

The Sixth Commandment

“Thou Shalt Not Kill”

(Exodus 20:13 KJV) in the context of Bill C-14

(An Act to amend the Criminal Code of Canada to allow for assisted dying)

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It was a few months ago that John mentioned to me that he was planning to present a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments which are now well in progress. At that time he asked whether I would be willing to participate. The assignment was the Sixth Commandment: “You shalt not kill.” (Words from the King James Version). I have to admit that my initial head reaction was “Are you serious?” But being a willing associate and team player my heart said yes knowing that this subject would certainly be a challenge.

Following that conversation I began to consider the recurring and necessary question of which we as clergy have to remind ourselves which is: “Given the subject matter, and in this case one of the ten commandments, what message or approach might be of interest or helpful to the congregation, specifically in the here and now of our lives and place in society?” Or preferably, is there a relevant current issue or development within the scope of the selected scripture that deserves our attention and discernment. My answer came on June 16th with the passing of Bill C-14 by the Parliament of Canada, an Act to amend the Criminal Code to allow for assisted dying.

Although there is a school of thought that suggests the pulpit is not the place to touch on things political, I believe that the subject matter of Bill C-14 goes far beyond political implications. It clearly enters the arena of moral, legal, and theological considerations. Having said this I am aware that it is a well-known fact scripture can be used, sometimes inappropriately, to defend or conversely dismiss a development in the secular world, or indeed within the church itself. I

can recall one significant occasion within the recent history of the United Church. In 1988 the church faced the question of sexuality and ordination and decided that sexual identity should not be a bar to ordination. This is when inclusivity was considered paramount and that the church needed to take a stand. All of a sudden those members opposed were quick to recite Bible verses primarily from the Book of Leviticus to support their position. Leviticus 18: 22 reads *Do not lie with a person of the same sex in the same way as you would lie with a person of the opposite sex; this is detestable.* In response there was a backlash which although intended to be humorous, did in fact make an important point as to the relevancy of scripture in a contemporary setting, i.e. today. The backlash was in the form of a letter which became a widely distributed email to Dear Laura Schlesinger (not unlike *Dear Abby*). I share this not necessarily for entertainment value but to highlight the need to consider the context and relevance of scripture. The question to ask is how much of the Hebrew law is followed today?

“Dear Laura: I am interested in selling my daughter into slavery as sanctioned in Exodus 21:7. She is a Georgetown sophomore, speaks fluent Italian, and always cleared the table when it was her turn. What would be a good price for her? While I am at it my employee Leo insists on working on the Sabbath. Exodus 35:2 clearly says he should be put to death. Am I morally obligated to kill him myself or can I call the police? Just a couple of other quick questions . . . Does the whole town really have to be together to stone my brother John for planting different crops side-by-side? And can I burn my mother in a small family gathering for wearing garments made from two different threads?”

What possible application do these laws have today in this 21st century? And yet Leviticus 18:22 has been lifted from the text and held high to support homophobia and prejudice against the gay community. At the very least this suggests a selective use of scripture, not to mention discrimination and outright bigotry.

But let me be perfectly clear. I am not suggesting that we dispense in a similar manner with the Ten Commandments and specifically the Sixth. Without resorting fully into the theological arena a few points on this commandment may be helpful. There are two different Hebrew words and two different Greek words for murder and killing. The King James Version uses the

equivalent word for killing and later translations use the equivalent word for murder. It is specifically murder that is prohibited by the sixth commandment. Hence if the word *kill* is intended to mean **no killing** then it would render all of God-endorsed bloodletting done by the nation of Israel to be a violation of God's own commandment. So, by extension, if we take the position that it is a given God does not break God's commandments then clearly the sixth commandment *Thou shalt not kill* doesn't call for a complete moratorium on the taking of another human life. Hebrew scripture is awash in blood . . . killing, destruction, judgement, and carnage. Therefore we cannot overlook the clear contradiction when placing the Ten Commandments alongside this history.

Thus far this morning I have presented a narrative that has helped me personally in approaching the sixth commandment and specifically in my discernment of the concept of assisted dying, now a personal option for those who meet the criteria.

Perhaps some of you are very familiar with the intent and content of Bill C-14 but for those who are not let me summarize its important aspects. I do so not necessarily to present a sort of academic summation or highlight technicalities but rather would ask you to not only hear the words but to feel them. I say *feel* them because many of you have had the experience of being with a loved one struggling to die. You will identify with the choice of the Bill's language. I too have shared this experience within my family life and many times in the scope of pastoral ministry . . . meeting with multi-disciplinary hospital teams considering what is best for the patient and being with a family when life support is terminated. These are not just *ordinary* moments but *sacred* moments

Bill C-14 is an amendment to the Criminal Code whereby medical practitioners and nursing practitioners are protected from prosecution when providing medical assistance to bring about a death. The Act clearly defines eligibility requirements for assisted dying.

The criteria for consideration is that a person has to have a grievous and irremediable medical condition which is defined as follows . . . and I quote:

A person has a grievous and irremedial medical condition only if they meet all the following conditions:

- (a) they have a serious and incurable illness, disease, or disability;
- (b) they are in an advanced state of irreversible decline in capability;
- (c) that illness, disease, or disability causes them enduring physical or psychological suffering that is intolerable to them and that cannot be relieved under conditions that they consider acceptable; and
- (d) their natural death has become reasonably foreseeable, taking into account all of their medical circumstances, without a prognosis necessarily having been made as to the specific length of time that they have remaining.

Well, here we have the law today complete with the questions it raises in interpretation and the serious nature of what it attempts to address. It is a practice that, even if the specific criteria is met, deserves the utmost care and due diligence before a life is ended. With a precise definition of a patient's condition for qualifying purposes and the weight of the law to support an assisted death, the personal dilemma for patient and family isn't necessarily lessened. I cannot think of a decision of a voluntary nature any greater than the magnitude of one that ends one's life.

We may ask where Canadian society is with this amendment to the Criminal Code. A recent *Ipsos Reid* poll found that 8 in 10 Canadians support the right to advance consent for assisted dying and agree that individuals with a grievous and irremedial condition, including patients with dementia, should be permitted to consent to assisted death in advance. The support is wide ranging with 88% of the disability community; 76% of Christians (with 78% being Catholic); and 76% of Health Professionals in agreement. Canada now joins several countries and a few States in the US in making assisted death possible.

Bill C-14 addresses the subject of euthanasia although that term is not used in its narrative. Some of the most common pro-choice arguments for assisted dying are that it can quickly and humanely end a patient's suffering, allowing them to die with dignity; it can help to shorten the grief and suffering of the patient's loved ones; Everyone has the right to decide how they should die; Death is a private matter, and if you are not hurting anyone else, the

government should not interfere; illness can take away autonomy (i.e. the ability to make choices) and dignity, leaving you with no quality of life. Therefore choosing assisted dying allows you to take back control in deciding to die.

It would appear that many Christians support this new Canadian legislation and would argue in support of assisted dying. Here are some of those arguments as recorded in a website (rsrevision.com/gcse):

God is love. Christianity is love and compassion. Keeping someone in pain and suffering is not loving, it is evil. Euthanasia can be the most loving action, and the best way of putting love into practice.

In Genesis 1:28 God gave humankind dominion over all living things, i.e. we can choose for ourselves.

Jesus came so that people could have life “in all its fullness” (John 10:10). This means quality of life. If someone has no quality of life, then euthanasia could be appropriate.

God gave humankind free will. We should be allowed to use free will to decide when our lives end.

I think it helpful to recognize that there are examples of euthanasia in the Bible. In Second Samuel 1: verses 9-10 the death of Saul is explained by a messenger, an Amalekite, to David: “Saul having been gravely injured in battle begged me and said “Come over and put me out of my misery, for I am in terrible pain and want to die. So I killed him for I saw that he was near death.”

I realize that what I have shared with you this morning reflects a personal bias in that I believe Bill C-14 is long overdue. I have witnessed end of life suffering on too many occasions to not welcome a law that allows for choice in ending life in circumstances of extreme suffering. I have seen a patient and a loved one in what has been characterised as pharmaceutical oblivion which, within the practice of palliative care is in fact the culminating stage that ends life. Assisted death has been with us for decades but now the

law has recognized that the choice should be that of the individual in circumstances that are clearly defined; that protect the vulnerable; and are appropriately recorded and reported.

Let me briefly refer to an interview which the Honourable Rev. Dr. Rob Oliphant, Member of Parliament for Don Valley West and co-chair of the Commons-Senate committee on this subject, had with the Toronto Star. Rob makes a very interesting point in introducing a helpful method of decision-making. A model that he uses in his own discernment. He refers to what is called the *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. No need to remember this term. As the term implies this concept has four sides (considerations) namely scripture, reason, tradition, and experience. It was the Methodist John Wesley who added the fourth pillar *experience* to this model. Rob says "In reaching decisions, the four pillars must be in conversation with each other, and that any decision that rests on a **single** pillar will be a **weak** position." (Very well put!)

Yes I could attempt, and I use the word attempt intentionally, to build a case against this Bill. In all consciousness I could not do this. I know some hold the belief in the *sanctity of life* concept and the often quoted explanation that such and such is *the will of God*. I don't believe in a God out there or up there who interferes with human existence. Hence I see no practical reason to try to build such a case because I would inevitably find myself resorting to a selective approach to scripture, some of which would be totally out of context for the here and now of this 21st Century. Recalling my seminary teachings such misuse of scripture for me is both misleading and irresponsible.

In the final analysis I believe the heart of the matter is that of the alleviating of suffering and that the now legally sanctioned assisted dying is the *ultimate act of compassion* to end such suffering. **Amen.**