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October 6, 2019: The Ten Commandments, the Third and Fourth Commandment

Exodus 20:7-11
Psalm 119:65-80

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- ⁶⁵ You have dealt well with your servant,
O Lord, according to your word.
- ⁶⁶ Teach me good judgment and knowledge,
for I believe in your commandments.
- ⁶⁷ Before I was humbled I went astray,
but now I keep your word.
- ⁶⁸ You are good and do good;
teach me your statutes.
- ⁶⁹ The arrogant smear me with lies,
but with my whole heart I keep your precepts.
- ⁷⁰ Their hearts are fat and gross,
but I delight in your law.
- ⁷¹ It is good for me that I was humbled,
so that I might learn your statutes.
- ⁷² The law of your mouth is better to me
than thousands of gold and silver pieces.
- ⁷³ Your hands have made and fashioned me;
give me understanding that I may learn your commandments.
- ⁷⁴ Those who fear you shall see me and rejoice,
because I have hoped in your word.
- ⁷⁵ I know, O Lord, that your judgements are right,
and that in faithfulness you have humbled me.
- ⁷⁶ Let your steadfast love become my comfort
according to your promise to your servant.
- ⁷⁷ Let your mercy come to me, that I may live;
for your law is my delight.
- ⁷⁸ Let the arrogant be put to shame,
because they have subverted me with guile;
as for me, I will meditate on your precepts.
- ⁷⁹ Let those who fear you turn to me,
so that they may know your decrees.
- ⁸⁰ May my heart be blameless in your statutes,
so that I may not be put to shame.

Exodus 20:7-11

7 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.

8 Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. ⁹For six days you shall labour and do all your work. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For 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.

Sermon 1

In my household growing up, taking the Lord's name in vain was primarily associated with using God's name as a swear word. If my sister stubbed her toe, she might have said, "Ouch!" or "Shoot!" but we would never have dreamed of yelling out "Oh God!" or even something close like "Oh Gosh" or "Oh Golly," because we knew we would face my mother armed with her bar of soap. I only had to have my mouth washed out with soap once to learn that lesson. But, as I got older, I sort of began to think that using God's name as a curse word or an interjection as more on par with saying something impolite, like "Shut up" or calling someone "stupid." It's not nice or well mannered, but it's not as bad as using any of the dreaded 4-letter words. Definitely not something so bad as to warrant its own commandment, especially number 3 on the list! I started to think, maybe this commandment is about something more. Something other than offenses punishable with a bar of Ivory to the tongue.

What I would like to propose is that, perhaps, instead of thinking of this commandment as we always have, "taking the Lord's name in vain," let's use the other translation, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." 'You shall not make wrongful use.' I don't know about you, but at least for me, this other translation opens up a whole new avenue for thinking about

this commandment. Suddenly, it's not simply an issue of a curse word here or there, this commandment is broader, and seems to have something to say about our promises, both kept and broken.

Now, back in the Bible, it was considered good form to make your promises with the addition of God's name. In the book of Ruth, when Boaz promises Ruth that he will marry her, he says, "As the Lord lives, I will act as next-of-kin for you." (3.13). If you keep your eyes open, you'll see these promises scattered everywhere throughout scripture, "As the Lord lives, this" and "As the Lord lives, that." It was the normal and everyday way of making a promise or an oath to another person.

Using God's name in their promises did a few different things for the characters back in the Bible. First, oaths and promises are made as a sign of your commitment to action. We do the same thing today; when we promise our children that we will read them a story after they finish picking up their toys, we are giving them a sign of our commitment to action. We really do intend to read them the story when their toys are clean. Second, oaths and promises, over time, contribute to a communal sense of trust. Back in the book of Ruth, Boaz was clearly a man who kept his promises. We hear over and over again that he was a trustworthy man, held in esteem by the whole community. As he kept his promises over time, he built up a communal sense of trust, both in himself, and we can imagine in the value of a promise in the community. The same is, of course, true for us today.

We could come up with a positive example, but negative examples seem so much easier. Take, for example, politicians. Now, I'm painting with broad strokes in this example, so please don't think I'm stereotyping all politicians. However, we have a lot of examples of politicians letting us down. While he was president, George W. Bush assured us that there were Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, and thus justified our invasion. Well, we invaded, and the weapons weren't there. That promise was not kept, and it destroyed some of our communal trust in the office of the president. Although that example, serious as it is, seems downright quaint by 2019 standards.

Now, we can make promises as a commitment to action, promises that build up or break down communal trust, without using the name of God, but when we add the divine imprimatur to our oath, we're doing something else. When we insert someone else into our promises, it does something. When we promise to do something, "as the Lord lives," we're clearly stating what has value to us. As individuals and a community, a promise made in the name of the Lord tells the other party that God is the center of our affairs. And it tells the other party something about who we believe God to be, what we believe God cares about.

Now, as a church, I think we need to take special care with this commandment. Whether we say God's name or not, any commitment we make, internally among ourselves or externally to the community, any of those promises and commitments automatically carry God's name with them. We are a church, we gather together to worship, we claim to believe in Jesus Christ, his life, death, and resurrection. So, no matter what, people will

associate our actions, and whether we live up to our promises or not, as a direct reflection on the God we claim to believe in.

For example, if we claim to be a welcoming church, do our actions on Sunday morning live up to this promise? Are we truly welcoming of anyone who walks through those doors, regardless of their race, economic status, sexual orientation, or mental acuity? I hope, and believe, that we are a church who will live up to that promise.

As a church, what promises are we making, implicitly and explicitly, to the community around us? Why do we as a church exist? It's one thing for us to worship, to spend fellowship hour breaking bread, and to study the Bible together, here within our building. We're able to see the fruit of our promises to one another. But how are we committed to serving our neighbors, and are we living up to those commitments? Whether we want to or not, as a church, we are making promises in God's name.

This is the wonderful thing about the third commandment. When we make promises in God's name, promises we have prayerfully considered and committed to, God will meet us there. This is the power of God's promise to us. We are not alone in this business of loving our neighbors and caring for our community. We are, in fact, the opposite of alone. We are able to live up to the promises and commitments we make, by the power of the Holy Spirit working through us. Thanks be to God!

Sermon 2

We humans, it seems, are creatures of habit. We like our lives to be routine, somewhat ordinary and predictable. Or, at least I do. I find that habit and routine give me some sense of control over my life, the goings on of my day to day and week to week plans. I know what to expect on a Monday, in September, or during the Summer. Each day, week, and season brings with it a certain amount of routine and predictability.

Now, of course, there are times and places where a bit of spontaneity is, of course, preferable. Whether it be with Alzheimer's patients, where unpredictable schedules have shown to slow the progression of the disease, or within our own families, where a surprise trip to the zoo might just make your granddaughter's week, I will never be the one to say that a totally routine and predictable life is to be sought after. However, this being said, routines have proved, over and over again, to be not just helpful, but actually imperative for human life.

And routine is exactly what the fourth commandment is all about. Honoring the Sabbath day, by its very nature, is a commandment that centers on routine. One out of every seven days, one day each week, is supposed to be set aside, "the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work." Each week, according to this commandment, our lives should be anchored by this seventh day, the Sabbath. God worked six days and rested on the seventh, and like God, this commandment calls us to take a full day, to rest from our labors, and to provide rest for all of those people and animals who are in our care. It's a commandment of routine.

Originally, the people of Israel celebrated the Sabbath day on what we would call Saturday. Saturday is the seventh day of our week, and according to this commandment, we take the seventh day to rest, just like God did at the dawn of time. Jewish communities today still honor the Sabbath day on Saturdays, or more precisely, from sundown on Friday until sundown on Saturday. Christians, starting with the early church, we began to celebrate the Sabbath on Sunday. This is because even though Sunday is technically the first day of the week, it's the day of Easter. Jesus rose from the grave on a Sunday, and because of that, the church has always celebrated our Sabbath day, our day of worship and rest, as a "little Easter," a day to celebrate and remember the risen Christ.

The Sabbath day, what exactly does that mean? In our culture, the Sabbath day means a range of different things to different people. I'm sure most of you remember the "blue laws," which are laws that most states used to have which said that stores, especially liquor stores, must be closed on Sundays. In some areas, this idea persists, the Sabbath as a day to do nothing, go to no stores, run no errands, stay at home and go to church.

The Sabbath means a lot of different things to different people, but I'd like to look back to Jesus' interpretation of the Sabbath in Mark 2. He and his disciples are walking along, on the Sabbath, eating grain from the field they're tromping through. Some Pharisees, who were strict Sabbath keepers, stop them and ask Jesus why he and his followers are breaking the Sabbath day by "working". Jesus responds, "The Sabbath is made for humankind, humankind

is not made for the Sabbath.” It’s a short sentence, but I think this makes all the difference in the world. This Sabbath day, it’s a commandment for us, but much more so, it’s a gift. We are not supposed to feel encumbered by the Sabbath, weighed down with rules and regulations, it’s a day which is made for us, a gift of time and space to take a break and worship God. There’s nothing hugely complicated or theologically esoteric about the Sabbath day. It’s just a day, once a week, when we are given permission to take a day off, and as part of that rest, God asks us to worship as well. It’s really a day with two goals: first, to set aside time for God, and second, to rest and provide rest for those under our care

But stopping our labor is hard, and we live in a world where it seems, at times, that maybe stopping might be impossible. Doesn’t the Bible know that I’m important! Doesn’t God know that without my response to that email my company will be at a stand still? How come God doesn’t realize that my family will starve if I don’t go to the grocery store, or our guest will be disgusted when they come over to an unvacuumed house! How can I possibly take a whole day off? And besides, isn’t a whole day a little antiquated? Grocery stores aren’t closed on Sundays. Heck, even liquor stores are open on Sunday! The idea of taking Sunday off seems impossible, or at very least, somewhat countercultural. But, this, my friends, is a part of the gift of the Sabbath.

When we take a day to rest, to spend time with our families, to read good books, watch good movies, go for a walk in the park, or play games, one of the things that we will start to realize is that our work, our chores, our drive-to-do-things does not make the earth turn. I promise. The earth does not rotate

around each of us and our personal productivity, no matter how important it makes us feel to believe that. The Sabbath, as a time of rest, is a day which reminds us that we are not God. It's a day which allows us time and space to refocus, to remember our children, our pets, our parents, our friends and community, to see that which is truly valuable in our lives. It puts us in our place.

Now, practically, we could spend weeks of sermons discussing the ethical nuances of how we choose to observe the Sabbath day. Do you go to the store or not? There's no right answer. Can you take a full day for Sabbath? How do I observe a day of rest when my three children are, well, not exactly restful? And I love those questions. Let's get coffee and talk.

But for now, in observance of the commandment, just here this: you have permission to stop, to slow down, to rest. And you are required to provide this same gift to others. It's a commandment that puts us in our rightful place: we are not the center of the universe, and the earth will continue spinning, even, or perhaps especially, when we are just a little less productive.