worldwide food shortage, in order to have a fighting chance at life for themselves and for their children, they have emigrated to Egypt.

And at first, they are welcomed as neighbors and friends, and they become important contributors to the Egyptian culture and economy. But the book of Exodus opens with an ominous note. A new king, called Pharaoh, came to power in Egypt. And he looked at this thriving immigrant community in the midst of his kingdom and saw not neighbors and friends, but a threat.

And so Pharaoh enacted some new public policies in Egypt. For starters, he ordered the enslavement of our ancestors, all but ensuring centuries of crippling generational poverty.

But that wasn't enough. His advisors pointed out to him that Egypt was experiencing a crisis of demographics, because our Israelite ancestors experienced a higher birth rate than their Egyptian neighbors, and Pharaoh's advisors warned that if something wasn't done about it, Israelites would soon outnumber Egyptians. They warned with ominous tones that if this came to pass, Egypt would no longer be Egypt.

So Pharaoh ordered that all baby boys born to Israelite mothers were to be forcibly separated from their parents and then thrown into the Nile River. In short, consumed fear and in the service of racist Egyptian public policies, Pharaoh turned to murder as a political tool.

But when we come to the giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai, our ancestors have been delivered from Pharaoh's racist regime. They have been led out of Egypt by the hand of God. And the Ten Commandments become the framework around which God will transform people from slaves and refugees into God's holy nation, God's royal priesthood, God's covenant people. The Ten Commandments are not just a set of laws and rules – they are a statement of values for a moral, just society.

And so there is no ambiguity, no rationale, no further commentary on the sixth commandment. You shall not murder. Period. Full stop.

At first glance, this seems pretty cut and dried. But then when you think about it a little more, all sorts of moral and ethical issues begin to come forward.

For example, in the autumn of 1944, when he was not yet 20 years old, my grandfather found himself in the 102nd Infantry Division as it made its way through France, Holland, Belgium, and finally Germany. He received two purple hearts, a Bronze Star, and was taken as a prisoner of war just 10 days before VE Day. Although he never talked about his experiences, I realize now that he undoubtedly killed other human beings and witnessed the killings of countless others. Did he break the sixth commandment?

What about capital punishment? The crosses that adorn our churches remind us that Jesus of Nazareth was charged, tried and executed for blasphemy and sedition. Just last month, the Attorney General of the United States ordered the resumption of the execution of federal prisoners after a 16-year hiatus. Is executing someone, even if it's for murder, in and of itself a violation of the sixth commandment?

What about the beginning of life? Is it a breach of the sixth commandment to terminate a pregnancy if the pregnancy represents a mortal threat to the life of the mother? What if the pregnancy is the result of a crime?

And what about the end of life? Is it a breach of the sixth commandment to remove life support? What about

electing to forego treatments that would extend life? What about administering medications to intentionally shorten it?

And what about Scripture itself? As the old song says, Joshua fit the battle of Jericho, and when the walls came a tumblin' down, "they devoted to destruction by the edge of the sword all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and donkeys."¹

What about the closing lines of Psalm 137, when, out of a deep woundedness, out of deep, deep national lament, the psalmist prays to God for vengeance against their Babylonian enemies, praying, "O Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us. Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the stone."²

Perhaps the sixth commandment is not as cut and dried as it first appears. And of course people of deep, biblical faith can and do disagree sharply about many of the ethical and moral dilemmas of our day.

IV

But let's bring this a little closer to home. What does this mean for you, my brother, as you live and move and have your being right here in Athens, Georgia, in 2019? What does this mean for you, my sister, as you try to follow Jesus Christ in your daily living?

¹ Joshua 6:21

² Psalm 137:7-8

Here's one thing I can say to you with absolute certainty. My brother, there never has been and never will be another single human being like you. My sister, there are more than seven billion people on the planet right now, but there is only one you, and you were fearfully and wonderfully made by the Lord your God.

You are irreplaceable. You are precious. You are loved beyond all reason. In the gospels, Jesus tells some parables about what God does when those who are lost become found again.

He tells the story of a woman who had a few silver coins and lost one. She didn't just look under the couch cushions for a few minutes and then give up, saying, "Oh well, life happens, I've still got all these." No, she tore the house apart like a mad woman, and then when she found that lost coin, she danced around like a crazy woman and then called the neighbors and threw a party, because what had been lost had been found.³

Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who had 100 sheep, but one wandered off. The shepherd didn't say, "Oh well, such is life as a shepherd. There's always bound to be some breakage. At least I've still got these 99." Jesus says the shepherd left the 99 and went over hill and dale and through bramble and thorn until he found that one lost sheep. And then he carried it home on his own shoulders, singing and

³ Luke 15:8-10

laughing and smiling from ear to ear, for what had been lost had been found.⁴

A normal person might say, “Well, some coins are expendable.” A normal person might say, “Well, sometimes, sheep just get lost.” A normal person might say, “Well, some lives just have more value than others.”

But the God we read about in Scripture is not a normal person. The God whom we come to know through Jesus Christ is not a normal person. The God of our ancestors is the author and giver of life, and to God, every single human life is precious and irreplaceable.

That’s how God feels about you, my brother. That’s how God feels about you, my sister. You are cherished and loved, and you are irreplaceable. God loves you so much that God would rather go to the cross for you than live without you.

And here’s the thing I’m still trying to understand about God’s love – God’s love is bigger and wider and deeper than my little brain can ever fathom. The way that God feels about you – that if you were ever lost, God would tear the place apart until you were found – that’s the same way God feels about your worst enemy. The way that God feels about you – that if you were ever lost, God would cross every mountain and valley and bramble and thorn until you were found -- that’s the same way God feels about that person

⁴ Luke 15:3-6

⁵ Genesis 12:3

who, if you’re really honest with yourself and with God, in the deepest, darkest places of your heart, you’d just as soon see their little ones dashed against the stone.

And I just don’t understand that kind of love. I just don’t understand that kind of grace. Perhaps that’s why they call it amazing.

V

My friends, God called our ancestors, and God is calling us, to be God’s chosen, covenant people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, so that we might be a blessing to all the families of the earth.⁵

So may we remember who and whose we are. May we remember that we are loved, we are cherished, we are precious in God’s sight. May we remember that we follow Jesus, who says, “You have heard that it was said, an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you love your enemies and to pray for those who persecute you.”⁶ May we remember that we follow Jesus, who admonishes us to put away our swords.⁷ May we remember that we follow Jesus, who was publicly executed by the state for crimes that he did not commit. May we remember that we follow Jesus, who defeats the power of sin and death and invites us to a new life in his name.

Amen.

⁶ Matthew 5:38, 44

⁷ Luke 22:49-51