

Matthew 5:21-24
June 7, 2009

South Plains

sight of what matters most. What matters most is the preservation of life, individual life and community life.

Thou Shalt Not Kill

Last Sunday morning about the time we were leaving our sanctuary, the Reformation Lutheran Church in the central time zone was beginning worship. Dr. George Tiller was ushering, handing out bulletins and welcoming worshipers just as ushers were doing in churches across America. His wife had already taken her place in the choir. Dr. Tiller was a physician whose work had become controversial because he was known to perform late-term abortions. His clinic was bombed in 1986 and he was shot in both arms in 1993. Despite opposition, he continued his work. Last Sunday as he ushered in his church, he was shot and killed. His assailant is presumed to be a man described by his own family as suffering from mental illness, a man caught up in the anti-abortion movement. Although this attack is not representative of the anti-abortion movement, it is a telling symptom of the debate, a debate that too often produces more heat than light.

My intention this morning is to look with you at scripture that instructs Christians to preserve life, to protect life and to sustain life because life is a gift of the living God. I choose to address this subject today because I believe the killing of George Tiller is a terrible emblem of the culture wars that have ramped up the volume of public discussion until both sides have lost

It is inevitable that my own bias will color this sermon so I need to tell you at the outset that I am a reluctant and uneasy believer in the notion that women have the final decision to make about a pregnancy. That decision and its parameters will change as the pregnancy develops. I once would have called myself “pro-choice,” but I have come to believe that both “pro-choice” and “pro-life” are political positions that are more helpful in fund-raising and political campaigns. They have become increasingly bankrupt as ethical or moral positions. The rhetoric of both sides works against the preservation of life as I understand the words of Jesus.

I’ll try not to be pedantic, but I encourage you to get out your pew Bible and follow along with the passages I’m using in this sermon. Part of our problem with discussions about morality in the church is that we latch on to verses that support our politics without looking at the larger context of scripture. At the risk of boring you to death (pun intended), I invite you look with me first at the gift of life in the opening chapters of Genesis.

In Genesis, chapter four, Cain kills his brother Abel. The Lord tells Cain that for his punishment the earth will not give him a living, and he must be a wanderer and a fugitive for the rest of his life, a kind of beggar. When folks would ask that quintessential southern question, “Who are your people?” Cain had no

answer. Cain complains that without family and community, anyone may kill him. In 4:15, the Lord replies, "Not so!" And, the Lord puts a mark on Cain to protect him. Cain is to be punished with exile instead of capital punishment. The reason God takes murder so seriously is found in Genesis 9:6 where the Lord tells Noah:

Whoever sheds the blood of a human,

By a human shall that person's blood be shed;

For in his own image God made humankind.

Look at Exodus 20:13.

The Genesis material is preliminary, a foundation for morality. In the book of Exodus, any confusion about what God wants from us ought to be cleared up. Look at Exodus, chapter 20, verse 13. The commandment is terse and to the point. In Hebrew, it's two words. In English, it says, "You shall not murder." The word for "murder" usually means willful, premeditated, malicious killing without any legal justification. It is occasionally used to describe accidental killings or unintentional homicide. But, the intent of the sixth commandment is unavoidable: you shall not commit murder. Scripture has several lists of God's requirements in which some of the commandments are left out or changed. However, murder is always on the list as wrong.

One of the persistent heresies of the church is the belief that Jesus did away with the rigidity and harsh interpretation of the commandments and replaced them

with love and forgiveness. To the contrary, Jesus intensifies and broadens the prohibition against murder.

If you are angry with a brother or sister (he says), 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)

Whether or not we are able to keep Jesus' more intense version of the commandment, we cannot escape the force of his words. Jesus does not condone murder. If there is such a thing as justifiable homicide, we cannot say it's OK because we were angry. Jesus uses the word "brother" because anger and insulting language within the fellowship of the church is especially dangerous. As long as God insists on filling the church with people, we can expect to have conflict among Christians. Sincere followers of Jesus Christ will come to different conclusions about what God requires. And, we will fight over our differences. But, without the anger that can lead to killing

A fair fight between Christians will mean that we avoid insults and slurs and exaggerations. The rhetoric in the conflict over abortion has gotten out of hand. The church of Jesus Christ is not the only dog in this fight. Other organizations with little or no religious foundation have gotten involved. Some groups, as always happens, have tried to co-opt the language and people of faith for their own purposes. That's their problem.

I am not saying that Christians have no role to play in the debate. The church has at least two important contributions we can make to our society: The gift of a right attitude and the gift of right thinking. In the first place, we can demonstrate Christian conversation about morality as a model of civility. We want to avoid insults and anger in our debate simply as a matter of obedience to the words of Jesus. In this same passage from the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus connects our disagreements to worship. Don't come to worship, he says, until you have reconciled with your brothers and sisters. Communion is a sacrament of reconciliation. Christ in his death reconciled us to God. His table presents that reconciliation to us again as well as providing us with fellowship with one another. Christian fellowship is possible only because our reconciliation with God reconciles us to one another.

The Apostle Paul takes communion one step further. If we do not come to the Lord's Table reconciled with each other, we come unworthily. We have not really seen the body of Christ which is the church, the body of Christ presented in the bread of the sacrament, the body of Christ broken for our sakes and made whole in the resurrection. The world will see this reconciliation as respect and civility. It is a fellowship created by the death and resurrection of Christ. The way we live out conflict and disagreement in the church becomes a witness to the world, a demonstration of the power of the gospel. We must respect each other in our differences or we are

lost. That's the first contribution we can make to the abortion debate: respect for opponents.

Now look at Galatians 5:13-15.

The second contribution is the gift of ideas and principles. Preserving life is not just an individual matter. It's a community concern. Christian morality is part of the glue that holds a community together. Every time we read about another shooting or another crime that leads to death, we lock our doors and cast a suspicious eye at strangers and the peace of our community loses something. We lose a little precious freedom.

Paul writes to the Galatians, "You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters, only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another (5:13-15)." That's an appropriate warning this week when we seem consumed by self-righteousness.

The church is in danger of consuming itself in this controversy. Our nation is in danger of consuming itself in the same controversy. Neighbor love is rooted in every great religion. It translates easily among Christians and Jews and Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus. Neighbor love works in the newer religions. The church

of Jesus Christ offers to the world not only the principle of neighbor love, but a profound understanding of this love, an example of this love in the life of Jesus of Nazareth, and a demonstration of this love in our mission.

Jesus did not stop with loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. He taught us to love our enemies, and that means loving our opponents in the abortion debate. The principle of protecting life, especially for Christians, extends to include the preservation of the whole community.

We have a marvelous gift of Christian morality to offer the world. But we need to know what we're doing. And, we need to act in a manner consistent with our Christian principles and convictions. We need to nurture neighbor love in the rich soil of the gospel.

Matthew tells us that when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, one of his followers drew a sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear. Self defense. Jesus refused that kind of help. "All who take the sword will perish by the sword," he says in Matthew 26:52. He had a better way. We have a better way. We need to take that better way.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.