

February 6, 2011

## **SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR**

Whenever my extended family gets together we like to tell stories about each other and sometimes about ourselves — most of them not very complimentary. All in good fun and never behind each other's backs. Many of the stories we tell have to do with our exploits on the athletic fields of our youth. The McConnell's were never considered stars in their playing days. What we remember most is not what greatness we brought to the fields and courts, but more what mistakes we brought to the games we played. One such story that often gets remembered is the time when my brother was playing football for a team up in Western Pennsylvania. It might have been a JV football team. He was a receiver. And in one of those rare moments when they actually passed the ball in JV football the quarterback was able to connect with my brother with a pass. After catching it he broke free of the safety and headed for the end zone. To the loud cheers of the crowd he was on his way to his moment of glory. Scoring a touchdown. When he crossed the line ... he turned around to receive the adulation of his teammates and the fans ... not realizing that the line he had crossed was not the goal line, but the 5-yard line. He still had not scored. He couldn't understand why the members of the

opposing team were rushing toward him to congratulate him. Why were they hugging him and yanking him to the ground? He was tackled on the three yard line. His team in the next set of downs did not score.

So close and yet so far. You can go a long ways toward the goal ... but if you've only crossed the five yard line, you've not yet scored. I think that happened in a Super Bowl not too long ago. Last play of the game ... the Tennessee Titans ... going for the game winning touchdown. Kevin Dyson catches the football, knows where the goal line is, but gets tackled on the 1 yard line. Zero on the clock. Game over.

So close and yet so far.

One of the things that can happen when you and I look at the Ten Commandments is that we can choose to take them only so far. We can hear what they have to say and apply them to our lives but only to a certain degree. When the commandment says that we are to not take the name of the Lord God in vain, we can take it only as far as to refrain from using the Lord's name in association with an expletive or insult. Instead of realizing that as Christians we bear the name of Christ wherever we go and it should not be sullied by what we do. We can hear the

commandment to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy ... and take it only so far as to go to church on Sunday morning and leave the rest of the day to all sorts of unholy endeavors. We can take the commandment only so far ... but it may be that what we have done is simply crossed the five-yard line ... and not really scored. Not really realizing the full abundance that is being offered in the commandment. God invites us into the full extent of these commands — so that we can realize the full extent of his life and his joy. God invites us to go as far as the goal line ... so we can really discover the joy of the abundant life.

So when we read the sixth commandment we might want to check ourselves to see how far we are willing to take what the commandment says. At first blush, the sixth commandment, "You shall not kill," seems like a fairly straightforward commandment that you and I hear in our 21<sup>st</sup> century pews and say to ourselves — "Well, at least I'm good on one of the commandments. I haven't killed anyone that I know of. Not that I wouldn't want to ... but I haven't." It's one of those commandments that we can easily slip pass with a check next to it ... saying ... "Got that one covered." But what we may have done is gotten ourselves to the 5-yard line, but not really scored.

It appears to be what Jesus is talking about in his Sermon on the Mount when he speaks directly about the sixth commandment and says, "You have heard that it was said to those of

ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders shall be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or a sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire."

Now all of a sudden — at least when I hear those words — I wonder that when it comes to the sixth commandment that I'm not on the 5 yard line ... I'm on the 45-yard line. And what I hear Jesus saying to me ... that the invitation into abundance ... goes beyond my refrain from killing — it goes deeper. It goes to those things of the Spirit. It goes to those things that rattle around in my heart. It goes to those deep feelings of my soul. Jesus seems always concerned about what is going on in the inside.

Anger, insult, judgment, aspersion. Jesus seems concerned about these things.

And these matters of the soul have been an issue for us human beings ever since the fall of Adam and Eve. In the very first story after Adam and Eve get kicked of the garden, the story we read this morning, we find two brothers, Cain and Abel, each seeking to do what seems to be right before the Lord. They offer their offerings to the Lord — Abel from his livestock and Cain from his fields -- but for some reason the Lord accepts Abel's offering, but not Cain's. And there is something about this that feels unjust to Cain. He's a farmer ... he has brought the

fruit of his fields to God. It is what he has to give. He doesn't understand why this is unacceptable ... and he is disappointed that his brother has received the Lord's favor and he has not. And this injustice seeps down into his craw. And he becomes angry. That's where anger comes from — a feeling of injustice. We have been wronged. And God in so many words says to Cain — "You better do something about that anger, Cain. Because if you don't do something about that anger ... sin is lurking. And sin will take advantage of you. And pretty soon you will do something you may regret.

We know the rest of the story.

Now the truth is we know not just Cain and Abel's story ... we know our own. Because the truth is to be human ... is to, along the way, experience anger. You can't live in an unjust world and not experience anger. We don't get the fair shake all the time — at least we don't perceive that we get the fair shake all the time ... and the injustice, if we allow it, turns to anger — and anger can turn into all sorts of things. Saying something you wish you hadn't said. Sending an email you wish you hadn't sent. Engaging in rumors you wish you hadn't engaged. Casting aspersions that you wish you hadn't cast. And all of these things, Jesus says, are the same as killing. You might as well of pulled out a gun. And the truth is ... this anger and the sin that lurks next to it ... what it most wants to do, without our knowing it, is something evil to us. Elie Weisel, survivor of the holocaust and Nobel Peace Prize winner said once that "hate

hates both the victim and the hater."

I love how Frederick Buechner put it: "Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back — in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you."

It makes sense then when Jesus tells us to forgive. And to forgive not just once, not just twice, not just three times ... not just seven times. But to forgive seventy times seven times. Why all this forgiveness? Because of what the anger can do. Anger has to blame. Anger has to harm. Anger has to devour the one who is angry. Forgive, Jesus says, as much as you can in order to stem the feelings and anger of injustice. So when he's on the cross — the #1 victim of injustice — the perfect lamb of God being slain for trumped up reasons — Jesus says, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." As if Jesus is saying to himself, "If I'm going to die, let it not be of my own anger."

We've all gotten blindsided a few times in our lives. People close to us have hurt us. Unwarranted accusations thrown our way. Rumors with our name attached to them. And it stings. Sometimes it more than stings. And we have sensed the anger. And what I have sensed about the anger is that it seeks to feed on other things. A cancer seeking a host. And that without my persistent attention and conversation with God ... it will continue to feed and grow. Without the welcome of the Spirit's forgiving grace in me ... I have no strength myself to stem its tide.

C.S. Lewis when he was a boy was the victim of the harsh hand of a cruel headmaster of a boarding school. It left upon him some permanent emotional and psychological scars. The headmaster was half crazy and the sins he visited upon the young Lewis left deep wounds. When Lewis came to Christ he realized that this childhood anger was something that he had to bring to God. And bring it. And bring it. And bring it until he could welcome the Spirit's forgiving grace ... to forgive this tyrant who had long since died. And it wasn't until he had long passed the age of 60 that he could finally release the anger ... and forgive the old man. And thus draw that much closer to the One who had forgiven him.

Maybe you read in the paper a couple weeks ago the story of Izzeldin Abuelaish, a Palestinian doctor who grew up in the Gaza Strip. He practiced medicine there and tried, with his wife, to raise a family. He had made it his practice within his practice and his family to try

to build bridges in people's lives between Israeli's and Palestinians. He incurred the wrath of his own people by not speaking ill of his Israeli neighbors. And then came the day two years ago when Israeli tank shells tore into his apartment killing three of his daughters and leaving one blind in one eye. Injustice at its highest order. What does a man do when such has been done to him? Dr. Abuelaish wrote a memoir with the title: I Shall Not Hate: A Gaza Doctor's Journey on the Road to Peace and Human Dignity. About the memoir he says: "The antidote for revenge is not revenge. If I want to get revenge it will not return my daughters. The innocence of those girls must not be spoiled by revenge. I can keep their memory living with good deeds."

Sounds like a man trying to get from the 5-yard line to the end zone.

You shall not kill. Perhaps you and I never knew that so simple a command could offer so much abundance. If only we would give it a try. "Why are you angry?" God asks Cain. Good question. At least it is for me. Is it for you? And as hard as it might be to pick it up and let the Spirit examine us ... and let the grace of God fill us ... and let the anger that we want to hold onto ... go. And hard as all that might seem ... abundance is what lies ahead. Victory is what lies ahead. Joy is what lies ahead.

None of which comes when you choose to stay on the 5-yard line.