

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

August 31, 2008

www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

Respecting the Mark of God

Exodus 20:13

“Follow the yellow brick road,” Dorothy is advised in *The Wizard of Oz*. “Follow the yellow brick road!” But before she embarks on her journey, she receives a mark to protect her along the way. The Good Witch of the North gives her a kiss that leaves a sacred mark universally honored throughout Oz. Not the wild, winged monkeys, not the great Oz himself, not even the Wicked Witch of the West dares harm the little girl blessed with a sacred kiss that marks her as someone special.

I have long suspected that Frank Baum’s inspiration for conceiving this sacred kiss was Biblical. For the Scriptures offer us a parallel story, the strange tale of the protective mark of God, given not to a positive character, but to someone who has committed a heinous deed. We should be sobered to realize that it only takes eight verses, according to our sacred texts, for the first child born on earth to kill the second child.

In verse one of Genesis four, Cain is born; in verse eight of chapter four, Cain kills Abel.

That fact alone suggests how deeply violence roots in the human psyche and in human communities!

That fact alone suggests why our Lord offers as a fundamental principle for building a healthy society these four simple, solemn words: “Thou shalt not kill!”

Yet what does God do when Cain kills Abel? God places a protective mark upon him.

God does not slay the slayer. God does not allow anyone else to slay the slayer.

What is going on here? Is God allowing the first murderer to get away with murder?

In truth, our faith and our God is far more subtle than we might imagine.

For what really has Cain done? Cain has looked upon his brother and seen him as someone who is like him and yet unlike him, and has chosen to regard him as an enemy and snuffed out his life.

Cain and Abel bear not only the mark of the same parent, but the mark of the same God.

Yet Cain has chosen to ignore that mark and ended the life of his brother, regarding him as a threat.

Cain’s punishment is to live preserved by means of a protective mark of God so clear that no one will harm him. Having rejected community, he is expelled from community and is forced to live a nomadic existence in the land of wandering, the land of Nod.

There he must contemplate the fact that he ignored the divine mark upon his brother,

ignored the truth that he and his brother were made in the same divine image,

forced to reflect upon this fact continually because he bears the mark of God that protects and preserves his life.

For the rest of his existence he must contemplate God’s fundamental command, “Thou shalt not kill.”

Do you not find it interesting that the twentieth century was the first in human history to pass a law against genocide?

The twentieth century was the first to pass a law saying that it is wrong to kill thousands, or even millions of people.

Why did we find it necessary to say such a thing?

Why do we find it necessary to legislate against genocide?

One might say that it is because we now have technology to wipe out thousands of lives in an instant.

That is certainly true. But that is only a partial explanation.

The genocides that have taken place recently in Rwanda and Dafur were perpetrated by people wielding machetes.

Why have civilized societies publicly vowed that it is wrong to slaughter people in vast numbers? My answer is, it is because we have tried to separate the two tablets of God's instructions to us. We have tried to ignore those commandments that focus upon our relationship with God, and have focused solely on those principles that center upon matters that deal with our relationship with each other -- so we pass laws regarding murder, property, sex and psychology. Yet the truth of the matter is, our interaction with each other cannot be separated from our relationship with God.

"Thou shalt not kill," is not first and foremost a covenant established between humanity and humanity; it is not primarily a mutual agreement in which we promise not to harm each other.

"Thou shalt not kill," is a principle that reflects not humanity's valuation of humanity, but God's valuation of humanity,

"Thou shalt not kill," is not an expression of our regard for each other, but an expression of our regard of God's regard of us.

We are God's creatures. We are the sheep of His pasture.

We are made in God's image, each and every one of us.

"Thou shalt not kill," is not a covenant agreement mutually arrived upon by humanity for our mutual survival. Rather "Thou shalt not kill," is a principle mandated by God in recognition of the worth of every human creature, even those we do not want to recognize as among God's children.

Everyone has their talents. My daughter Clara has committed to memory the entire script of the first Harry Potter movie, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. She can even provide the appropriate British accent. She has watched the movie so many times that she knows it by heart, can recite it verbatim.

I, as her father wanting to be with her, will sometimes sit down and watch with her for the thousandth time, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

So I know very well what that paragon of evil, Voldemort, says to Harry in their first conversation.

The dark wizard says: "There is no good; there is no evil, there is only power and those too weak to wield it."

That comes from a children's book, but it expresses a view reflective of many people's view of humanity.

If I don't bear a divine mark, if you don't bear a divine mark, then I am free to eliminate you if you are in the way of my self-fulfillment.

You may disagree with that, in which case you are free to eliminate me if I am in the way of your self-fulfillment. Then it comes down to a question of who proves to be more powerful.

Translate that attitude to a government.

If there is no Creator, then there is no Creator to endow each individual with certain inalienable rights, like life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

If there is no Creator, there is no intrinsic value in a human being,

and the government is free to determine the value of a human being solely in terms of its use to the state.

The state is free to promote us or exterminate us in terms of our usefulness for the so-called higher good.

It is precisely Voldemort's view that there is no good and there is no evil, only power and those too weak to wield it that informed Joseph Stalin's coolly stated perspective that the death of one person is a tragedy, but the death of millions of people is a mere statistic.

There was a celebrated murder case in Poland recently, the story of a young businessman fished out of a river, his body bearing the marks of torture and starvation, having been tied in such a way that any struggle would only tighten the bonds that held him. The victim had no criminal record, no history of enemies; no suspect surfaced.

Newspapers labeled his killing "the perfect crime."

Not long thereafter, a Polish novelist published a novel called "Amok," whose protagonist mocked

religious faith and spiritual verities, claiming to do away with all moral prohibitions, and celebrating his amorality by abusing and then brutally killing a young woman. He wanted to commit the perfect crime. In real life, as a detective soon discovered, the murdered man's cell phone happened to be sold on the internet by none other than the author of this novel promoting amorality.

The last phone call made to the murdered victim happened to come from a pay phone paid for by a phone card registered to none other than the author of this novel.

On the basis of these and other evidences, the author of the novel *Amok* was eventually convicted for the murder of this young businessman, having apparently committed a murder for the thrill of killing, then compounded that thrill by writing about it.

He has been compared to two murderers of the 1920's, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, two brilliant Chicago students who, influenced by Nietzsche's declaration that good and evil didn't really exist, killed a fourteen-year-old boy so they could express their will to power and become supermen.

What am I trying to say?

I am trying to say that when I do not recognize the divine mark upon your life,
when you do not recognize the divine mark upon my life,

then we become mere instruments in each others eyes in our personal journey toward self-glorification.

All naturalistic attempts to establish the holiness of humanity have miserably failed.

When one discounts the reality of the Sacred, one has difficulty arguing for the sacredness of life.

When one discounts the reality of the Wholly Other, one has difficulty establishing the reality of holiness.

We are talking about murder, but we cannot talk about murder except in relationship unto God.

As Dostoevsky said so perfectly, "Without God, everything is permitted."

Yet the Sixth Commandment is not an absolute prohibition against killing.

The verse should really be translated, "Thou shalt not murder."

The Sixth Commandment is not a prohibition against killing, but against unjustified killing.

The Sixth Commandment is not an absolute prohibition against all acts that take human life, but it does recognize that where the taking of human life happens, it must be an exceptional instance.

I cannot help but think of that celebrated Tennessee bumpkin, Alvin York, wild as a young man, who then became a Christian and a pacifist,

but who was nevertheless inducted into the Army and eventually saw action in World War I.

Over time he committed one of the most extraordinary acts of heroism recorded in that wretched war.

Almost single-handedly, he captured over thirty machine guns and one hundred and thirty-two enemies, along the way taking twenty eight lives.

How could a pacifist act in such a manner, he was asked.

He explained, that when he saw those machine guns mowing down human life right and left, he resolved that the only way he could save people was to silence those guns.

He took human life, and it grieved him, but he did so as a way of protecting and promoting human life.

The Sixth Commandment accepts that that there may be a time when participation in warfare is justified.

There may be a time when a suicide is justified.

There may be a time when an abortion is justified.

There may be a time when lethal self-defense is justified.

But such moments are rare. They are meant to be exceptional, and only when we are acting in promotion of the mark of God upon humanity, not in ignorance of it.

These are hard words to grasp.

Joy Davidman, wife of C. S. Lewis, told a story about what happened at the end of World War II to the crew that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.

The crew was brought to Washington to be celebrated, and some Washington socialite hosted a party

in their honor. She had even commissioned a cake depicting an atomic explosion. A photograph was circulated nationwide of this confused pilot holding a knife over this cake depicting a nuclear explosion. Now the American public, even at that time, was divided over the moral propriety of using nuclear weapons, though the majority of people concluded that the use of the bomb ultimately saved far more lives than it took. But everyone agreed on one thing. Everybody hated the cake. Everyone recognized that the cake trivialized the mark of God that is to be found even upon our enemies. The use of that bomb might have been justified – but, even so, it was not right, not in the ultimate sense of right and wrong. Even when justified, the taking of life is always tragic. That cake represented the effacing of the mark of God that is to be found even upon our enemies, and yet that mark is there.

Christian ethics begin with this notion: the mark of God is upon every human being. Yet it is so easy in the living of real life for us to look past the mark of God that is upon those we oppose. Some friends of mine, among the most pacifistic, gentle people I've ever known, went to see the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*. They came out of the movie saying, "It was awful. We found ourselves becoming so angry when one of our boys would be killed. Then we found ourselves becoming joyful when one of the enemy would be killed." These sensitive souls walked out of the theatre realizing that even in just viewing a movie, they had ceased to see the mark of God upon those with whom their country was at war. In the living of real life, it is easy not to see the divine mark upon each other.

"If looks could kill . . ." goes the old saying.
Well, looks *can* kill.
When you and I look upon each other and see only the face of an enemy,
only the face of one estranged from us,
only someone who has ceased to be neighbor to us,
only one who strikes us as someone who is foreign and alien,
then in essence we begin to kill that person in our esteem.
None of us is likely to walk out of here today and physically take another human life,
yet we may remove from people around us the very mark of God that God intends for us
to see and to acknowledge.
Looks *can* kill. Looks can also save.
Only when we look upon each other, whether it is our fellow pew-sitter or our neighbor,
whether it is among the millions fleeing floods in Louisiana,
or the family fleeing the flood just down the street from us,
or that Arab terrorist being tortured in some cell in Guantanamo Bay --
only when we see all of them as bearing God's mark
are we being honest to the call and command of God.
Only then do we really appropriate the power and truth of God's fundamental teaching:
"Thou shalt not kill."
If we do not recognize this mark upon each other,
and upon all of God's children throughout this world,
we will one day destroy ourselves as a human race.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer
August 31, 2008

Seventh in a Series