

*Earth Day
and the Eighth Commandment
Thou Shall Not Steal*

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When I look back on my life, some events seem to have marked the passage of time in particular ways. Perhaps for all of us, we mark our lives by certain events—some filled with joy and some with sorrow. I can bring back to mind my wedding, graduation from college, the birth of our daughters, standing here on that first candidating Sunday three years ago, and talking about Jackie Robinson—winning the Nobel Prize—that kind of thing. Over the last couple of weeks, we mentioned all the events ripe for comment—Easter and Passover, the Buddha's birthday and Holocaust Remembrance Day—but it was also the 40th anniversary of Jackie Robinson playing in the major leagues. Events of joy and events of sorrow make up our lives.

For the most part, I have been spared personal tragedy. Other than my sister's death when she was 50 and I was 52, my own life has had a blessed distance from tragedy. I have seen pain and suffering; I was a chaplain for two years at a psychiatric facility and a chaplain for Hospice for a year; I have heard stories of sorrow and pain and tragedy from members of the congregations that I have served. No one of us lives far from the house of sorrow.

As we know, life is beautiful, and not. The painful irony of the film of that name "Life is Beautiful" about Nazi concentration camps is all around us to greater and lesser degrees. Kathe worked with a nurse in Washington D.C. who was from Rwanda, and remembers fleeing with her family from the massacres and what it felt like to drive over bodies in the road at night hoping to get to safety. How do they live, these people in our world who have experienced such horror? How is it possible that we can rain so much horror on our brothers and sisters?

Almost 45 years ago, I listened as John Kennedy was assassinated, and again a few years later Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. The horrors of the Vietnam war were brought home on television and in my brother's eyes when he returned after a year as a combat marine in that war.

And in my ministry: the bombing in Oklahoma City in 1995 that took 168 lives and injured more than 800; the shootings in Columbine just eight years ago last Friday that took the lives of 13, though the intent was to kill more than at Oklahoma City; the attack on September 11, 2001, that took over 3000 lives. And now Blacksburg.

My daughters have friends at Virginia Tech. Some graduated and some are still there. One good friend lived on the same floor of the dorm where the first murders took place; she was probably just getting up when they occurred. She is a UU; her Dad a UU minister; they were close to us in Virginia.

There is a phrase in Melville's *Billy Budd* about why Claggert hates the innocent Billy. It is a "mystery of iniquity," Melville suggests. A mystery. A mystery of iniquity. Andrew DelBanco, in his great book *The Death of Satan*, claims that Americans lost the ability to talk about and understand evil in the early 1800s, beginning with Emerson. He suggests we no longer believe that evil is a real presence in the world. We think of evil as some kind of mistake or a lack of something, but something that can be repaired. We somehow believe in the perfectibility of our own selves.

Was Seung-hui-Cho mentally ill? Was he evil? What line did he cross and why? What is the mystery of iniquity in his life? His family has said they are "helpless, hopeless and lost." They cannot understand. Where is that line that is all too often crossed? When do obsessions turn dangerous? When does our imagination slip into the darkness? Remember *Taxi Driver*. Remember John Hinckley, the man who shot Reagan. Where is that line in you? Is there one?

Yeats mentions the "rough beast, its hour come round at last..." and wonders why it is that the worst are filled with passionate intensity and the good lack all conviction. We watched "Jesus Camp" the other night and wondered how it is that the religion of Jesus, the Prince of Peace, has come to be the religion of war—soldiers for Christ, militant and muscular Christianity, the cultural war, talk of the enemy—all the language of violence and hatred. Galen Guengerich, my colleague in New York City, titled his Easter

sermon "When darkness becomes desire," a line from a Mark Strand poem, but we might ask if the inverse is not also sometimes true, when desire becomes darkness.

Wendell Berry suggests that it comes from our inordinate desire to be superior to our surroundings, that we are unwilling to live within limits and see ourselves as a part of a larger whole. Berry says we have convinced ourselves that we live at the center of everything and that the world is unlimited.

The roots of violence are somewhere, whether it shows up in the shooting of 32 people on a college campus or in the destruction of our climate, whether our weapon is a gun or oil, the roots of this ability for destruction lie somewhere.

How does hatred begin? How does the hatred that led to Monday begin?

It begins whenever or wherever we (and I mean all of humankind, not just us) when we think we are better than someone else, when we think others are less than we are. It begins when we no longer doubt ourselves, when we are so sure that we are right. It begins when we no longer see others as fully human.

It begins when we think we are better than others because of what we believe or don't believe; it begins when we think we are better than others because of who we are or who we are not. It begins when we turn our heads from the poverty and suffering throughout the world; it begins when we are indifferent.

How does hatred begin? It begins when we think we are superior to our own condition; it begins when we think we are larger than anything, when we refuse to surrender to some greater reality. Hatred begins when we refuse to serve some larger good. It begins in pride, in fear, in selfishness. It begins when we think we are more important than anyone or anything.

And how does hatred end? Can it end? Will it end? Hatred begins to end when we pick up and go on, when we do not give in to despair or cynicism or fear. It begins to end when we realize that there is great beauty and love in this world. Hatred ends when we look around us and see others engaged in the same quest for a better world and when we join hands together in that. Hatred ends when we love.

Hatred ends when we are willing to bend our knees and realize we are a part of and dependent on a reality far greater than any one of us. Hatred begins to end when we open ourselves to grace rather than to pride.

So, this is an Earth Day sermon and also a commandment sermon—the Eighth Commandment—"thou shall not steal." And it is a sermon about the mystery of iniquity. It is all of a piece, I suppose. All of this is about who we are and how we live: questions about ethics and morality and the rules of behavior; questions about our conduct as individuals and communities and societies; questions about murder and environmental degradation (killing each other and killing the earth); questions about helping each other and healing the earth. Why and why not.

Anyone here have the answer?

These commandments from beginning to end are about iniquity and about our ability to cross moral lines. In some ways, I bet we are all guilty of transgressing the commandments so far.

This one: thou shall not steal. Ever stolen anything? I took a comic book once from a drug store. I felt awful and guilty but I did take it. That is the easy notion, taking something from someone else, something that belongs to someone else. That is obvious.

But what else do we steal?

I have stolen joy from others by raining on their parade. I have stolen grief from others by pretending that all is OK. I have stolen ideas and time from others. I have stolen clean air by not tuning up my cars. I have stolen beauty by littering and wastefulness. I have stolen so much from this Earth.

If stealing is taking from someone else something that is theirs and not ours—well, we are all guilty.

We—and this is the big we of western society—have stolen from our children and from the earth itself by our profligate waste of resources, by taking more than our share of the earth. We have stolen energy by using way too much; we have stolen clean air and water by our wastefulness and consumption; we have stolen species by over-development. Maybe this commandment is the perfect one for Earth Day and maybe we should ask ourselves what we have stolen and what we are stealing from the earth.

A Native American tale relates how an elder says to a young woman: "My daughter, there are two wolves inside of us all: one is filled with fear and hatred and greed and anxiety and war, and the other wolf is filled with peace and serenity and justice and kindness and moderation. Our life is a struggle between those two wolves."

"And which wolf wins?" she was asked. "The one we feed; the one we feed," she answered. If we feed hatred and consumption, that wolf will win. If we feed kindness and moderation, that wolf will win.

Inspiration may come at odd times. Two famous stories are of Paul on the road to Damascus and the Buddha under the Bodhi tree in India. Paul, then known as Saul, persecuted the new Jewish sect who called themselves Christians, had a revelation on the road to Damascus. He wrote later that he had until that time seen as through a glass darkly, but after that he saw clearly, as if face to face. The Buddha came to a revelation after many, many years of study and discipline, and it came to him as he waited. Sometimes a surprise and sometimes a gift.

I had one in a drive-through line at a Carl's Jr. It was years ago, almost 20 years ago. We had an older Toyota Tercel 4-wheel drive station wagon. It had barely enough power to get up a hill but it could go through snow. In front of me was a big pickup (They have gotten even bigger, these pickups; what in the world are people thinking of with these vehicles, the huge SUVs and trucks?) which was putting out a fair amount of noxious exhaust. I had had my windows down, but closed them, put the air on re-circulate and turned on the air conditioner. And, it came to me—the question anyway—which generation will be the last, the last generation to want to have children. Because the earth has been used up, because the future is grimmer than the present, because hope is gone. Not my generation, obviously, and not my children's, but how about their grandchildren's, or great-grand children's? Are we stealing the future from our descendants?

You know all the facts about global warming, about the disappearance of species and habitat. You know the facts about conservation, and what is good and what is not. You know the 7th Principle: respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

You know these things. You know that it is wrong to use more of the earth's resources than you should, that it is better to walk than to drive, that you should turn out lights when you can and switch to compact fluorescent bulbs. You know that you should plant more water tolerant plants where you live and take shorter showers; you know that you should unplug all these little devices (phone chargers, etc., that use energy when not in use). You know that you should support candidates who take the environment seriously; you know that you should recycle and take re-usable bags when you shop; you know you should buy local produce. You know these things. As in all of life, you know you should be a part of a solution rather than part of a problem, that you should add to the good and the just.

We know all these things.

You see, what happened in Blacksburg on Monday is not entirely different from what we have done to the earth, and the answer to last Monday is the same as it is to the environmental crises. (That's plural crises, not singular crisis, folks.) When we isolate ourselves, whether it be as individuals or communities or even societies, we risk both understanding and care. Out of the isolation the possibility of violence increases. We will only care for what we love and we can love only to what we are connected.

The answer to this all is a combination of humility and love: humility that we are connected; that, as John Muir said, when we pick up anything, we find out that it is connected to everything else in the universe.

On Earth Day, maybe we should stop for a minute and realize that this good and great planet Earth is our home and that we belong here. We have no other place. It is not always a pleasant place. Along side the majesty of the Sierras is the violence of the earthquake; the Guinea Worm lives alongside the butterfly. The earth is not always benevolent—"red in tooth and claw," wrote Tennyson—just as human nature is not always kind. We are both the torment of Seung-hui Cho and the courage of Liviu Librescu, the holocaust survivor who was killed protecting his classroom.

When we take what is not ours—from each other or from the earth—we violate a sacred principle: that life is a gift and that our lives are entrusted to each of us to do well by it, to live with kindness and justice, to leave the world the same or better than we received it.

Blessed be, Mother and Father Earth. Blessed be.