

Adventures in Missing the Point II: Taking the Lord's Name in Vain

March 28, 2010 – Southminster Presbyterian Church

Randy Marshall

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Welcome to the most confusing Sunday of the church year. The 6th Sunday of Lent – the Sunday before Easter has traditionally been reserved to celebrate Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Following an extensive teaching tour – largely in the northern reaches of Galilee his celebrated entrance into Jerusalem is seen as a matter of destiny; and so it is appropriate that we celebrate this penultimate moment in his ministry at the beginning of Holy Week. Those of you who will take the opportunity to worship with us Thursday evening and again on Friday evening will get more than your fill of the emotions of the week – the anguish, the doubt, the betrayal, the death; and finally, next Sunday the glorious celebration of the resurrection. But I get ahead of myself. Back to today; the 6th Sunday of Lent, Palm Sunday.

It was in 1969 that Pope Paul VI moved Passion Sunday from its traditional celebration on the 5th Sunday of Lent to this Sunday – giving us the often confusing “Palm/Passion Sunday”. Up until then, the Catholic Church (at least) celebrated the passion (Jesus' trial and crucifixion), then the Triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and then the resurrection – in that order. I'll admit that it meant for a confusing progression, but the result is that on this Sunday we begin by singing “Hosanna – blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” and we end on a much more somber note – as we look to the events at the other end of Holy Week.

But for now here we stand, in the middle, between the high of our first hymn and the rather disturbing text in our last hymn. And who better to stand with us in this time between the times than Peter. You've heard me talk about Peter before; label him as my favorite disciple; point to him as the disciple with the greatest of faith and at the same time the greatest ability to totally miss the point.

It was Peter who first identified Jesus as the Messiah, and then tried to prevent him from going to Jerusalem – prompting Jesus' command to “Get thee behind me satan”. It was Peter who was so impressed when he saw Jesus walking on water that he wanted to try it too. And he did until he got scared by the wind and started to sink. It was Peter who wondered if seven times was enough to forgive; “No Peter, not seven times but seventy times seven.” It was Peter who didn't want Jesus to wash his feet, then decided; “Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!” Yes, Peter is the perfect companion for this stage in our journey.

Actually what follows is the second in a series of essays I like to call “Adventures in Missing the Point”. You haven't heard the first installment. I preached it a Boise First several years ago. It dealt with the relationship between church and state and our uniquely American concept of freedom of religion. It was written for a particular time and place but maybe someday I'll rework it for Southminster.

Today we'll spend some time with another key point in scripture that, I believe, is often misunderstood; and because of that misunderstanding we miss a significant point about what it means to be followers of the Christ.

This misunderstanding begins with the Ten Commandments; and more specifically the third Commandment:

Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

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In my own travels as an itinerant student of the Bible I have come to several conclusions about scripture. Here's the bottom line for me with respect to the third commandment. The concept of "taking the name of the Lord in vain" is not what they taught you in Sunday School. It has little, if anything, to do with normal four letter words, and while it could be related to a request we might make for the almighty to damn a person, or beast, or the driver in the next car, or our computer – it's not so in the way you normally think about it.

To better understand the commandment we need to look at the concept of vanity. The Hebrew word here is "Shav" and it refers to desolating evil; either by ruin or guile; also figuratively to idolatry or uselessness. That's not the same concept as our good friend Elaine Dilley expressed when she used her "golf words". Expressing frustration at a little white ball that insists on going where you hit it, rather than where you intended, doesn't carry with it desolating evil or idolatry. And I would only apply the term useless to my own skills as a golfer, never to my ball. So what, then, do we mean by vanity here?

My suggestion is that what God is really talking about in this commandment is people who regard the Lord's name in a trivial or useless fashion. You know the type. They're good Christians; singing hymns on Sunday and stabbing you in the back on Monday. Oh, wait. That's me.

For me breaking the third commandment is a two part process. It involves, first, taking the Lord's name. Me? Why yes, I'm a Christian. And second, acting or living in a way that is contrary to Jesus' teachings and example. Which brings us back to Peter. Listen:

Matthew 26: ⁵⁷Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, in whose house the scribes and the elders had gathered. ⁵⁸But Peter was following him at a distance, as far as the courtyard of the high priest; and going inside, he sat with the guards in order to see how this would end.

⁶⁹Now Peter was sitting outside in the courtyard. A servant-girl came to him and said, "You also were with Jesus the Galilean."
⁷⁰But he denied it before all of them, saying, "I do not know what you are talking about."
⁷¹When he went out to the porch, another servant-girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, "This man was with Jesus of Nazareth."
⁷²Again he denied it with an oath, "I do not know the man."
⁷³After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, "Certainly you are also one of them, for your accent betrays you."
⁷⁴Then he began to curse, and he swore an oath, "I do not know the man!" At that moment the cock crowed.
⁷⁵Then Peter remembered what Jesus had said: "Before the cock crows, you will deny me three times." And he went out and wept bitterly.

Peter, chief among the disciples, leader of the early church, gives us a great lesson in "taking the Lord's name in vain."

Confronted with the possibility of being identified with Jesus and the unknown risk that such a discovery might present; Peter resorts to a lie. Not once but three times he repeats that lie. Like us, it is so easy to profess our faith and devotion in the comfort of this place, or among members of this community of faith. But it's a much riskier venture out there.

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Actually, I take great comfort in this episode. The fact that Peter repeated his denial three times is significant. Like all numbers in the Bible the number three has meaning far beyond just the fact of a tri-fold denial. Three is a holy number, a whole number. Last week Marci referred to the account of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead. One of the most interesting points for me about that account is that Jesus purposely waited for more than three days before arriving at Lazarus' tomb. In that culture it was assumed that the soul stayed close to the body for three days before moving on to Sheol. The very clear message for the people on the scene and for the first hearers, then, was that God's power is absolute. Not even death itself – not just a coma but real by-golly death is stronger than God. That message will be repeated in Jesus' own resurrection "...on the third day." Three is a very significant number. So when Peter repeats his denial three times it has a finality that none but God can overcome. And God does overcome it. It happens in John 21. Peter along with several other disciples had gone fishing. In the morning they found Jesus on the shore, waiting for them with breakfast. We pick up the story there.

John 21: ¹⁵When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my lambs." ¹⁶A second time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Tend my sheep." ¹⁷He said to him the third time, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, "Do you love me?" And he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." Jesus said to him, "Feed my sheep.

There it is, God's final final answer. There's great comfort there; for me, for us.

Even so, the third commandment is serious business. We run the risk, when we take up the Lord's name and call ourselves Christian that we will from time to time slip back into our old habits. Rather than living as "kingdom people" we fall into our patterns of living lives of competition, acquisition, greed, anger, superiority, fear. Or maybe we find ourselves just not paying attention; to the beauty of creation or the joys and cares of our brothers and sisters or the silent pleadings of those who have no voice. It's way too easy to take the Lord's name in vain. It's way too easy to defend our actions, or our inactions.

Isn't grace a wonderful thing? Even in the depths of our own self-righteous tombs the Holy Spirit can reach in and touch us, call us, lead us back to the Kingdom, make us whole. "Do you love me? Feed my sheep." But with every act of redemption there's a calling. "Feed my sheep."

I was interested recently to receive the latest Cokesbury catalog. Cokesbury is a publishing and supply house for churches. They'll sell you everything from candles to choir robes; coffee mugs (complete with the PC(USA) cross) and curriculum. They even sell books. And the book on the cover of this most recent catalog was Mike Slaughter's new book: "Change the World; Recovering the message and mission of Jesus." Since I haven't read the book I'll quote from the back cover.

Christians are known more for exclusivity than for love, more for potlucks than for solving world hunger. It's time for churches to

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get over [...] being a program provider and reconnect with the true message and mission of Jesus: to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, and freedom to the oppressed. The church is called to be a mission outpost, living out Christ's ideals in today's world.

Those are pretty strong words. Actually I have a good excuse for not reading this book (yet). I immediately went on-line to order it, and like all good Websites Cokesbury offers you the opportunity to purchase other, similar, books that you might enjoy. I ordered, and am reading, "If Christians were Really Christian" by John Killinger. He's a man after my own heart. His theme is that we, as Christians have lost our "missional calling." Listen to the following quote:

What does it mean to be a Christian? The simple answer is that it means to be a follower of Christ. But being a follower of Christ isn't that easy, is it? To be a follower of Christ, you really have to know who Christ was and what his ministry was about. You can't just have your name on a church roll. You have to understand something of what is involved.

Who was Christ? He was a godly, spiritual man who identified first, last, and always with the poor, the helpless, and the outcasts of society. He made his home with the marginalized persons of the community. He had a deep and abiding concern for forgiveness and healing and wholeness – for the restoration of the broken, segregated, and divorced people of society as acceptable and functional parts of the total social organism. Killinger p.6

Don't get me wrong, I'm a big fan of pot-luck suppers. Actually, pot-lucks (and other times when we gather as a community to socialize, to have some fun, to encourage each other and laugh with each other, to spend time beneath the superficial) these are very important to the health of our community of faith. But there's a lot more than that to being Christians. Again, to quote Killinger:

Being a Christian doesn't mean having a kind of club membership to brandish about as if it were a right or a possession. It means something much deeper, subtler, and more demanding. It has to do with having the Master's spirit in us, with living daily in such a way that his spirit challenges us, chastens us, directs our wills and molds us into persons always becoming something new and different. Killinger p.7

Ultimately, that was Peter's problem. When the chips were down he didn't have the Master's spirit within him. Finding himself challenged he avoided the risk and resorted to a lie.

How easily do we slip into the same trap? How often do we put our Christianity in a closet, locked away to be taken out on Sunday morning, briefly, not too long, only to hide it away as we return to our daily lives? How often do we do and say things during the week that we would never do or say here in this place, with these people? And if that's the case, if we are two different people; Christians here and citizens of the world out there; which one is the lie?

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OK, that's a little harsh. But you get the point. If we are to take the name of Christ we must take it for good, everywhere, in all situations. One last quote from Killinger:

Christianity is a matter of the spirit of Jesus living in our spirits, so that we become as simple and loving and faithful and God-oriented as he was. Killinger p.9

That's easier said than done in 21st century America. With the deafening noise of technology and the blinding neon lights and the overall pace of life it's way too easy to lose sight of the outcasts and downtrodden of our community; We don't have time to lend a hand to those who need help or a shoulder to those who need to cry. We have no voice to spare for those who have no voice. We don't have the patience to bring a cup of cool water and a healing touch to the sick or the old or the infirm. Besides, that's the deacons' job, isn't it?

Living a Christ-filled life isn't easy. That's not the way of things. But we have two gifts that will help. The first is prayer. If the most important thing we know about Jesus was his compassion, the second most important thing we find in the gospels was that he so often resorted to prayer. Prayer has always been an essential part of gospel living. In it we find strength and solace and God's spirit.

Personally I've recently found a great prayer discipline. Each day, about noon, I get an e-mail from an organization called Sojourners. The subject is "Verse and voice". It contains a short Bible passage, a quote by someone of great faith, and a prayer for that day addressing an issue of concern to followers of the Christ. It's a great discipline to pause and reconnect with God and with my calling to live as Christ would have me live. Let me know if you want to join me. I'll help you get signed up.

The second gift is the church; because that which we can't accomplish alone, we can achieve in the company of others. Together we can make a difference; in our neighborhood, in our community, even in the world.

Marci has challenged us. We've always been good about donating money, food, school supplies. We announce that fudge eggs are for sale and by the time the coffee fellowship is over we've sold 63 of them. We announce that there are opportunities to bring food for holiday meals for Hayes house or Chrysalis house or the WCA, and if you aren't one of the first 50 people out the doors after service you find that all the needs have already been met. We regard each summer as a challenge to outdo ourselves in the number of backpacks we can supply to disadvantaged students. We can be very justly proud of the way we respond to these opportunities to give of our treasure.

And for some of us, gifts of food and school supplies and money are sufficient. Time and circumstance have a way of placing limits on us and God is grateful for every gift. For others of us, there is another question. What about our time? How can we use the gift of our time to enrich the lives of those less fortunate? Don't get me wrong, gifts of money and food are great, but when you sit with someone – visiting someone who is shut-in; reading with a second grader; eating lunch with, and then playing a board game with a group of fourth graders – you multiply the benefit far beyond any financial commitment. And along the way you become more than a little confused about who is giving and who is receiving the grace. There are opportunities before us – wonderful opportunities to live into the Lord's name that we have taken. On

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Thursday the mission committee met with Tim Lowe, the principal at Grace Jordan Elementary school to talk about how we can be more involved in the life of that community. We'll be hearing a lot more about opportunities there in the near future; most notably on May 9 when Tim joins us in worship. He'll have a lot of information for us on that day but here's a snapshot. Grace Jordan serves 580 students in Kindergarten through the sixth grade. Most of the students are Caucasian, while the rest come from Latin America, Burma and several African countries. As you would suspect based on the demographics of our neighborhood 70% of the students at Grace Jordan come from low income families. For too many of the students the thing they need most is attention. When parents are working two or even three jobs to make ends meet, there is never enough time to be a family. So when we began our discussion with Tim, the first suggestion he made was a Lunch Buddy program. It's as simple as eating lunch with one or more students and then joining them in a board game during the lunch recess. That's all, just attention; a little time and a big impact.

That's only one of several opportunities we'll hear about in the coming months; to live out our faith in service to others. Be watching. Be ready to respond.

That morning on the lakeshore Jesus gave Peter another chance. "Peter do you love me?" "Feed my lambs." "Do you love me?" "Tend my sheep." "Do you love me?" "Feed my sheep." What sheep is the risen Christ calling you to feed?
