

Life Sunday Sermon 2019

John 10:7-11 “Self-Defense”

Rev. Hans Fiene, River of Life Lutheran Church, Channahon, Illinois

www.lutheransforlife.org

Whenever pastors teach confirmation students about the Fifth Commandment, we always have to take a moment to explain the exceptions. So, when God tells us, “You shall not murder,” this isn’t a universal prohibition against taking human life. It’s a prohibition against taking human life unjustly, without God’s calling and command. And, as the Bible teaches us in Romans 13 and elsewhere, there are times when God gives certain people the vocation of taking certain lives under certain circumstances—namely when evil people threaten the lives of the innocent. So when a soldier kills an enemy combatant in a just war, for example, he’s not breaking the Fifth Commandment. He’s not murdering. He’s killing in order to defend the lives of the innocent that are threatened by the enemy. Likewise, if someone threatens your life and the only way to stop him is to use deadly force, you haven’t sinned if you kill him in self-defense. But, of course, if someone isn’t threatening your life, you aren’t justified in taking his. This seems like a pretty simple distinction between murder and killing, between breaking the Fifth Commandment and keeping it.

And yet, our sinful nature loves to blur the lines. Or, to put it another way, our sinful nature loves to *redraw* the lines, loves to convince us that God’s definition of “self-defense” is too restrictive, and that we are justified in killing our neighbor, not only if he threatens our life but also if he threatens our pride or our comfort.

This is precisely what happened in the first murder. Cain imagines that he is greater and more important than his brother Abel. But when God has regard for Abel’s offering and not for Cain’s, Cain finds his pride under attack. When he looks at the face of his brother, he doesn’t see the face of someone loved and cherished by God. He sees the face of some worthless afterthought of a person, some fool who had the audacity to take the divine favor and status that belonged to him. In the midst of his anger, Cain decides to redraw the lines of self-defense. He puts his pride on the same level as his life and decides that he is justified in killing anyone who threatens it. He decides that the only way to preserve his sense of self-satisfaction is to kill the one who has threatened it. And that’s exactly what he does.

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When King David is enjoying the comfort of prosperity, he seeks pleasure in the wife of another man. When she becomes pregnant, he tries to cover it up but fails. So David's comfort is threatened. It's challenged by Bathsheba's husband, a man named Uriah who could very well take away that peace, that palace, that pleasure in pursuit of justice. David decides that God's definition of self-defense is too narrow. He decides that those who threaten his comfort have forfeited their right to life. He has Uriah put on the front line of battle and then abandoned. Indirectly, but indefensibly, David murders Uriah.

And throughout every generation of our history, we sinners have been doing the same thing. We have constantly expanded God's definition of self-defense. We've convinced ourselves that we have the right to take the life of anyone who threatens our pride, our comfort, or anything else we don't want to give up.

We prayed to false gods like Molech and Baal who convinced us that our children were a threat to our crops and our dinner tables. Blinded by fear and idolatry, we sacrificed our little ones to these idols, the price they had to pay for taking away our peace of mind.

We sailed to foreign lands and slaughtered those who sat on piles of gold and Congo rubber plants and other precious resources. We traveled to the coasts of Africa and declared that those we put in shackles were not sufficiently human. We convinced ourselves that we were better, purer, and more essential to the betterment of mankind than those of other tribes. In all of this, we justified putting these supposedly inferior people in chains, in gas chambers and death camps, or leaving them to starve on reservations. We declared that they had no right to freedom, to dignity, to life itself because they obstructed our right to live as proudly and lavishly as we pleased.

In 1973, we returned to the worship of Baal when the US Supreme Court declared that a woman's right to privacy was greater than her unborn child's right to life. So, in effect, we have declared that self-defense means a woman can kill the child God is still forming in her womb because that child poses a challenge to his mother's job, her ambitions, her social status, her dream of having a perfectly formed and

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healthy baby, her bank account, or even just her mood. “How do I tell my parents? How am I going to finish school? How am I going to afford a child?” These are the kinds of things that vulnerable, terrified men and women would ask themselves in response to an unplanned pregnancy. And preying upon their worries, *Roe v. Wade* convinced them they didn’t have to find answers. Abortion would let them rewind the clock and pretend that the baby never happened.

Today, advocates of euthanasia insist that we have every right to kill ourselves when our bodies break down on us. And more of us are believing these advocates because our pride will not endure the humiliation of adult diapers or assisted living. And soon we’ll apply that logic to our neighbors. We’ll insist that it’s merciful to end the suffering of our parents, our friends, or anyone who’s medically reliant on our tax dollars. But in truth, we’re just repeating ourselves. Once again, we’re insisting that God’s definition of self-defense is too narrow, that it ought to include the right to kill those who have the audacity to burden us, to take away our time or our money.

We also follow this same mindset when our hands remain unstained with blood but our hearts are corrupted with hatred. As Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, “You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire” (Matthew 5:21-22).

When we burn in anger against those who have challenged our pride, when we curse and slander those who threaten our comfort, we join the ranks of sinners who have tried to expand God’s definition of self-defense. But we have only succeeded in making murderers of ourselves.

In John chapter 10, Jesus speaks these words. He says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good

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shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:10-11). Behold the great difference between Christ and men. When we killed and destroyed to keep what we had, Jesus was crucified and killed to give us everything He had.

At the cross, Jesus had no desire to expand the definition of self-defense as we so often do. He didn't contemplate eviscerating those who threatened His life, nor did He consider pouring out His wrath on those who merely challenged His authority. In fact, Christ had no interest in self-defense at all, because He understood his role in fulfilling the Fifth Commandment.

As Luther explains in the Small Catechism, “You shall not murder” means “we should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need.” And Jesus knew that His Father had sent Him to help and support us in every physical need by dying in our place. Jesus knew that His Father had sent Him to lift us up out of spiritual death by taking our place in the jaws of the wolf. Jesus knew that He was the Good Shepherd who would restore His sheep to life by laying down His life for them. And that's exactly what He did.

From the cross, the Good Shepherd defended us by pouring out the blood that took away our hatred, our cruelty, and every other sin that brought us death and condemnation. From the cross, Christ looked out upon a sea of sinners, a sea of murderers who had despised the gift of life, and there, in that moment, He loved us all, cherished us, valued our lives more than His own, valued us more than the breath from His lungs and the beating of His heart.

From the cross, Jesus looked upon those who had earned death from God by sacrificing their children, and He agreed to be sacrificed in their place, to take that death sentence upon His own head and to give eternal life to all who believe. From the cross, Jesus looked upon the slave holders, the ethnic cleansers, the bloodthirsty exploiters of lands and tribes. He looked upon the abortionists and euthanizers, and there, with the words “It is finished,” He responded to their murder with His mercy.

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And with those same words, Christ had mercy upon you. When you took part in the sin of abortion, Jesus responded by making you a part of God's family through His bleeding mercy. When your heart was filled with hatred, Jesus filled you with the love of God by claiming your hatred as His own and accepting the death sentence you had earned. There, at Calvary, the Son of God chose selflessness instead of self-defense. There the Good Shepherd chose to lay down His life instead of taking yours. There at the cross, Christ gave up everything in order to give you back the life you threw away.

And on the third day, when the Good Shepherd rose from the grave, God the Father proclaimed that He had accepted the selflessness and sacrifice of His Son. There He proclaimed that you would never need to defend yourself from His judgment on the last day because there was no wrath or anger or condemnation left for you to face. Christ had taken all of that into His grave and left it behind Him when He left the tomb victorious.

Now, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, because of the Good Shepherd who died for you instead of defending Himself, you now have the gift of life eternal. In the waters of your baptism, you were given that gift when you were claimed by the Triune God. When God looks at you through those waters, He doesn't see the face of a sinner who deserves to die for threatening His righteousness or His reign. He sees the face of a saint who bears His restored image, a saint who deserves to live forever, a saint who is worthy to dwell with Him in His kingdom for all time because of Christ's blood. Now when God looks at you, He sees a saint worthy of that saint's life and worthy of God's own love.

May we see the same thing when we look upon those for whom Jesus died. When we look upon the images of the poor and the lowly, the weak and the oppressed, may God bless us to see the face of those who instantly deserved every ounce of our protection and love and charity and mercy the moment Christ died for them. When we look upon sonographic images of the unborn, may God bless us to see the faces of those who are worthy to be called our beloved sons and daughters because Jesus gave them the

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right to be called sons and daughters of God when He breathed His last for them upon the cross. When we look upon the faces of the aged and the sick, may God bless us to see what Jesus saw upon the cross—the faces of those who deserve not to be cast aside or coaxed into the grave, but who deserve for us to befriend, feed, and clothe them because, at the cross, Jesus befriended them with His love and fed and clothed them with His forgiveness.

When Jesus looked upon your face at Calvary, He didn't see any reason to engage in self-defense. He saw every reason to give you selfless love. May we see the same thing when we look upon the faces of our neighbors today.