

July 15, 2018

TEXT: Exodus 20:7 and Ephesians 4:1–6

TITLE: Thou Shall, Thou Shalt Not: The Importance of Names

By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf

A friend came over to help my husband with a home improvement project and brought along his 8-year-old son. As soon as his dad and my husband had slipped away, the boy came over to me, and, in a hushed voice, said, “Heather, how many swear words are there?” To which I replied: “Well, how many do you know?” He listed off about the handful of words he had known—not speaking the cuss words out loud, but referencing them by first letter. I nodded my head and told him that I thought he had them all. While I knew that a motivator for our conversation was a young boy’s desire to explore the unknown world of forbidden words, his question opened the door for a much more important conversation about how the words we say might give messages to others—whether those messages are true or not—about who we are and what we believe.

When we hear the language of the third commandment, many of us feel compelled to respond like this 8-year-old boy. When we read the commandment to not take the name of the Lord in vain, we want an itemized list of all of the language that is off limits, so that we can ensure that what comes out of our mouths is of no offense to God. It’s possible that this reflex comes from our own childhood. After all, this is the commandment typically referenced to teach kids that cuss words are bad. Yet, it’s not long before they remember that some of the words appear in the Bible of all places (the A-word and H-word, and D-word), and it becomes clear that we’re talking about more than a list of words and more about the intent behind them.

One commentator writes this:

The name of God is so commonly associated with empty phrases or easy religion or the latest ideology of a social or political sort. The name thereby gets dragged down to the level of the contexts in which it is used. As people hear it so used, they may come to associate the name of God fundamentally with a cause they wish to avoid or reject. Consequently, they will not be drawn to this God and the name will not receive its due honor and respect. At the deepest level, use of God’s name is a matter of mission.¹

Essentially, he argues, God is worried about God’s reputation. God wants to ensure that the Divine name is only attached to words, ideas and actions that reflect the heart of God. God is worried about people misusing the Divine name not only for their own interests & selfish gain, but also for any purposes that defy

¹ Fretheim, Terrence E. *Exodus*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. p228.

the will of God. Yes, God is worried about false prophets and false teachings. But God is also concerned about actions done by people bearing God's name. God is worried about the conduct of God's followers, knowing that their conduct—our conduct—will be a reflection on God.

We get this sentiment. It's why college athletic teams have a dress code for when they travel. It's why Papa John's Pizza fired its own founder for his documented use of a racist slur on a conference call in May. It's why, regardless of how much we argued with our brother and sister as kids we knew how to use our best manners in public, to be kind, and always say "please" and "thank you."

We know that when we are a part of something bigger than ourselves, we are a reflection not just of ourselves but we are likewise a reflection of the larger whole.

And, frankly, we know that God had good reason to worry about the branding of the Divine name.

See, God has made it abundantly clear through covenants, through prophets, through scripture, and even through the Incarnation, that God is a God of *love*. Genesis writes of the love God had for creation at its inception, and how that love endured even when humanity chose to sin. In Exodus we read of God's liberation of God's people and God's unfaltering provision through the wilderness. And the prophet Jonah tried to run from his call because he just *knew* that God would be merciful to the Ninevites. The author of John's Gospel reminds us that God put on flesh and dwelt among us because *God so loved the world*. When asked for the greatest commandment, Jesus said that we are to love God with wholeness of heart, mind, soul and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. And the author of 1 John says it plain and clear: *God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them*.

Yet, in spite of God's clear and steadfast message of love and God's call to God's people, we know that every generation—including our own—has fallen short of this call to love. As individuals and as a people Christians have tarnished the name of God. Christians, have, in fact, committed heinous acts in God's name. The list is long, but highlights include the Crusades; the enslavement of African men, women and children; the conquest of and forced proselyzation of Native American men, women and children—including the removal of Native American children from their parents and the placement of them in Christian schools, and with Christian families; the Holocaust....

We see it today when "Christian" business owners fight for the right to choose not to bake cakes for same sex couples, when laws are drafted to grant adoption agencies the prerogative to deny adoptions to same sex couples, and we see it in both subtle and overt ways all throughout the church when Christians exclude or limit the engagement of a gay, lesbian or transgender person because of their gender or sexuality.

We see it when Christian lawmakers institute legislation separating children from parents and detaining families who have come to our border seeking asylum, just as we see it when officials in the Christian Church hide abuses against children to shield clergy or church hierarchy. We see it when those who are not Christian are treated as enemy—and when that enmity is codified through travel bans, even the watered down version that was upheld by our nation’s Supreme Court.

We see it when any person or people are seen as sub human because of their gender, race, sexual identity, class, religion or ability: when scripture is quoted to exclude women from leadership or to suggest that black on black crime is justification for blue on black crime.

We can likely all think of people who have said to us, “I used to go to church, but…” and named how they had been excluded, heard a message of hate or not been treated with love. We’ve all heard people say, “I like Jesus, but I can’t stand Christianity. They don’t do things like he did.”

We know that when one is wounded in the name of God, this woundedness hits doubly hard because it not only feels like a person hurting us, but that God rejecting us too.

Thankfully the “shalt nots” are situated amidst many more words of “shalls” that guide us in our journey. Paul, for example, charges the church to live a life worthy of our call. As individuals and as a community we are to be humble, gentle, unified in the Spirit and loving.

Our brothers and sisters at Eastminster embodied this call for us this week as their music ministry team sent flowers and words of condolence to our music ministry team, honoring our loss and Gabe’s witness.

And Matthew’s Gospel reminds us that in spite of our sinfulness we are sent out by Christ in Christ’s name. Our call, by the grace of God, is to be God’s love letter to the world—going out to share the good news, to baptize, to teach, to heal and above all to love, in the name of the one who saved us.

As Christians we bear the name of Christ. It is a privilege to bear the name of the one who put on flesh to dwell among us; who bore our sin that we might be forgiven; who died and rose from the dead that we too might have life, and have it abundantly.

Our call, simply put, is to love. We honor the name of God when our witness, in word and in deed, is a witness of *love*. When we point others to God’s love through our example of hospitality or mercy; when we offer our gifts generously and to God’s glory; when we welcome the outcast or advocate for the oppressed; when we are kind to our neighbor and even when we are kind to our enemy.

Friends, at the end of a painful week and the dawn of a new day, may we remember that the God whose name we bear is a God of love. What's more, this God in Christ has triumphed over all of the hurt that anyone could bear—the hurt of this past week, and even the hurt of generational sin. Because of the power of the living God and the hope we have in Christ's resurrection we can step out as a people of hope. We can love because God first loved us. The challenging charge is not as tough when we remember that in life and in death we belong to God, whose love will never let us go.