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Title	⇒	She's Somebody's Child (10 Commandments Series)
Scripture		Exodus 20: 1-13
Minister		The Reverend Matthew Ruttan
Place		Westminster Presbyterian Church, Barrie, ON
Date		November 13 <sup>th</sup> , 2011
Calendar		22 <sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost
Note		This text is an approximate rendering

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Minister: Peace be with you  
**Congregation: And also with you**

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*Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery... You shall not murder.*

The movie *Ironweed* came out in 1987 and starred Hollywood heavyweights Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep. There is a scene where these two characters are walking down the snowy street, both tipsy from having been drinking too much, and they stumble upon a woman lying in the snow. In their state of disrepair they wonder aloud what they should do with her, if anything. “Is she drunk or a bum?” asks Nicholson’s character. “Just a bum. Been one all her life,” Streep’s character replies. “And before that?” “She was a [prostitute] in Alaska.” “She hasn’t been a [prostitute] all her life. Before that?” “I dunno. Just a little kid, I guess.” “Well,” Nicholson’s character replies, “a little kid’s something. It’s not a bum and it’s not a [prostitute]. It’s something. Let’s take her in.”<sup>1</sup>

She’s somebody’s child.

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This morning we continue with our 10 Commandments series and wade into a tangle. We have considered those commandments which deal in a direct way about how we are to live in relation to the God of liberation, the one who frees us out of the *Shawshank Redemption* prison of bondage in Egypt (for the Hebrews, in ancient times) and who frees the rest of us from sin in our own times. We have also just begun an exploration of the last six commands which are about our relationships with one another—that is, among this God’s people. Because just setting us free isn’t the end of the story. It’s not enough just to liberate us: With our new found freedom we have to know how to live. Without that guidance we are like toddlers jumping the fence at the zoo and wandering innocently, bright-eyed and bushy tailed into a Lion’s den. Just because we are free doesn’t mean we are safe. And so the command invites us to live with this freedom in a way that preserves our lives and helps us live with a deeper, more everlasting joy. The commands do not *tie* our hands; they *untie* our hands.

I say that this command “You shall not murder” is a tangle because although it seems fairly straightforward on the surface it is anything but. With this command—and with some others that we will be jostling with in the coming weeks—we engross ourselves with the deepest of moral and ethical problems. Things that relate directly to our modern lives. What are the implications not just for a vengeful act of intentional murder (because that is usually the first image that pops into our minds), but abortion? What about war? What about acting in self-defence? What about suicide? What about euthanasia? What about capital punishment? What about animals? Does this command “You shall not murder” address these issues? And if so, how?

Imagine you are in Moses' big, intimidating shoes. You are leading God's people out of slavery, through the wilderness and you are receiving God's commands for life, so that in the midst of our new found freedom we don't end up at the zoo climbing the fence and walking innocently into the Lion's den. And there is some irony here as Moses listens to God. Why did he flee from Egypt to Midian before being called by Lord Almighty to go free his people back in Egypt? He fled because he was found out to be a *murderer*. He did it to take vengeance on an Egyptian soldier who was hurting one of his fellow people—but it was still murder—and so he fled. And now here he was, hearing “You shall not murder.” He's listening with tainted ears.

I would like to suggest that as we think of this command, we also think of it in terms of its opposite. As in night is the opposite of day and up is the opposite of down. And just as so many of the commands begin with “don't” or “you shall not,” just as this one says “You shall not murder,” if we frame it in the positive the principle is ‘You shall cherish life.’ But why?

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The first piece about this command is that it reminds us what murder is. Murder is taking away someone's life. Why is life important? And here's the first critical rub: Although life is valuable in and of itself, human life and breath is to be cherished because *it is a gift from God*. That's the first thing: It is a gift from Lord Almighty. The delivery room is Christmas morning. And if it is a gift, it did not belong to us in the first place. Therefore, it is not ours to take away.

Glenn Adsit ministered mostly in China. He was under house arrest in China when the soldiers came one day and said, “You can return to America.”

They were celebrating, and the soldiers said, “You can take two hundred pounds with you.”

Well, they'd been there for years. Two hundred pounds. They got the scales and started the family arguments: two children, wife, husband. Must have this vase. Well, this is a new typewriter. What about my books? What about this? And they weighed everything and took it off and weighed this and took it off and weighed this and, finally, right on the dot, two hundred pounds.

The soldier asked, “Ready to go?” “Yes.” “Did you weigh everything?” “Yes.” “You weighed the kids?” “No we didn't.” “Weigh the kids.”

And in a moment, typewriter and vase and all became trash.<sup>2</sup>

Human life is first a gift from God—a gift eternally more valuable than all other things. We cherish that which God entrusts to us and to the world. Tim Noel was the Deputy Governor of the Bank of Canada. He died of Lou Gehrig's Disease, more properly known as A.L.S. While he was dying he said—perhaps with a heart-pumping urgency or cutting-through-the-fog clarity that most of us have yet to know—he said, “Each new day is a gift. That's why they call it the present.” Human life is first a gift from God. We cherish that which God entrusts to us and to the world. It is not ours to take away.

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The second critical point is related to this. Here it is: *Humans are made in God's image*. Remember that central and pivotal line in the very first chapter of Genesis: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Both men and women (and that's everybody) are imprinted, internally tattooed, unmistakably constructed with divine D.N.A. To take away someone's life is to defecate the image of God. It is to defecate the image of God which he has carefully gardened into this world in people of all shapes and sizes.

In Mexico a young boy stands in front of a mirror. His parents' “employment” is digging through the city dump each day for food. His face is dirty and permanently scarred from the slash of a broken Coke bottle, brutally delivered to him as he stood defending his shack of a home while attacked by a thug-gang when he was six. His name is Abejundio. He stands each day and looks at himself in the mirror. Some days he cries. Others he does not. He is made in the image of God.

In Iraq, Farrah stands in front of her mirror. Her day is just beginning. She gets up early to have a few minutes to herself before her three children arise. She has yet to put on her head dress. She stands looking at herself. A baby cries. She clicks on their radio softly and tries to turn up the volume, but the power is out again. Electricity has been a huge problem since the attacks on the city. She again looks into the mirror. She is made in the image of God.

It's late at night and Hugh is getting ready for bed. He's just finished brushing his teeth and stands before the mirror in the house he's owned for 50 years with his back slightly curved from a disk problem that the doctors could never just figure out right. His wife died three years ago. And since that time he's kept a secret. There is a small liquor store under his bathroom sink. It's upstairs in his house, off of the bedroom so the kids won't happen to find it when they're over. He struggles to turn out the light. Or should he open the little door to under the sink again? He is shaking, and catches a glimpse of himself again in the mirror. Hugh is made in the image of God.

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The third critical point is again related to the first two. One: Life is a gift from God. Two: All people are made in the image of God. And now three: What are we to do with this life? Answer: *To glorify God and to enjoy him forever!* That is the great summary of the purpose of humanity according to the Westminster Catechism that has helped shaped the Reformed Protestant understanding of Christianity for hundreds of years. It's a biblical summary of our chief purpose in life: To glorify God and enjoy him forever. And so if we take someone's life we are depriving God of that person's praise and joy which God wants them to give him. What it means, in effect, is that we are subtracting from God (depriving God of) the praise and joy that he made us to give him.

Hindiyya, the mystic nun of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had this prayer to God: "Come into my heart, give me energy to worship you—until the last breath of my life." Taking away life deprives not only other people of what they can offer to God, but deprives God of what he wants us to give him: glory and joy until the last breath of our lives.

These three things are what we might call overarching reasons behind the command not to murder. But they still do not answer every question. Scholars have wondered whether or not the command to not murder was meant just for the Hebrews internally (for, in and amongst their own people only), and not reflecting on the wider groups of people they would meet. So difficult is it to understand the exact parameters that a few words need to be said about the many controversial moral and ethical problems I mentioned a few minutes ago.

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First, it needs to be noted that we are most certainly talking about *people*. Throughout Scripture God's people eat meat—and although it makes sense to treat animals well there is no blanket prohibition against killing animals for food.

Second, it is most likely that things like euthanasia and abortion were not originally envisioned a part of the parameters of this commandment. However—and this is a big "however"—that doesn't mean Scripture is silent on these multi-faceted moral problems. In a few different places in Scripture, including the Psalm we read responsively, Psalm 139, the human being is imagined to be a part of creation while still in the womb—*God's* creation. God is active in the life of that child, nurturing and fashioning, while still in the womb. And although there are incredibly multi-layered challenges to the debate around abortion—especially in cases such as rape and incest—the general guiding principle is that human life is being lived in the womb.

Euthanasia is a more recent phenomena and along with it the dark phrases "mercy-killing" or "assisted suicide." And its complexity is heightened by a general confusion in modern society about what the purpose

of life is. Say, for example, someone thinks that the purpose of life is to fulfil our personal needs and wants. If this is the case, then euthanasia isn't as much of a theoretical problem because the centre of life is the individual. "If life belongs to me," so the thinking goes, "I'll do what I want with it." But as people of faith we acknowledge that we are not the centre of life. It's not all about us. The centre and subject of life is *Lord Almighty*. And not only that, but we acknowledge something very distinct about his creation—those three overarching principles: That life is a gift from him; that we are made in his image; and that we exist to give him glory and joy. Who are we to say (or who is a suffering individual to say) that they no longer belong to God? That they are not a part of his domain? As complex as the problem is, especially in the case of severe disability and suffering, we must tread very, very carefully at the prospect of taking a life which is not ours to take. That grave responsibility belongs to the only One who gave us that life in the first place.

Of all the possible complexities there are looming behind this command, the last one I'll mention is the taking of life in the context of war. Biblical scholar Terance Fretheim argues that the Hebrew verb here used for "murder" is not the same one used for killing in other places of Scripture that discuss war. Professor Jochem Douma even goes further to say that what is meant in the 10 Commandments based on his research of Scripture and the examples it provides, is *unlawful* murder—meaning that if it is done in the context of the law or government-sponsored war for a legitimate cause against evil, then the prohibition in the 10 Commandments doesn't apply. But even the old philosophical arguments about a "just" war have recently complexified. What about the prolific and terrifying nuclear bombs which exercise no distinction between combatant and civilian?

Suffice it to say that it is not an easy problem to solve. But I find a way forward when reading Jesus' words in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter five; that we are guilty even when we are angry or insulting! He looks beyond the official "rules" and looks into our hearts. Even if we are angry or insulting we are committing a kind of murder! Perhaps a kind of *spiritual* murder. And other places, that we are to love not only those who are like us, who are fellow believers, but to all of God's children, wherever and whoever. The principle remains: *Cherish life*.

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The reason I say all this because it is important to acknowledge when dealing with as sensitive an issue as this that there are sometimes no perfectly easy answers; but also, that we should be careful not to always take the door that is presented to us by the popular culture around us. Regardless of how we navigate the windy seas of these moral and ethical issues, we need to recognize two things: First, that Scripture and the Spirit of Christ need to be our guide: We can't make decisions on this or that moral dilemma because it's just how we feel. We humans are too fickle. If our instincts had all the wisdom, or if the culture around us had all the wisdom, or the government had all the wisdom, well then we wouldn't read the Bible every Sunday. And second, we need to acknowledge that whichever way we go, and no matter how we live up to the commandments, or *fail* to live up to the commandments (!), we are always all sinners in need of the grace of God through Christ. I know it's not popular these days to say that we are all sinners—there's always a certain amount of shuffling in seats; but there is a great hope in that fact: That no matter how good we are, or how bad we are—no matter the great and painful depths with which we have struggled with these moral challenges in the past, *and it is very important that we all hear this*: no matter the great and painful depths with which we have struggled with these moral challenges in the past *the remedy is greater!* And the remedy is this: Trust in Christ alone as our rescue. He is the one who saves; not our own decisions. He is the one who saves. Because that, more than anything else, makes us righteous in the eyes of God. Not anything we have or haven't done, but the fact that we cling to him. I have attended many funerals where this fact has been confused. We hear a lot of accolades about how good someone was and how nice they were and how this must somehow make them righteous before Christ. But no. Clinging to Christ is what makes us righteous in the eyes of God. Nothing *we* do, but what he has done.

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Fred Craddock recalls when he was younger, coming home from school, and having to go find the red mule they used to plough the fields. They could never agree on a name so they just called it “the red mule.” Well, of course, the mule would get out. He would come home from school and his mom would call out to him, “Go get the red mule.” Here’s how Craddock describes it in his own words:

Finding the red mule almost invariably involved going up over a hill and across the back woods where there was the family cemetery. Graves in there dated back from the 1700s. It was an old cemetery, with wind whistling in the pines, the carpet beneath making it so silent it was frightening. I would make noises and scuff my feet and whistle and do anything to break up the silence of the place. I hated that mule taking me through that frightening cemetery in the late hours of the day, sometimes almost dark, always behind that graveyard.

When I went for the mule, I said, “Do I have to go through the graveyard?” She said, “There’s no other way. Now when you go through the graveyard, make sure you don’t step on graves.” These graves, 1791, the ground was level, the little markers leaning over, and the carpet of needles. Where was the grave? I remember how ridiculous I must’ve looked tiptoeing and taking long steps and then short steps trying to avoid what I did not know—but maybe this is sacred. I went home frustrated with that mule and I said, “Mama, I can’t tell what part is sacred.” And she said, “Well, I know, it looks the same. But if you’ll just treat it all as sacred, you’ll never miss.”

If it’s true for 6 feet *under* the ground, how much more is it true for 6 feet *above*?

In their state of disrepair, Streep and Nicholson wonder aloud what they should do with this woman they see passed out in the snow, if anything. “Is she drunk or a bum?” asks Nicholson. “Just a bum. Been one all her life,” Streep replies. “And before that?” “She was a [prostitute] in Alaska.” “She hasn’t been a [prostitute] all her life. Before that?” “I dunno. Just a little kid, I guess.” “Well,” Nicholson’s character replies, “a little kid’s something. It’s not a bum and it’s not a [prostitute]. It’s something. Let’s take her in.”

She’s somebody’s child.  
And friends, aren’t we all?  
Cherish life.

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<sup>1</sup> The movie *Ironweed* was directed by Hector Babenco. The screenplay and book (on which it was based) was by William Kennedy. I have adapted it here for telling.

<sup>2</sup> As told in: Fred Craddock, *Craddock Stories* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 22-23.