

“The Name”
June 30, 2019
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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Exodus 20:1-17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Welcome to the third week of our summer series on the Ten Commandments! For ten weeks, we will focus on each one of the Ten Commandments – Ten Gifts, Ten Promises. I will preach on these commandments; but not only that, I will interpret the commandments musically as well! The Music of the Ten Commandments.

Today, we are looking at the third commandment: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses God’s name.” I’ve also heard this commandment translated as, “Do not use the Lord’s name in vain.”

Many of us probably grew up understanding this commandment to mean that we ought not trivialize God’s name. Don’t just throw it around casually. Don’t use it as a swear word.

I know a wonderful story about this. There is one of you in this congregation who, when she used to overhear her children saying “Oh, God!” or “God, Mom!” or whatever we tend to say, she would tell them: “Okay! So you’ve started a prayer to God. You’ve

called on God by saying God's name! You've gotten God's attention. God is listening, so now you need to finish the prayer. What else would you like to say to God?" I love that! A creative way to remind ourselves not to take God's name lightly. A way to remember that, when we call on the name of God, God actually listens!

Don't use God's name in a trivial way. Don't throw it around like any old thing. Treat the Holy Name with reverence. That is one very important way to think about this third commandment.

Lots of us, we call the name of God
But we don't know that we are calling
The name of God on high
Everybody's saying, "Oh my God," and "Jesus Christ,"
But we forget sometimes
God always hears our cry.

*And when we say, "O God," God listens
And when we call, "O God," God's here.*

Your mama may have told you that it wasn't nice
To use God's name in vain,
And mama, she's not wrong
But it's not that God's real mad or wants to punish us
For calling;
God just wants to hear our song.

Refrain

The thing about this Word
Is that it tells us that God loves us, and is hoping
That when we say the Name,
It means that we are wanting to start up a conversation. Which means that:
God's love is not in vain.

Refrain

So, our God loves us, and is excited to hear from us. When we call on the name, it's no small thing! God is longing, waiting, hoping to hear from us.

This commandment, in other words, is all about relationship. It's about our relationship with God. It's about what we claim about God, what we think we know about God.

I talked some last week about how the second commandment ("you shall not make idols") reveals to us how we have a real tendency to create God in our own image. God, in other words, is just like us: just bigger, and projected into the sky. This third commandment gets at that too. One of the ways I use God's name in vain is by claiming that God is just like me: likes the same things I like, hates the same things I hate. So if I hate French people (sidebar: I so don't hate French people. I spent a

wonderful year with wonderful French people when I was in college!) – if I hate French people, I might just say to you, “God hates French people!” And suddenly, I start to dehumanize all French people. Suddenly, when I say, “God hates French people,” I can treat them unkindly, I can dehumanize them. When it gets really bad, using God’s name in vain like this – putting God’s stamp on all the things I believe to be true or important, affixing God’s name to my agenda – can even justify violence towards them. It can justify killing. It can justify war.

I didn’t attempt to write lyrics to a song about this theme, as I believe it has already been done so effectively by Bob Dylan in his 1964 song, “With God on Our Side.” I did, however, write a new tune to this old song:

Oh, my name, it ain't nothin', my age, it means less
The country I come from is called the Midwest
I was taught and brought up there, its laws to abide
Oh the land that I lived in had God on its side

Oh, the history books tell it, they tell it so well
The white people charged, the Indians fell
The country was young, it had nothing to hide
Just dead red men falling, with no God on their side

The First World War, boys, it came and it went
The reason for fighting I never did get
But I learned to accept it, accept it with pride
'Cause you don't count the dead when God's on your side

The Second World War, it came to an end
We forgave all the Germans and then we were friends
Though they murdered six million, in the ovens they fried
The Germans now too have God on their side

I've learned to hate Muslims each day of my life
If another war comes, it's them we must fight
To hate and to fear them, to run and to hide
And accept it all bravely with God on my side

'Cause now we got weapons of chemical dust
If fire we're forced to, then fire we must
One push of the button and a shot the world wide
You never ask questions when God's on your side

Through many a dark hour I'm thinkin' 'bout this
That Jesus the Christ was betrayed by a kiss
But I can't think for you, you will have to decide
Whether Judas Iscariot had God on his side.¹

¹ Bob Dylan, “With God on Our Side,” 1964. I have altered some of the lyrics. For Dylan’s original version, see: <http://www.metrolyrics.com/with-god-on-our-side-lyrics-bob-dylan.html>.

The third commandment re-affirms the truth that God may not in fact stand for what we say God stands for. I can't just put God's name on any ol' thing / think is true. I can't use God's name to justify my own agenda. That is making wrongful use of the name of God; that is using the divine name in vain.

One final point I'd like to make about this commandment is first a larger point about all the commandments: you may have noticed that many of them are framed in the negative: "*Don't* do this, *don't* do that." Only two of the ten ("Remember the Sabbath" and "Honor your father and mother") are framed positively. However, each one of these commandments, even if they are framed in the negative, has a positive side to it.

In the case of this third commandment, "Do not make wrongful use of the name of God," the positive side is a very important one, I believe. It goes something like this: "God has given us God's name. Yay! God says, here, here is my Name. Use it well! Use it to confess your sins. Use it to call out to me when you are in pain. Use it for gratitude, to say thank you to me by name. Here is a gift for you! It is my Name! Use it! And I will be with you."

What a gift, truly. It's another way that God tells us that God is for us, that God is with us, that God is not going anywhere.

I give you a gift, the gift of my Name
It's for you to call upon when you are in pain
When dark and churning waters are all that you can see
Call me, call me, call on me

*My name, it is a holy thing
My name, the mention of it makes the angels sing
And I give it to you, here take it again,
This gift I give to you, my precious friend.*

I give you a gift, this gift is for you
I know you are not perfect, I know you know this too
So when the time, it comes for you to fall down on your knees
Call me, call me, call on me

Refrain

And sometimes, sometimes, you'll open up your eyes
And green will be the growing grass and blue will be the skies
And gratitude will grasp you for the sun, for the birch tree,
Call me, call me, call on me

Refrain

Thanks be to God!