

January 22, 2012

Life is Sacred

Genesis 9:1 – 12

Today is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. And the reason we have such a day goes back to 1973 and a trial that opened the door to legal abortions. And the focus on these annual events are usually on the tragedy of abortion. And that is right and necessary that we publicly address this issue. Since 1973 the number of abortions has continued to increase worldwide. In the United States, in 2008, the last year for which there are compiled statistics, there were 1.2 million abortions performed. That amounts to around 4,000 every day, 3 every minute, 1 every 20 seconds. And in the United States, which has one of the highest abortion rates among developed countries, every fourth baby conceived is killed by abortion. Clearly, we have as a society gone down a path that says '**Human life in the womb is not sacred**'. But the larger issue is not merely the sanctity of life in the womb – but the sanctity of life in general. The issue is the sacredness of human life – all human life, not just the unborn. When a society begins to determine that some lives are not worth saving or being born, that is the moment they sow the seeds of their own destruction. When a society decides that human life is not sacred, the doors are opened for all sorts of evil to exist – and killing unborn children is merely a logical consequence of that world view.

In the passage we just read in Genesis, God comes to Noah after this world-wide cataclysm and makes a covenant with him and the rest of humanity. The flood that wiped out the inhabited earth was God's judgement on sin – this covenant was in part, a statement on how He views mankind – **the value He places on humans**. It is a statement on the sanctity of human life that we see throughout the Bible. In Genesis 1, God creates the world and everything in it. But in that creation, one life is singled out for special attention – man. Of all the created things, only man is blessed by God and given dominion over all the rest of the created world, only man is placed in a garden and given work to do, only man walks and talks with God as a friend. God is saying something about the value of human life. He says it again in Exodus when He give His people His law and says, among other things - "*You shall not murder*". Exodus 20:13

But the principle of the sacredness of human life is clearly expressed long before Exodus here in Genesis 9. Here in this passage God comes to Noah and his family after this horrendous event, which probably left them thinking they were pretty small and insignificant, to reassure them of His love and commitment to them and assure them that they are, that human beings are, the most unique and precious beings to Him in all creation. And He explains to them what it means to be a human being. He reassures them of their importance. He lets them know just how unique they are in the world and how valuable they are to Him. And then He says, 'On the basis of this, on the basis of what I am telling you about human life, this is how I want you to treat each other as well'. So what we have here is a theological principle – How God sees human life – and then, if this is true about human life – What are the practical implications for us?

So first, the principle - **Human life is sacred**. It is sacred in a different way than everything else. Everything God has made has an element of sacredness, but human life is given a greater value and sacredness than any other thing. We see this in verse 5 of the text: "*Surely I will require your lifeblood; from every beast I will require it. And from every man, from every man's brother I will require the life of man. Whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God He made man.*" Genesis 9:5-6 What this says is that human life is given a higher value than any other kind of life. The word require means that God will demand an accounting for every drop of human blood shed not only by other humans, but by animals as well. And you might be saying 'What, if an animal kills a human being, God is going to hold those animals accountable? How does that work?' I don't know how that works, all I know is that this is what God said. **And what this says to us is if God holds animals accountable for merely doing what their instincts compel them to do, how much more accountable are humans for killing other humans?** What God is telling us is that, although He loves all His creation, humans are on a different level – human life is sacred in a way that animal life is not. Baby humans are sacred in a way that baby puppies are not.

So what does that mean? What does it mean to say that human life is sacred? I think the text gives us at least three answers to that question. First of all, **Human life is sacred because it is priceless**. That is, you can't put a price on it. – there is no exchange for it – there is nothing on earth comparable to human life.

In his book, *The Applause of Heaven*, Max Lucado tells about a sweater that hangs in his closet. He says he seldom wears it — it's too small, the sleeves are too short, the shoulders too tight, some of the buttons are missing, the thread is frizzled. Logically, he says, he should throw out that sweater since he has no use for it and will never wear it again. But that sweater, for Max, has infinite value. It is unique, one of a kind, it is priceless. Each strand was chosen with care, each thread selected and woven with affection by his mother. You can't put a price on it.

God said to Noah, *"Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed,* Genesis 9:6 Many modern scholars have bought into the idea that when Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, including of course this passage, with all its laws and codes of behavior, he was simply borrowing from law codes that were already in place in the ancient world, like the Code of Hammurabi. But one important reason that cannot be true is that in every other law code, human life had some imputed value. The value of a human life in those law codes was always tied to some finite value. For example, in Hammurabi's Code, if a commoner killed a nobleman, the nobleman's family could come and wipe out that man and his family. But if the same nobleman killed the commoner, all he had to do was pay a certain sum of money. There were different values for different people. Human life had a finite value. But God says that there is nothing that can pay for human life. Anything that you would put in its place would make human life a finite value. You cannot pay for it in anything other than its own currency. That means that human life is infinite in value. Human life is sacred because it is priceless.

Secondly, **human life is sacred because it belongs to God.** You don't own it. It is not yours — you are accountable for it. Something is sacred if it is put into your hands but not your ownership. If someone gives you some money, and says, 'This is a gift' — you can do whatever you want with it. It's not sacred. But if they give it to you to invest for them — you are accountable — you cannot spend it any way you please. It is in your hands, but it isn't yours to do with whatever you want. It's sacred because it is in your hands, but not your ownership. If it is a gift, it's not sacred, you can do whatever you want with it. But if it is in your hands and not your ownership, that is sacred, you are accountable for it. This is what we have in the text here: *"Surely I will require [demand an accounting of] your lifeblood; from every beast I will require [demand an accounting for] it. And from every man, from every man's brother I will require [demand an accounting of] the life of man.* Genesis 9:5

If you own a car, you can do whatever you want with it. It's yours — it's not sacred. You can go four-wheeling through the mud if you want. But if your friend gives his Lexus to drive, you can't take it out four-wheeling. It's in your hands but not your ownership. You hold that Lexus in a sacred trust. My friend was telling me about his brother who was staying at his rich friend's place and the friend told his brother to go ahead and use the car — a very expensive Maserati. My friend's brother came home one night after driving that Maserati and just parked it in the driveway in front of the garage. The next morning he heard a horrendous crash and ran out to discover that his wife had backed their Suburban out of the garage right into that Maserati. Needless to say, there was extensive damage to the car and the guy had to take it in to get it fixed for a considerable sum of money. Why? Because it was in his hands, but not his ownership — he held it in a sacred trust.

Every human life that comes into your life is a life you are accountable for. Every human life is a sacred deposit. How you treat other people, God says, 'I will hold you accountable'. In the movie *'The Four Feathers'* the hero of the story lays dying in the Sahara desert. And some guy traveling through the desert finds him nearly dead. He picks him up and carries him to the nearest village where he recovers. When he is able to speak, he asked the traveler, 'Why did you save me'? And the traveler responds, 'Because God put you in my way'. God puts people in our way every day, but I doubt that we are consciously aware that we are accountable for the way we treat them. Because no human beings are ours and we cannot treat them any way we want. We cannot act as if we own others by treating them however we wish — they are owned by someone else and we are accountable to the owner.

Human life is sacred because it's priceless. Human life is sacred because it's owned by someone else, it's not yours. And the most compelling reason human life is sacred is **because every human life is in the image of God.** *'For'* the text says: *for in the image of God He made man.* Genesis 9:5-6 What that means is that divine glory rests on every human being. God has put His stamp on us. He's put His sign of ownership on us — **made in the image of God.** Whenever you harm another human being, whenever you violate another human being, you are doing something Thomas Watson says is *'tearing God's picture'*. *'It is a wrong offered to God's image. In the image of God made he man. ...It is tearing God's picture, and breaking in pieces the King of heaven's broad seal'*.

Whenever you harm another human being, whenever you harm them physically, spiritually emotionally, whenever you abuse, whenever you violate another human being, you are tearing God's picture. In other words, an assault on another person is an assault on God. We are created in God's image. So what does it mean that human beings are made in the image of God? What it means I think is this. **God built us in such a way that enables us to reflect aspects of His being which we alone can reflect.** Dogs don't reflect this, cats can't, majestic mountains and expansive oceans can't. There is a sense in which the animal kingdom speaks to us of a Creator. There is a sense in which all of nature speaks to us of God. If we look at the created world, we get a limited reflection of God.

We all know that there are varying degrees of reflection. For example, a you can sort of see your image reflected in a window pane, but an even clearer image is found in a clear mountain lake. However the best reflection is found in a mirror. All creation to some degree, reflects the image of God. The Bible tells us that His invisible attributes and eternal power and divine nature can clearly be seen in what has been made. In fact the heavens are telling the glory of God. But man is special in a way that no other created thing is. We were created to reflect as a mirror – not a window pane or a mountain lake. Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 3:18: *'...we all with unveiled face beholding and reflecting as in a mirror, the glory of the Lord...'*

Dogs and cats, oceans and mountains do reflect God – but it's a dim reflection – its like looking at a window pane. But humans were built to accurately reflect the glory of God in a way that no other created thing is able to do. Why is it that cats and dogs are content with a place by the fire and food in the bowl? We have a cat whose lifelong quest is food in her bowl and a cozy place in the house where she won't be discovered and thrown out. The only two things that probably worry her, if she can worry, is, will there be food in her bowl, and will she be discovered? But in her eternal quest for food and cozy places, God is glorified – because she's a cat. There is a dim reflection of her Creator in her cat-ness and she's content if these things are satisfied. But humans reflect much more complex aspects of God than food in our bowl and cozy places in the house.

Why is it that humans are never content like animals are content? Why are our pets the most well-adjusted members of our households? Why is your dog content with a bowl of food and a pat on the head? Why do they go out of their minds when you walk in the door? On the other hand, why are **we** so mal-adjusted? Pastor Tim Keller puts it like this: ***'Why do we want more love than we can ever get? Why are we always so frustrated in our desire to create things, or why does a beautiful sunset or majestic mountain fill our soul with happiness?...Why is it that we can never achieve what we want to achieve? Why is it we want beauty and never have enough? Why is it that we are so unhappy?...Why are our desires so insatiable?'*** Or why is it that humans fear and hate death? Animals don't. When was the last time you witnessed your dog pondering his eventual demise? Or why do we yearn for a joy inexpressible and full of glory?

And the answer is, we are made in the image of God – we were built to reflect far more complex aspects of His character than animals or mountains or oceans. We can reflect things that all of the rest of creation cannot. We reflect God's rationality, Gods' personality, His eternity and His creativity – we can mirror His love and grace and forgiveness. Because we are rational, we long to know. Because we are in His image, we long for joy and we hunger for love and to be loved. Because we are creative, we revel in beauty. Because we are eternal, we long to last – to endure. That's why we hate death, that is why we hate murder – that is why we should hate abortion and any other abuse or violation of human beings – it tears God's picture. **We are God's mirror.**

And if you never know and embrace the fact that you are created in God's image – that you were built to reflect the complex character of God, your quest for love and joy and happiness will never be satisfied. You will always be learning, but never come to the truth. You will be forever frustrated in your quest for significance and permanence. You were created in God's image and you have settled for a full bowl of food and a cozy spot by the fire. Jack Higgins, a very successful author, was once asked what he would like to have known as a boy. His answer: ***"I would have liked someone to tell me that when you get to the top, there's nothing there."*** And what that should make us ask is, if our souls are built in such a way that even that degree of success cannot satisfy them, then what were we made for? We were made to mirror God. We were built to face God. If you face a mirror toward the light – it is brilliant. If you face it toward the dark – its dark – there's nothing there. And that is the case with human beings and sin. We are turned away from God. We've pointed the mirror at the darkness – at nothing; and we've expected joy, and love and satisfaction and goodness, and we've been disappointed. It's no wonder – we been facing the wrong direction. We're still mirrors – we still have that capacity for rationality and beauty and creativity and eternity – but we're facing the darkness. Turn the mirror toward the sun and you'll be blinded by the light.

Human life is sacred because it is priceless, because we belong to God, and because we are made in the image of God. That is why God says: *You shall not murder*. In his book, *Mere Morality*, Lewis Smedes said this about the sixth commandment: *'In its austere generality this commandment spreads a protective moral shield around every person's life. To God, human beings are dear, be they friend or enemy, productive or dependent, elect or reprobate. No quality or lack of it can disqualify anyone from taking shelter under the moral command of respect for human life'*. Lewis Smedes

So what are the implications of this? What does this mean to us? What are the implications of the principle that human life is sacred? What flows from the commandment: *You shall not murder*? First of all we should be profoundly impacted, not firstly by how this relates to abortion, or capital punishment or suicide or euthanasia – but what it means for us in every human relationship. To be sure, the fact that life is sacred should inform our behavior on every one of those issues. But you won't get that right if you don't get the principle right. The first and primary application of the sixth commandment is that **everyone who comes into your world must sense that they are valued** – not for what they can do, or not for what they can contribute, not for what they can do for you, but for themselves – **for the intrinsic value which your Creator and theirs poured into them at their birth.**

This is why C.S. Lewis, in his book, *'The Weight of Glory'* wrote, *'It is a serious thing to...remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities [indeed one or the other is an eventuality], it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another... all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal.'*

You are breaking this commandment when you treat people with indifference or coldness or disdain. You have to ask yourself, 'Do people feel valued and honored when they talk with me, do they sense that they are being met with warmth, with dignity, with real friendship?' We may know that it is wrong to kill babies in the womb, but do we realize we are tearing God's picture when we treat others with contempt? Do people come away from talking with us built up or torn down? Are we living with a sense that human life is sacred? You won't have to worry about getting your position on abortion, or euthanasia or capital punishment right if you get this right. This is fundamental.

The root of this commandment is to love one another. And love at its highest is the accurate estimation and the adequate supply of another's need. And if we really took this to heart, if we really believed that all day long we are helping each other to one or the other of these destinations, if the overwhelming possibilities really impacted our hearts, if we truly believed that there are no ordinary people, then we would begin seeing and treating others in the light of eternity and telling others about the saving power of the Son of God. Because if you have anything in your power to change a condition that might lead to someone's death, might lead to someone's eternal destruction, then you must do it. And the thing we have is the gospel of grace. And what God is saying to us is, *'How you treat those I put in your way is how you treat me'*. If you know that you are someone made in the image of God and a sinner saved by grace, then you must treat others in His image as needy of grace as you.

All of us stand exposed in the light of the law that says: You shall not murder. All of us are held accountable for the sacredness of human life. Whether you've had an abortion, or violated others with indifference and rudeness and contempt, there is forgiveness and cleansing at the cross of Christ. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and the wages of that sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Our gracious God and merciful Savior,

Forgive us for the many ways in which we have trampled Your Law and torn Your picture. Forgive us for reflecting the darkness and not the light. Give us to see every other person as dear to You, whether friend or enemy, whether productive or dependent, whether elect or reprobate. Help us to reflect Your glory in this world and grant that we would be those who day after day are loving those whom You have made and see them as made in Your image. Let our hearts be broken for those who are ravaged by sin and make us instruments of grace to bring the saving power of the Son of God into their lives. Make us the most radical God-reflecting, glory-bearing, grace-giving people on earth for Your glory and Your great Name's sake we pray in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.