

The Art of Living Well: Remember the Name

Exodus 20:7, 22-26

Today, we're continuing our series "The Art of Living Well," and we're looking at the third commandment: the one about the Lord's name. Since we're talking about names, I wonder: do you know what your name means? If you do, tell the person next to you. My name means, "noble" because it is derived from the Latin "Patricius," which was title of a nobleman in ancient Rome. Many Biblical names have meanings that are associated with the story of that person: Abraham means "exalted father" because he is the father of many nations, and of the people of Israel; Isaac means, "God laughs" because Sarah laughed when she was told she would have a son--and it was God who got the last laugh; Jacob means "heal-catcher" because he was the twin of Esau and grabbed his heel during birth.

Names are important because they tell us who we are. In his love for Juliet, Romeo cried out, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet." Now that sounds sweet and romantic, but I beg to differ with dear Romeo. There is much in a name. And Romeo knew that well himself: he and Juliet could not marry because they carried the names of certain families--Montague and Capulet--who were feuding bitterly with each other. And their love affair ended in tragic death. What's in a name? Our identity is in a name--who we are is in a name. Names are not simply a few letters strung together, a combination of vowels and consonants to make a syllable or two; names carry weight and meaning. A name gives a person an identity: we are what we are called. I am Patrick; who I am is inextricably bound up with my name--my name is intricately connected with who I consider myself to be and who you understand me to be. You know me--not simply as me--but as Patrick. And I think of myself, not simply as me but as Patrick--as my name. Names create identities. That's part of why we take so much care with naming a child, because we are also creating an identity. Not long ago, Caitlin and I were having lunch with a friend--another minister--and we were talking about the difficult and weighty process of deciding on baby names. And he leaned back, and asked, "Do you think we are known in heaven by our baptismal names?" In other words, does God know us by the names our parents give us? Do names matter that much? I don't know, but it certainly seemed to up the ante!

The third commandment is about the Lord's name; the old translation said to "not take the Lord's name in vain;" most of us don't really know what it means to take something in vain, and so the contemporary translation simply says, "do not misuse the name of the Lord." Now, before we go much further let's talk about what almost everyone in America assumes this commandment means: we shouldn't say a particular curse word. When I was a younger, that's all I thought this commandment meant: you can't say that word, because if you do God is going to get you.

And anytime I heard that word--or God forbid thought that word--I would get really nervous as if lightening were going to strike. This commandment is about much more than a curse word; it is about the presence and blessing of God in our midst. The name of God gives us access to the presence of God. You remember that the second commandment tells us we are not allowed to have any idols: we cannot make any statue or picture or image that would bring god to us. So how can we have access to God? How is God present to us? Through the name. God gives us his name as an access card to his presence.

God first revealed his name when he spoke with Moses from the burning bush. There on Mount Sinai, while the people of Israel were in slavery in Egypt, God told Moses to go to Egypt and lead his people out of slavery. And Moses said to God, "when I tell the people that the god of their ancestors sent me to you, and they ask me, "What is his name?", what shall I tell them?" And God said tell them, "I AM" sent you. Now this word that appears in our English Bibles as "I AM," is actually a set of four Hebrew consonants that cannot be fully translated; in fact, the word was never spoken by the Hebrew people--we don't know what this name sounded like because they would not speak the name of the Lord. It was too holy to speak. In some Bibles, these four consonants are translated as "Jehovah;" and others translate it as Yahweh. Those are the vowels we give to the consonants to pronounce the name; but we're only making an educated guess. That is as close as we can come to speaking the name that God gives Moses on Mt. Sinai. So when we say God, we are actually referring to this unspeakable name given to Moses. What does the unspeakable name mean? It means simply, "I am the one who will be with you." It means the presence of God.

And this is why it is so important to remember the name and to keep it holy; why it is so important to not misuse the name of God. Because the name of God is the presence of God. When we speak someone's name, we not only speak their name but we also bring to mind their whole person and life; we conjure their presence. There are some names we hear, and we get upset because it brings to mind a person who hurt us; some we hear and cry, because it brings great sadness for the loss of one we loved. You have seen people in Washington, D.C. at the Vietnam Memorial touching the names on the wall, with tears streaming down their face. They are not touching mere black granite; nor are they simply touching the outlines of letters. By touching the name, they are connecting to the presence of the person they love.

When we speak the name of God, or even when we remember the name of God, God is giving us his holy presence. In the book of Exodus, just after God gives the law to Moses, we read God's instructions for how the people of Israel are to build an altar. He says that they are not to make gods of silver or gold; they are only to build a simple altar of earth--build it from dirt--and sacrifice their offerings there. And then God says, "*in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to*

you...” Whenever God causes his name to be remembered, there his presence will be also. In Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples that wherever two or three are gathered *in my name* there I will be also. In the Old and New Testament, God promises that his presence will come with his name.

And more than that, he says, “I will come to you and bless you.” God’s name is access not only to God’s presence, but also to God’s blessing. When we remember or speak the name of God, we invoke God’s blessing on the people and circumstances about which we are thinking and praying. That’s why when I close the worship service each week, I give a blessing in the name of, “The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” By saying God’s name, I not only give my blessing and my good wishes for your life; but I give *God’s* blessing on your life. When I see your faces, those of you who look at me when I give the benediction, I know from your look that it is not only my blessing that you are receiving in that moment, but it is God’s blessing.

It is God’s presence and blessing that we need in our lives, and we have access to God’s presence and blessing whenever we remember the name. One of my favorite stories in the New Testament comes in Acts after Jesus has risen, and has commissioned his disciples to preach the good news to the people. They are walking into the temple to worship, and Peter and John meet a beggar who is laying by the gate called beautiful asking for money. And Peter looked at the man and said, and for some reason the words stay with me from the King James Version, he said to him: “Silver and gold have I none, but such as I have give I thee; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk.” In the name...rise up and walk. The lame man by the gate did not need money; he needed the blessing of the name of God.

Now you may be thinking at this point that what I’m saying seems a little strange--almost like magic. Say this magic word, remember this special name, and all will be well. It must work like the old speakeasy’s worked during prohibition: knock on the door and say the code word, and someone will let you in! Just say “God” or just say “Jesus” and all your problems will be solved. Wouldn’t it be nice if it worked that way? If we just said “God” or “Jesus” enough, all our problems would be solved! But there is no magic here; there is no word that will make God do what we want him to do, no magic name that will cure all our diseases or heal all our hurts. A magic word is not what the name is about.

God does not give us his name for magic; he gives us his name for relationship. This is the very same thing that happens when you and I share names with each other. I have tried very hard over the past few months to learn names--and it’s a hard thing to do to remember names. And I am grateful for your patience as I’ve asked you for your name, sometimes multiple times! But I don’t ask you for your name so that I can simply repeat it back. I ask you your name because knowing your name is part of knowing you; knowing each other’s name is part of our relationship. Knowing the name of God is part of our relationship with God. When God told

Moses what his name is, he didn't do it so that Moses could utter a magic word to Pharaoh and set the people free; he told him so that Moses would know the God with whom he was beginning a relationship. When we speak the name of Jesus, it is not so that we can have special superhuman powers; it is so that we can access the relationship we have with the one who died and rose again for us, with the one who forgives us and sets us free, with the lover of our souls.

When I was an chaplain intern in the hospital as part of my seminary education, I had to go in one day a week to visit with patients who were about to go into surgery. By the time I walked in, they were in their gowns and hooked up to IV's, and just waiting for the doctor or nurse to come by and start the anesthesia. And more often than not, they were afraid. They were afraid because it was surgery, because they weren't sure what the result would be, and sometimes because they weren't sure they would make it. In the very few moments I had with them, there was little I could do calm to their fears. In fact, after talking for a couple of minutes, usually we would just pray. But the power of those prayers stays with me even now; as I spoke the name of God, as I called on the name of Jesus, I would feel their hand tighten around mine--as if they were holding on to the name. And sometimes, sometimes, as I prayed they would gently say, "Yes, Lord," or "Thank you, Jesus,"--they would just say the name. They knew the presence and the blessing of the name and the relationship. As Charles Wesley put it: "Jesus, the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease; 'tis music in the sinner's ears, 'Tis life, and health, and peace." "What's in a name?" asked Romeo? More than we can imagine. In the name of God there is God's presence and God's blessing. That is the positive dimension of the third commandment, and that is why God does not want us to misuse his name. Because he has given us his name for our blessing and for our worship. Remember his name--in prayer, in song, in coming and going, in times of trouble, and times of joy, hold on to his name, remember his name and be blessed.

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