

Words to Live By
"What's in a Name?"
Exodus 20:7, Acts 2:1-4; 14-21

Today we continue our summer sermon series on the Ten Commandments. So far, we've seen that God commands us to have no other gods, and to have no idols. This morning, we'll be looking at the third commandment, which is that we should not make improper use of God's name. In more traditional language, it is the command that we not "take the Lord's name in vain."

There is an old song called "**If I had a hammer.**" The theme of the song is that, if the singer had a hammer, rather than building a physical structure he would hammer out a warning that would lead to justice and freedom, and love between his brothers and sisters, all over this land. That's pretty good. Whenever I use a hammer, I get a different result. Almost invariably, I hit one or more of my fingers, and...well, I end up saying some words I shouldn't say. Let them write a song about that! I suspect it is a more common experience. The truth is, many of us, in moments of pain and frustration are tempted to utter some unedifying terminology. Sometimes, we might even speak God's name in a way that is far from worshipful. Of course, this isn't a good thing. When I first encountered the Ten Commandments, I believed that this was kind of thing the third commandment was about. I thought that if you never swore using God's name, you had it covered. But the commandment is about far more than using God's name as an expletive when you are angry or frustrated. It is about not using God's name in any way that brings dishonor to God or which uses God's name as a tool to further our own agendas. For the ancient Israelites, this specifically meant not misusing the sacred name for God, whom they called "Yahweh." For us, the words "God" or "Jesus" serve the same function. The point is, God will not be used, and forbids our trying to co-opt God for our own selfish purposes.

The commandment means that there are things for which we should never use God's name. In it's original context, the commandment meant, first of all, that people should not take oaths in God's name and then lie. In Biblical times, it was common to swear to the truth of one's words by invoking the name of your god as a guarantee that you were being honest. Even today, when you testify in court, you may be asked to take an oath in which you affirm to tell the truth, "so help you God." Well, if you do that, and then lie, you've committed perjury in God's name. Or, on a much more casual basis, people will sometimes tell a story and reinforce it with the words, "I swear to God." Again, if what you say isn't really true, you've made God a party to your lies. This is definitely not something we should be doing. For this reason, Jesus tells us that when we are taking oaths or making promises that we should not swear by God, but just let our "yes be yes" and our "no be no" and to leave God out of it. God is sacred, holy and to be honored above all else. We are never to use God's name to prop up our dishonesty. That is an insult to God.

Neither are we to use God's name in curses. This certainly applies to the kind of situation I described earlier about hitting my fingers with a hammer and the resulting words of pain and frustration. But the commandment has far greater application than that. It often happens that, in order to bolster their own cause or ideology, people will say not only what they believe to be

true, but go the extra step of saying that God is somehow “on their side” with regard to that issue. This results in them “cursing” certain groups of people in God’s name. In the Bible there were prophets who by divine inspiration pronounced words of judgment or warning. But none of us are Biblical prophets. Jesus, in fact, has commanded us to refrain from pronouncing judgment and curses on others. I know, we all want to feel like we’re on the same side as God, and we can find Biblical passages to justify our cursing of people we deem unworthy. On a certain level, it feels good. But honestly, as Christians, we are followers of Jesus, and no one trumps Jesus – who explicitly commands us not to judge others, but instead to bless those who curse us, and to love and pray for our enemies. Even so, we get characters like Harold Camping, who predicted that Jesus was coming to judge the world on May 21. Clearly, he didn’t speak for God. What was actually happening was that he was taking God’s name in vain; using God’s name for his own purposes. And there are many others who do or have done similar things. God’s name has been used to curse or demean entire nations and races, all females, and many other groups of people. Whoever you don’t like; whoever you have an argument with; whoever frightens you-well, it’s tempting to say that they stand under God’s judgment or are somehow inferior, and that you are the favored one. Beware, friends, because God will not be used to shore up our prejudices. There is no greater violation of the third commandment than to do so. The Bible tells us that God alone is sovereign, and we need to be very careful in claiming to speak for God, especially if it is to curse or demean other people.

On the other hand, there are appropriate uses for God’s name. The Bible tells us we are blessed by God so that we, in turn, might be a blessing to others. One way we share God’s blessing is by caring for others in God’s name. A little over a week ago, seven of our members helped out with a Habitat for Humanity building project. They blessed others in God’s name. The same thing happens when you work at the food pantry, help out at the House of Bread, or visit the sick, work for justice for the oppressed, or perform other acts of kindness. These are the kinds of things that bless people in God’s name and reflect God’s heart for people. Most of all, we make proper use of God’s name when we share the Good News that Jesus came to redeem us, to reconcile us to God, and to restore all of God’s creation. Our Presbyterian heritage sees great power in our proclamation of the Gospel, because it enables people to experience God’s salvation.

In our reading from Acts, we heard the story of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit came down upon the disciples and they began to proclaim the good news of Jesus in various languages, so that many could hear, understand, and come to faith. The Apostle Peter got up to explain to the crowd what was happening. He ended with these words, quoted from the prophet Joel: “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved!” God’s name isn’t to be used to cover our lies or reinforce our prejudices or express our frustrations. God’s name is to be used as a blessing to other people, with the result that they may call on God’s name, because God’s will is that every person shall be saved. There is no fancy formula or process for salvation here. When your child is in danger and calls to you, you run to them and do everything you can to save them. And so we have this promise from Scripture that everyone...EVERY ONE...who calls on the name of the Lord, shall be saved. This is so because God loves us with a parental love and is not willing for any of God’s children to perish. It is our responsibility then, to live with integrity, and justice, and mercy, so that God’s name

will be honored and taken seriously. It is our calling to proclaim the Good News of God's grace in Jesus Christ, so that everyone may indeed call on God's name, and experience God's salvation.