

Summer Series on the Ten Commandments:

Second Commandment, June 17, 2018

What comes to mind when you hear: Do not take the Lord God's name in vain? Right, we think about using God's name to swear. I have to admit I wince when I hear somebody say, Oh, my God. OR they use the shorthand, OMG. I know we hear it all the time on TV shows and in the movies. Maybe it slips out of our mouths once in a while, and we don't even think about it. Or someone uses God's name and then places damn after it.

The second commandment is, Do not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God; the old King James said, Do not take the Lord your God's name in vain. So swearing using God's name is part of what this commandment means. But there is more to it than that. There are some ways we take God's name in vain that maybe we don't realize as much.

I like going back to Martin Luther to discover his take on the commandments. Here's what he says in his explanation to the Second Commandment in The Large Catechism: "How do you understand the Second Commandment, or what is meant by taking in vain, or misusing God's name? Answer briefly thus: It is misusing God's name when we call upon the Lord God, no matter in what way, for purposes of falsehood or wrong of any kind....For God's name cannot be misused worse than for the support of falsehood and deceit.

A little further along he says, "Thus you now understand what it is to take God's name in vain, that is either simply for purposes of falsehood, and to allege God's name for something that is not so, or to curse, swear, conjure, and, in short, to practice whatever wickedness one may." Luther says, Don't use God's name to support any kind of falsehood, or to curse or swear.

For ancient people like the Hebrews, the name of something or someone held power in a way that we don't understand today. When Moses hears God's voice in the burning bush, Moses says, If I go to pharaoh and he asks, What's the name of your God, then what do I tell him? Moses knows that there is power connected to the name of God.

We get a little of this flavor when someone says to you, If you go to this restaurant, I know the chef, so if you mention my name, you might get a little extra special

treatment. If you mention my name, you might get a free dessert. There is some power in the name of your friend, because of the relationship he or she has with the restaurant owner.

In the Book of the Acts, when a lame man asks Peter and John for money, they say, We don't have any silver or gold, but in the name of Jesus rise up and walk. They know that there is power in the name of Jesus.

So this second commandment probably had more to do with using the power in the name of God for something false. This makes sense when we come to Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, which we have today in our second lesson. Jesus says, Again, you have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "you shall not swear falsely, but carry out the vows you have made to the Lord." In other words, the Hebrew Scriptures said it's allowed to swear that you will do something, but you better carry it out. "When a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word" (Numbers 30:2) William Barclay says that the Jewish people in Jesus' day considered an oath binding if they made it using the name of God. But if they didn't use God's name, they could break it. If they just said, I swear by Jerusalem, or by the earth, then they hadn't brought God into it; God wasn't involved, and they could break their promise.

The problem with that logic is that God is involved in all of our lives. We can't leave God out of things. If I make a promise to do something, whether I mention God's name or not, God will be involved. So Jesus says, "Do not swear at all, whether by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is God's footstool, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King."

And Jesus says, Do not swear by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black (this was before hair color by L'Oreal). Don't imagine that you can make some promise even more sure by bringing yourself into the matter. Jesus says, Let your word be, Yes, yes, or No, no; anything more than this comes from the evil one. One idea here is that we simply keep our promises; we don't need to back them up with extensive supporting claims. Yes, I will do this. No, I will not.

But here is another way we can take God's name in vain. It's when we use God's name to put ourselves in the place of God. Maybe you heard this when you were growing up, from a Sunday School teacher, or maybe even your parent: "God

punishes little boys who do such and such...” Or, “God doesn’t like little girls who...” This is a grown-up’s way to use the name of God as a threat. That feels like a misuse of God’s name to me.

I wonder if we aren’t misusing God’s name when we quote Scripture at somebody; when we use it like a hammer. We are absolutely sure what God’s will is for another group of people, and we quote Scripture to prove it. I try to couch my interpretation of Scripture as just that: my interpretation. Maybe you’ve heard me say in my preaching and teaching, Here’s what I believe about this passage. Here’s where my study and reflection have led me. Now share with me your interpretation. One way to misuse God’s name is to use it as a kind of club over people with whom we disagree.

We can also misuse God’s name in our prayers. If we pray for God to help those who don’t get enough to eat, but don’t do anything to help, I believe that’s a misuse of God’s name. God, please help feed those who are hungry, but then we don’t give anything to the HOPE food pantry or to Backpack Buddies. By the way, if you give any gift in the offering plate, or if you give it through electronic giving, 10% of your gift goes out beyond this church, and a small amount of that goes into the ELCA World Hunger Campaign. But my point is, if I simply pray for God to make some kind of change in the world, but don’t do anything about it, aren’t I using God’s name in vain?

What do we say sometimes after we hear about a tragedy, or we hear about a mass shooting? “Thoughts and prayers.” That’s our shorthand for, I am sending kind thoughts and offering prayers for you. After seventeen students were shot to death in Parkland, Florida, there were politicians who were tweeting, “Thoughts and prayers for the students at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School.” And the students were saying, We need more than thoughts and prayers. Don’t just think kind thoughts and pray for an end to gun violence; *work* towards it.

We have different ideas for how that can be done. Some of us in this sanctuary believe that we should limit the sale of semi-automatic weapons here in Oregon, which have been used in mass shootings in Aurora, Roseburg, San Bernardino, Newtown, Orlando, Las Vegas and Sutherland Springs. The Oregon Synod recently approved an initiative to ban the sale of semi-automatic weapons in Oregon, and to help put it on the ballot in November. There may be a petition here at church that we will be able to sign on Sunday, July 1, to allow this on the ballot this fall.

Some of us in this sanctuary would be against that. We think that's an abridgement of the right to bear arms. We would support more funds for mental health efforts, or to arm teachers. There are a number of things that can be done to reduce gun violence, and we will agree on some of them and disagree on others.

But if we simply say, Thoughts and prayers, we may be using God's name in vain. God is saying, *You* do something about it. By the way, I have become much more reticent to use the phrase, Thoughts and prayers, if I'm not going to back it up with action.

Now I love what Luther does with these commandments, especially in the Small Catechism, because he says, No only don't do these things, but conversely, practice *these* things. In the explanation to the Second Commandment, Luther says, We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God's name, but instead use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.

So I could say, I haven't used God's name to curse, to swear, or to call down judgment on a group of people. Luther says, Good for you. But have you called on God's name; have you prayed; have you praised God today; have you spent time giving thanks to God? Luther says, that's a really healthy and helpful way to praise God's name.

One of the ways I like to use God's name is to point out the ways I see God at work in my day. When something happens that seems more than coincidence, I'll say, It was a "God thing." Monday was the bloodmobile here at church. I arrived for my appointment at about a quarter to 2, and hardly anyone was in the parking lot. I asked our two volunteers what was going on, and they said how slow it had been. Three out of six appointments hadn't showed up. But, they said, there is a pastor who has gone in to give blood. I perked up my ears, because I know many of the pastors in town. They told me his name, and I said, I recognize it, but I don't think I've met him.

So I went into the back of the bus, had my blood pressure checked, and my iron tested. If you give blood, you know there are a number of questions you need to answer beforehand about your health history. I was cruising through them, when I came to, Have you ever had cancer? If you have, they want to be sure it has been cured. A number of years ago, I had a basal cell carcinoma, the least offensive kind of cancer, and it was taken care of. But as I got to this question again, I membered

that I saw the dermatologist several weeks go, and she discovered another basal cell carcinoma that I needed to have removed. The appointment wasn't until Thursday. This was Monday.

So I called the nurse in, and he confirmed that I wouldn't be able to give. I was disappointed, and felt stupid that I hadn't remembered, because I was wasting everybody's time here, including my own.

But I thought, While I'm here, I'll go up to the front of the vehicle, grab some orange juice, and see who I can talk with. There was only one person sitting at the front of the bus, and when I introduced myself as the pastor at the church, he said, Oh, I'm so and so, the pastor at a church in town that I recognized, but had never visited. I had heard of him, but never met him. So I sat down, and we had a wonderful conversation for twenty minutes. We were the only ones there. We had the freedom to talk about a range of issues. He's an evangelical pastor, so we saw things differently in some way, but we also shared a lot of common ground.

When pastors get together, we're not always honest with each other. Sometimes we just want to share the things that are going well. But in this conversation, we were both honest with each other about how difficult parish ministry can be in Oregon. I gave him my card when I got up to leave, and said, Let's keep this conversation going.

I've told about that conversation to several people this week, and I always say, *It was a God thing*. If I had remembered that I couldn't give, I would have cancelled my appointment. If I had been able to give, he would have disappeared by the time I was done. It worked out just right for us to meet. It was a God thing. And when I name that for people, I am following Luther's positive side of this commandment, to use God's name to praise, to thank, to give credit to.

Susan had Thursday off this week. She decided to get a pedicure that day, instead of her usual day of Friday. Because she went in on a Thursday, the salon was much less busy. She and the two salonists were the only ones there for the entire time she was having the pedicure. The Vietnamese woman who was attending to her began to open up about the struggles her 14-year-old boy is having. He has been bullied for several years. He eats alone at school. The woman told Susan that her son just had a psychological work-up done, and they discovered that he is autistic.

This woman needed to unload, and there was Susan, showing up on a day she doesn't usually come, with no one else around. It was a God thing. We both said that when she told me the story. We gave God the credit. We gave God the praise.

OK, so you haven't used God's name to curse, or to lie, or to make an oath, or to bludgeon someone with Scripture. But how are we doing with calling on God's name, with praising God, with thanking God, with looking for opportunities to give God credit? That's a great use of God's name. Amen.