

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost- August 13, 2023

Scripture lesson: Matthew 5:21-24 & Romans 12:14-18

YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID . . .”

You may remember Richard Hickock and Perry Smith. A while back they were well known-infamous, in fact, for brutally murdering an entire family in Holcomb, Kansas. They had been in prison before the murders. Perry had painted a large, pastel portrait of Jesus and had given it to the prison chaplain. But when he and Richard got out on parole, they planned their killing with manic intensity.

They didn't know the Clutter family. They had heard Mr. Clutter kept major stash of cash in the house and they wanted it for a trip to Mexico. It turned out that there was no money, but Hickock and Smith killed the family anyway- *In Cold Blood*, as Truman Capote wrote of it. Theirs was the sort of deed that the Fifth Commandment, traditionally translated as “You shall not kill,” was originally intended to forbid. But most recent Bible translations render it, “You shall not murder” because that in fact comes closer to the original meaning.

Other forms of killing were widely accepted at that Biblical time. For example, people were supposed to be killed for breaking the Fourth Commandment. Failing to properly “Honor your father and your mother” could get you the death penalty.

Enemies, of course, were to be killed in battle. When “the ban” was in effect during wartime, all living creatures on the enemy side, including children and animals, were to be slaughtered. Only virgin women were to be spared so that they could be taken as sexual slaves and concubines.

Those killings weren't simply accepted; they were considered to be the very will of God.

And yet, *murder* was forbidden. To be more specific, as Biblical scholar, Terence Fretheim, tells us, the Hebrew word *rasah* used in this command means “any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstance and by whatever method, that might result in death.” All such deeds were prohibited because every human life was held to have sacred worth. Created in God's image, it could never be taken lightly. As Fretheim further highlights, this commandment called for “a lengthy pause filled with careful soul-searching and the absence of vengefulness and arrogance” in any matter concerning life and death.

To which most of us today would probably say, “Well, of course,” although we might also question, as I do, how lengthy the pause and how careful the soul-searching could have been for the ancient Israelites to embrace as much killing as they did. Then again, I'd best not be quick to judge harshly, lest I forget what Jesus does with murder in today's first Scripture reading.

From his Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:21-22, he says, “You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, ‘You shall not murder’; and ‘whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, 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."

Jesus says that there are other ways to kill besides murder, ways which God forbids just as strongly. With this, he brings the Fifth Commandment very close to each of us. I might like to think, "Never in a million years would I commit murder." But Jesus comes to me and says, "Think again, brother. You probably already have, and many times."

The Greek word for anger used in Matthew 5, verse 21 is *orge*. It refers to anger that we nurture, that we cultivate. It's used here as a present passive participle which when translated literally means, "A person who is giving in to angering"- or put differently, someone who is indulging in an *orgy* of anger. Can we relate to that?

Jesus says that we can if our anger has ever led us to insult someone. The Greek word translated in verse 22 as "insult" is *Raca* which literally meant something like blockhead or numbskull. The Greek word translated later in verse 22 as "fool" is *more* from which we get our English words, *moral* and *moron*. A *more* was a moral fool, someone who was thought incapable of making sound moral decisions. Psalm 53, verse 1 gives a Hebrew Scriptural equivalent when it says, "Fools say in their hearts, 'There is no God.'" To call someone a *more* was to label them spiritually dull and morally deficient.

*Raca more*- stupid moron: laying insults like that on our fellow human beings has a killing effect. Jesus says that God judges these just as severely as murder itself. As much as we might like to deny it, our words have that much power.

We may remember especially from our childhoods, insults that cut us to the bone and whose killing effects we may still not have shaken off: fool, moron, idiot, dimwit, stupid, retard, ugly, worthless, no good, good for nothing. Verbal barbs like those can punch holes in our souls from which we might never recover.

The Bible is adamant about the enormously destructive power of our tongues. The letter of James, chapter 3, says "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue- a restless evil full of poison. With it, we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so" (verses 5b-10).

It ought not to be so because to trash fellow human beings with ugly words is to trash those made in the very image of God. Insulting them, insults God. It's a murderous deed.

So, when our pride or self-righteousness tempts us to call somebody names or to sully their reputation because they differ with us on important matters, we don't do it, because we remember, "You shall not murder." (Think of the difference that this alone would make to the tone and content of our family, political, and religious lives, both in this country and around the world.) Or when our insecurities tempt us to puff ourselves up by putting someone else down, we don't do it, because we remember, "You shall not murder." Or when our anger tempts us to lash out at someone who has wronged us, we don't do it, because we remember, "You shall not murder."

Following Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, we instead interrupt even our worship of God to seek reconciliation with anyone who may have something against us. Following St. Paul in his

letter to the Romans, we bless those who persecute us and do not curse them. We rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We live in harmony with one another, resisting the temptation to be haughty, but instead associate gladly with the lowly. We don't claim wisdom that we don't have. We don't repay evil with evil, but strive for what is noble in the sight of all. We live peaceably with everyone, so far as that is in our power.

The aim of our words is never to tear down but always to build up, never to kill but always to give life. Thanks to Jesus, the Fifth Commandment reminds us that our words really do have that much power. Consider this.

The great Christian preacher and teacher, Fred Craddock, was on vacation with his wife, Nettie, in the Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. It was the last day of their vacation and they had stopped at a favorite little café called the Blackberry Inn. They didn't want to be bothered by anyone.

An old country fellow walked in and started talking to everybody. Fred thought to himself, "Curses", and tried to hide behind his menu. But soon this fellow was at their table and said, "You folks on vacation?"

"Yes."

"Are you havin' a good time?"

"I was," thought Fred.

"Are you gonna be here long?"

"No."

"What do you do?"

That was the question Fred had been waiting for, since he thought that he could shut down just about anyone with his answer to it. He said, "I'm a professor of homiletics and theology."

To Fred's dismay, this perked the fellow up even more and he said, "So, you're a preacher man! Well, I've got a preacher story for you!" He pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Yes sir, I was born back in these mountains. My momma wasn't married. We lived in a shack outside of town. The other women in town used to spend their time guessin' who my daddy was. And I didn't know who my daddy was . . .

"My momma worked a lot. Other kids weren't allowed to play with a boy like me. I would hide in the weeds at recess, and I ate my lunch alone. They said I wasn't any good and that I'd never amount to anything.

"Kids used to call me Ben the Blankety-Blank. (I'll let you figure out which "blankety-blank" that was.) Ben the Blankety-Blank . . . I thought Blankety-Blank was my last name."

The man was crying at this point, but he collected himself and went on.

"Anyway, there was a church in Laurel Springs. It had this preacher with a voice big like God. I knew that church wasn't a place for boys like me.

"But sometimes I'd sneak in and sit towards the back so I could sneak out before the service ended. One day, though, I just got lost in what the preacher was sayin', and before I knew it, church was over. The aisles got all jammed up and folks were lookin' at me. I was makin' for the back door as quick as I could when all at once I felt this big hand on my shoulder.

"The big voice boomed, 'Boy!' It was the preacher man himself! He said, 'Boy', and I froze. He talked so loud that everybody could hear and he said, 'Boy, who's your daddy? Boy, I *know* who your daddy is.'

“That was a knife in my gut, and I wondered, ‘Did he know who my daddy was?’ He said, ‘Boy, now let’s see . . . why, you’re a child of . . .’ He paused and everyone listened in close. ‘You’re a child of . . . *God*, and I do see a strikin’ resemblance. He swatted my bottom and said, ‘Now you run along and go claim your inheritance.’”

Craddock looked at the man who now seemed familiar to him, and he asked, “Sir, what’s your name?”

“Ben Hooper.”

Craddock said, “Ben Hooper . . . Oh, yes. I remember. I remember my daddy tellin’ me about you. You’re that illegitimate boy who twice was elected the governor of Tennessee.”

Governor Hooper had tears in his eyes again, and he said, “I was born that day.”

Yes, our words have that much power. They can give new life, but they can also kill, which is why we remember with Jesus, “You shall not murder.” We use our words to give life. Amen.