

January 5, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

A Resolution Worth Naming

Philippians 2:1-13 and Matthew 5:33-37

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Over the next couple of months in our sermons we are going to be thinking about the corporate nature of Christianity. The fact is that Jesus calls us to live out our Christian faith not just by ourselves with God, but with one another as well as with God. This is an essential part of Christian living, and this is important to emphasize in a world or society in which church going is decreasing rapidly, in which many people think that they can go it alone as worshippers of God, as spiritual people. We're going to be doing so with the help of a Presbyterian statement, which is part of our constitution, which is called the *Six Great Ends of the Church*: six wonderful reasons, remarkable reasons for us to live out our faith, not just by ourselves, but together with others:

1. The Proclamation of the Gospel for the Salvation of Humankind
2. The Shelter, Nurture, and Spiritual Fellowship of the Children of God
3. The Maintenance of Divine Worship
4. The Preservation of the Truth
5. The Promotion of Social Righteousness
6. The Exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the World.

So that's what we're going to be doing in the months ahead. We're going to begin that series next week, thinking corporately about our lives together as Christians.

Today, however, as we enter the New Year, I want us to focus on our lives as individual Christians. At the beginning of this New Year I want us to think about who we are as individuals in the sight of God and who we want to become as a follower of Jesus Christ in this coming year? What's my resolution as a Christian for this coming year?

Or to phrase this in terms of where we are in the liturgical year – today is the day we call “Epiphany,” where many churches celebrate the coming to Jesus of the Magi, the Wisemen. So . . . What will it take for us to be wise seekers of Jesus in the coming year? Is there a resolution that we can make, something we can commit to, that will help us be wise?

Well, I'd like to suggest that there is, and it comes from the Ten Commandments! Through the Fall we look together at the Ten Commandments. Those of you who heard the series may realize that we only looked at nine out of the Ten Commandments. I left one of the commandments for us to consider today – one that makes a wonderful resolution for us as we enter the New Year; something to pursue that will make us wise! It's the third commandment,

which speaks about the name of God. In the negative it says to us that we are “not to take the name of the Lord our God in vain.” This should be a great resolution for us to make, and one we have a possibility of actually remembering as the year progresses, because, in its positive form, we repeat it every week as we come to church. The negative form is “not to take God’s name in vain,” while the positive form is “to hallow or honor God’s name” – something Jesus teaches us to pray about in the prayer that he taught his disciples, when he says to us we are to pray like this: *Our Father, who art in Heaven* (notice how the prayer begins by naming God?), *Hallowed be thy Name*. Jesus is picking up on the third commandment and expressing it positively. That is, to turn it into a resolution, what we are asking God to help us with is this: “Lord, help me not only not to take your name in vain, but help me to lift up your name, fill it with meaning amid significance in this coming year!” May this be our resolution as we move into 2014, the third commandment.

When people think about the third commandment (if in fact they ever think about the third commandment!), they tend to think about the third commandment in terms of words: in terms of the words that we speak. I’m not going to take the name of the Lord my God in vain, is understood to mean “I’m not going to say something, use God’s name as I talk, in such a way that it empties God’s name of meaning.” When people use God’s name casually, when they use it as a swear word we say they take God’s name in vain – and it happens so often in our society these days.

You can barely watch a movie; turn on the television without somebody saying something about the name of God or about the name of Jesus, which empties that name of its meaning or its significance. So somebody says “For God’s sake” or “For Christ’s sake” or “Jesus!” or both names of Jesus, “Jesus . . . Christ!” they say.

And they do it for emphasis, to be emphatic about something.

They do it to express some sort of cynicism or frustration about something:

- “Oh God!” they say – it’s an expression of frustration when God’s name is used like that.
- And even if we speak up at that time and say, “I wish you wouldn’t say that,”
- people will generally respond that it doesn’t mean anything: “I really don’t mean that I’m speaking to God. It just happens to be the word that I’m using at this particular time. I could be saying something else.”
- But we say, “You’re not saying something else, you’re using that name.”
- They say it doesn’t really amount to anything, it’s just trivial.

To which I would respond that the third commandment, to begin with at least, says to us “Wait a minute, no word that we speak is trivial. No word that comes out of our mouth is inconsequential, and especially if the words coming out of our mouth have something to do with God; they always, always mean something! – ***when we treat anybody’s name in vain we’re diminishing our relationship with them, and in fact it’s quite possible that we’re actually destroying our relationship with them.***

Let me give a couple of examples about this. Think for example about speaking to somebody about somebody else. You're speaking about "their name" – both literally and figuratively (their name meaning reputation). You mention their name and you're bad-mouthing them, and they are not there. You say there's no harm in this, we're just speaking about this person and he or she will never know. But what if they did know? What if they found out? What if there were microphones in the rooms that led straight to that person so that whenever you say anything about anybody else somehow they always know? However trivial it may seem to you – if, somehow, they know about the conversation, that word about them will always cause a breach in your relationship. The moment that they know or hear. It may not rupture the relationship completely, though it might, but a barrier will come in, oh yes it will, as soon as they hear that something was being said about them behind their back. You cannot speak about somebody's name without it affecting them in some way, shape, or form.

Let's think about it this way; so when people swear they use all kinds of words, they may use God's name – God, Jesus, Christ. But what if they used a different name, just a normal everyday name of a person that you know, a friend of yours. Maybe they used the name David? Or maybe they used the name David Renwick whenever they are frustrated or angry or cynical and they just want to add emphasis to what they say? So here you are, and I'm not among you, and in your everyday conversation every so often the name David comes up;

"Ohhhhh Daviiiiidd!" people say (as my mother would have said!). "O David," or just out of the blue, "David . . Renwick," and all the power and frustration in the world is poured into that name and all of you are doing it. And the people speaking say that it just doesn't mean anything. And then I walk into the room, into the middle of the group!

To begin with, I say "isn't that nice, they're mentioning my name all the time." I hear it and then I say, "Wait a minute, are you talking to me?"

And they say "No! we're not talking to you at all."

And I respond, "But it's my name!"

"But it doesn't mean anything!" It's not significant to them –

"But it IS to me, because it's my name and I'm here!"

"But we don't mean anything by it.

I say to you, "But it's the name I was given, and it's not just my name. Whether I like it or not it's wrapped up in who I am, and I can't avoid that. So I really can't continue to come into this gathering if you use my name like that, it hurts me. At the very least it hurts me. It may offend me, but at least it hurts me to think that I am so insignificant to you that you can use my name like that."

In other words, if we were to use a regular person's name instead of God's name in a "swearing" manner, and we knew that they could hear and see us do it, because they were there, it would be tantamount to treating that person as if they were a non-person, as if they are not there, as if they have no feelings – whereas God is always here! And hears! And we are in relationship with God, and it should be significant. So too should be the name of God: God's name and God's person are intimately connected with each other.

If we lived in the ancient world we would realize that this connection is actually far stronger than we in the modern western world tend to think of. So Jesus in the scriptures is very specifically given some names.

- He's given the name Jesus because the name Jesus in Hebrew means "God Saves" (Matthew 1:21). This name reflects not only what he does, but who he is: he is the savior.
- He is also given the name Immanuel (Matthew 1:23), which means "God with us," because he is the embodiment of God – he is, literally God, with us in flesh and blood.
- Or in our passage in Philippians 2, we read that Jesus is given the name "Lord" which means "boss"! – he is the one in charge, Paul explains, because through his incarnation, his death and his crucifixion he has defeated all the enemies of God, every single one of them. So that you and I could be set free to be in relationship with God forever, and God says to Jesus, "You can take my name." You see the name "Lord" not only means "boss" but it is the Old Testament name for God! God's name is "the Lord," and God gives Jesus his name, the name above every name, that (as Paul says, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in Heaven and on earth." Jesus' name is not just an added extra for his life; it's who he is.

Names matter. Our words matter. The way we speak about God's name matters; it has to do with our relationship with God, and at the very least if we are to take this commandment as a resolution for the coming year we should be saying to God, *"Lord help me to control my lips. No matter what it is I say, may my lips always be seasoned with Grace. No matter what I say, and especially when I use your name, may I take it as seriously as you take me. May I not be callous or casual with your name, for you are really here and you really hear, and you want our relationship to be intimate. Lord help me, help me not to take in vain your name on my lips."*

That's a good place to start with this commandment: to think about how we speak. But this third commandment has to do with more than how we speak. When the commandment tells us that we are not to take God's name in vain, it's speaking not just about our speech, but about our whole way of life. Let me put it like this; when we take God's name, we are taking on God's name, as if God's name were our name. So we're not just taking it on our lips, we're taking it into our very being, so that it becomes a part of who are or who God intends for us to be. Let me illustrate the second sense of taking God's name in a number of different ways.

Taking God's name in this sense is far more like marriage and family; it's far more like a spouse taking on the name of the person they marry; or a child who takes on the family name from the very moment they're born.

- So for example, a woman by the name of Jackie marries Jack and she takes on the name of Kennedy and because of that name, by golly, she becomes the "first lady!" You see, the name change changes everything.

- What about Juliet who doesn't take on the name of Montague? She cannot, she's not allowed to take on the name of Montague because of the family name she carries. It changes her short life; it changes everything.
- What about Michael resisting his family name? The family name is Corleone! You know who I'm talking about? In the movie, The Godfather! Michael doesn't want to be a part of the family, he wants to escape the family, he wants to be somebody else, but finds himself dragged back into everything that name stands for. He remains a part of that family whether he wants to or not. And, eventually, embraces the name and everything (bad) that it stands for.
- Or on a brighter note, there's Kate, who takes on the name Windsor and . . . she's on track to become a Queen!
- Or move out of that realm and into the realm of our life as a nation. We're coming up to the winter Olympic Games where athletes are going to come together from all over the world and they bring with them their own individual name. But they bring not only their individual name, they bring with them *the name of their nation* emblazoned on the clothes that they wear. Every time they race or perform, they literally and figuratively carry with them not only their name, but the name of their nation. And they are, or ought to be, committed not only to bring honor to their own name, but to their nation too.

There are some from small nations around the world who will never win a medal, but the sense that they bear their nation's name is critical for them. Some of you may remember back to 1988 when there was a bobsled team in the Calgary Olympic Games that came from Jamaica. They didn't win, but they carried the name of their tropical island nation proudly in the snow and ice.

- Or think about the corporate world. Maybe we work for a corporation or a company, and their name becomes synonymous with who we are and what we do. There's been an advertisement on the television recently for IBM, and it's not just about IBM and what IBM does, but it's about the people who work for IBM and (I hate to say it) the ad has worked because the tag line there is in my head and it goes "I'm an IBMer, I'm an IBMer, I'm an IBMer." In other words, those working for the company are saying that the name of the company in some way defines them — it's who I am, it's what I stand for, it is what I do.
- Or, finally think of the military. A person is not just "in the Marines" but is a Marine; you are Navy, you are Air Force, you are Army, you are Coast Guard. The name is who you are, your identity is wrapped up with this.

All of us take on a name, it may be our given name, but we internalize some name for ourselves which often has more power over us than we care to imagine; power to lift us up or to drag us down. Fred Craddock is the former professor of preaching at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University, and he tells a wonderful story about when this truth really hit home to him many years ago.

This was probably in the 1940s or 1950s when he and his wife are on vacation in the mountains of eastern Tennessee. They were at a restaurant in a small town and wanted to be alone when an elderly gentleman came up to them and began a conversation. They were muttering under their breath “Leave us alone, leave us alone!” – but he wouldn’t, and instead began asking some questions about them; who they were, where they came from, what they were doing, were they on vacation? And they found themselves caught up in this conversation. Finally Fred Craddock let it be known that he was a minister (sometimes we ministers hide the fact that we are ministers). He let it out that he was a minister, and that he was part of the Christian Church, Disciples of Christ. To which the man responded by taking a seat! (He wasn’t going away!). He took a seat and he said, “My life was changed in a little Christian church just up the road from here. Laurel Springs Disciples of Christ Church.” And he began to tell the story of his childhood. He was born out of wedlock and the name he carried in his mind and that others dumped on him again and again was “illegitimate.” Whether it was with his friends (especially in teenage years) or whether it was with others in the small community, this name always came back to haunt and hurt him. It affected him deeply.

But he wanted to go to church, he wanted to be close to God, and he found this small church, Laurel Springs Christian Church, and he said that when he went, he went late so he wouldn’t have to talk to people when he entered the church; and would leave early so he wouldn’t have to talk to people on the way out. But there was one Sunday when he couldn’t leave the church soon enough. There was a crowd of people blocking his way and he was stuck in the crowd.

When the crowd moved on and he came to the door before he could escape he felt a hand on his shoulder, and it was the hand of the pastor, a tall bearded man he says. He was scared that the man would say something about his background. The minister spoke and he said “I know who you are!” The old man said that at these words he began to tremble even more. “I know who you are, you bear a family resemblance. I know exactly who you are! The pastor said. And then he said it: “You are a child of God! Now go and live out your inheritance!”

As this elderly man told his story to Fred Craddock and his wife, he said that that day was almost like the first day of his life. He’d been given a new name! He’d been set free from the old name and given this new name. He said that he wanted to live up to that name that he had been given.

Fred Craddock asked him what his name was (he realized he didn’t know the man’s name). The man replied that his name was Ben Hopper. Fred Craddock didn’t know who he was, but later he remembered – From 1911 to 1915, Ben Hopper was governor of the state of Tennessee.

Here was a person whose life was significantly changed when he realized that the name by which he'd been going didn't really belong to him anymore, and was no longer going to guide and dictate the course of his life. Instead, the new name given to him was everything he was, and everything he was going to be: "Child of God!"

God has given us that name, too; a name to live up to! But sometimes like the people of Israel we have a hard time living up to it, we *take that name upon us* in vain.

The prophets speak about the people of Israel being called the children of God, the chosen people of God, but they don't live up to that name. Malachi was one of the prophets who spoke most forcefully about this. Says Malachi (Chapter 1) to Israel, "You're going through the motions. You have all the religious trappings, but your heart is far from God. You cannot, if you bear God's name, give God your second best or your third best. God deserves only your very best. So, Malachi says:

"A son honors his fathers, and servants their master, if then I am a father where is the honor due me, and if I am a master where is the respect due me? My name is great among the nations and in every place. Incense is offered to my name and a pure offering, for my name is great among the nations says the Lord of host!"

God shares his name with us, but we don't always live up to the privilege. Indeed the prophet Isaiah (quoted by the Apostle Paul) says, of one period in Israel's life that "God's name is blasphemed among the nations because of you!" Because God's people treat God's name lightly.

When we hear the words of these prophets, I hope our response is almost like swearing! I it is strong! I hope we take God's name and we use it as forcefully as we can when we think about Israel not honoring God's name, and we say

- *God forbid that this should be true of us too! God forbid that other people should despise God, or ignore God because of me!*
- *Rather, may it be the other way around. May other people find life in Christ's name.*
- *May they find that God is real and God is present and close, because I heed this commandment! Because of the way that I speak and live!*
- *Lord, may my speech always be seasoned by Grace, especially when I speak of you this year.*
- *May this be my resolution: May my life be a life in which it is clear that I live not just for my name, but for yours, and may others see this and glorify you.*

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