

A FOUR-LETTER WORD

Seventh in series, Ten Commandments Revisited The Sixth Commandment

Preached by Douglas Norris at the First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
March 3, 1985 Matthew 5:38-48

While we were in Manteca, one of our church girls returned home from her kindergarten class excited, yet embarrassed, "Mother, Joey said the F-word in school today!" To which her mother, treading on dangerous ground, inquired, "What is the F-word, dear?" Blushing and giggling as only little girls do, she replied, "Fool!" The little girl may not know the F-word, but I know a four-letter word that is far uglier and more obscene! Some church folk are offended by the increasing use of four-letter words in movies and TV--descriptive language that reflects a lack of education and a low level of imagination! But, the four-letter word, taken for granted, that must be banished from the vocabulary of the world is "kill."

Our world's lifestyle of killing, violence, and war is leading us to the destruction of this planet. We have reached a point in human civilization where the taking of human life must be banished, where violence against humans must be repudiated. The sixth commandment, "You shall not kill," originally meant, "You shall not murder," but Jesus extended the meaning of the commandment into an ethic that has not yet been attained. We are people of the covenant, where God is our God, and we are called to live God's lifestyle as an alternative to the world's lifestyle. You and I are called to model a new lifestyle. Too long have we reflected--mirrored--the world's obsession with killing.

"You shall not kill" is more than a commandment prohibiting the taking of another person's life. "You shall not kill"--with Jesus' further elaborations to turn the other cheek, walk the second mile--is not a lifestyle of cowardice. Too long we have interpreted Jesus' commands as commands to do nothing: to acquiesce, to cower and meekly let other people do whatever they wish. Doing nothing was never taught by Jesus. Not only shall you not kill, but you shall resist, you shall dehostilize, and you shall act positively in such a manner that the enemy becomes, perhaps not a friend, but at least becomes a nonenemy.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies." Love does not mean having good warm feelings towards the enemy, but it means to act in such a manner that the enemy ceases to be an enemy. This principle might be called the "Second Mile Strategy." In our gospel lesson today, Jesus said if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles! It was the custom in that day for a Roman soldier, a member of the occupation forces, to compel a Jew to carry the soldier's pack one mile. At the end of the mile, the Jew could throw down the pack and go on about his business. Jesus suggests the Second-Mile Strategy. Transform the compulsory service into a voluntary act of service that might disarm the astonished Roman soldier. Perhaps the two might engage in conversation. Perhaps the soldier will feel less like an enemy, and the Jew feel less like an enemy.

In other words, dehostilize situations and people. Act positively in such a manner that potentially dangerous and inflammatory situations are dehostilized. In the face of the nuclear arms buildup, many of us feel frightened, hopeless and powerless. I believe Jesus' ethic--God's lifestyle--is never a call to hopelessness or despair. We are not called to do nothing, for Jesus was an activist. The theme of the Beyond War Movement is, "Working together we can build a world beyond war." Working together includes working with the Soviets. Last year 3200 people gathered in San Francisco, watched themselves on TV, and then, at 8:30 p.m., the video was received from Moscow where a similar gathering was being held. There, on TV, they waved at each other, waved hope for peace, for a world beyond war. Vladimir Pozner, the Soviet host in Moscow, summed it up, "Maybe there will be giant video screens set up in all of the

cities on all continents, the mirror for humanity where people will finally see that the world is one and that ours is a small cosmic home." Jesus calls us to work actively to dehostilize, to dehostilize even the threat of nuclear confrontation.

There is a further dimension interpreted and taught by Jesus that is little understood by us today. "You shall not kill" does not mean that evil and violence are not to be resisted. Jesus calls us to resist, but not to resist with violence. Use positive action. This is called the "Two-Cheek Strategy." Jesus said that if anyone strikes you on one cheek, give him/her the other cheek as well. That act is not an act of cowardice, but an act of courage. We are not asked to do nothing when attacked, but to act positively in such a manner that the violent act is diffused.

There is a delightful story of resistance in the first chapter of Exodus, before Moses was born. The Egyptian Pharaoh was worried about the number of Hebrew slaves. Fearing a rebellion, he instituted a devious method of Hebrew birth control. He called in two Egyptian midwives and instructed them to kill all newborn Hebrew boys, but to let girls live. The Egyptian midwives, even before this commandment was given to Moses, were offended by the four-letter word "kill," and deliberately chose to disobey the government and to obey God. They let the male children live as well as the female children. Then the Pharaoh called them before him to inquire why male Hebrew children were living. Listen to their delightful reply (and remember Jesus' admonition to be wise as serpents, gentle as doves). The women said, "The Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they give birth easily, and their babies are born before either of us gets there!" They resisted violence, they resisted killing, and put their own lives in danger.

In 1980, 26 persons from El Salvador fled their homeland, fled terrorism, torture, and death squads. They left friends, jobs and possessions. Near Nogales, Arizona, at the U.S. border, they gave a coyote all the money they had and hired him to lead them to safety in our country. A coyote is a person who preys on people who are in desperate straits. Coyotes are in the business of smuggling people. The coyote took them far enough into the Sonoran desert so that they could not find their way back, and then deserted them. The Sonoran desert is hostile to humans--no food, no water, and boiling temperatures. Within days, half of them had died--men, women and children. The other half survived by drinking their own urine! They struggled northward until spotted and helped by a Tucson rancher. That was the beginning of the sanctuary movement. Wouldn't you have helped? Churches who abhor the obscene four-letter word "kill" befriended the refugees and offered them protection even though it is against the law. Our government denies that sending these people back means sending them to their death. Which has higher priority--the law of man or the law of God? On January 14, 1985, federal agents arrested 60 Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees and 16 American Christians, including two priests, three nuns and a Presbyterian minister. John Fife, the Presbyterian minister, spoke on behalf of those indicted, "We will continue to assert the church's right to administer sanctuary to helpless people whose lives hang in the balance every day. We cannot abandon our help to Central American refugees without abandoning our religion, our faith." They resist that people may live. Jesus calls us to dehostilize and to resist.

The best example of Jesus' teaching is Jesus himself. When his accusers screamed, Jesus answered with dignified, eloquent silence, and gave Pontius Pilate second thoughts. When they beat him, humiliated him and killed him, Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." His courage and gentleness so impressed a Roman soldier that he cried, "Truly, this was the Son of God." Jesus' positive action dehostilized the situation and prevented further violence towards his disciples and followers. His

submission, not to the violence of people, but to the will of God, transformed his death into the means of salvation for all humankind.

We gather today because of Jesus' life and death. He is our example as we seek to live God's lifestyle as people of the covenant on behalf of the world which so desperately today needs the witness, "You shall not kill."

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