



LESSONS IN LIVING

“How Christianity Forgot What It Means to Take the Name in Vain”

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
April 21, 2024

Scripture Reading: Exodus 20:7, Matthew 12:31-32 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Exodus 20:7

Do not utter the Name YHWH to misuse it, for YHWH will not acquit anyone who utters God's Name to misuse it!*

Matthew 12:31-32

Therefore, I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven, except for blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Anyone who says a word against the Promised One will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the next.

**YHWH represents the divine name found in the Hebrew text. It represents the Divine Mystery which, following Jewish tradition, is not pronounced. Instead, we say “God” or “the Holy One” or some other term of reverence.*

Sermon

Welcome! Thank you all for being here.

Well, we're in a sermon series that . . . It's a little strange, unlike my other sermon series. (laughter) What we're trying to do is look at parts of the tradition that fell out, and they're typically pillars of sanity. When you look at what the Church is doing to our nation and to our world, it's really important to realize it doesn't have to be this way. That religion doesn't have to be about judgment, it doesn't have to be about hate, it doesn't have to be about pretending to be something that you're not, or believe something that you don't.

In this series, we started with looking at one understanding of the First Commandment, although they're not really commandments, they're more like insights. When you see the Decalogue, that's ten words. It's not ten Commandments. They really make less sense if you call them commandments because it's the story of liberation.

Exodus is a story of liberation from bondage. The idea that the whole point was to rescue you from earthly dictators, so you could have a heavenly dictator, that's not very inspirational to me. Love wouldn't do that. Love would want you to be free. Love would want you to blossom completely.

The First Commandment is the "I am," is the Divine Name. I'll go ahead and put up the first slide.



This is, I think, a bad understanding of the Third Commandment. You may remember that, from Monty Python. Which is very formative in my theology. *[Laughter]* Do you remember somebody had Halibut that was very good, and they said, "This is good enough for Jehovah." Everybody gathered with stones. Just how silly it is to understand the Third Commandment as a commandment against cussing or using God's name that way. 'God' is not God's name.

Remember, it's this mystical experience that Moses has at the burning bush. It's the pattern of things. It's the fact that the universe has math written into it. Moses is looking at a burning bush and understanding every bush, every animal, everything. Everything is radiating out of this depth.

The Second Commandment is don't worship your sense images of that mystical experience. If you go to the mountaintop and you have this great revelation, it's important to realize what was important was the awareness. That's not just available on that mountain, and yet that's what worshipping our images are.

The Church is the guiltiest place in terms of idolatry. It teaches you to worship certain ideas of God, particularly masculinity. I mean, I know people that say God is a mystery. We know nothing about *him*. (laughter) You do know one thing, or at least you think you know one thing about it. So that indoctrination is so insidious.

It's important to realize that the Second Commandment, the second suggestion, the second insight is *don't worship your idea*. For centuries in this country, people worshiped a white Christ. Did that have any problems? Did it make anything unpleasant for some other people? I think it kind of did, and I think that's what the second insight is. That whatever we mean by the sacred is transcendent. It doesn't look more like some of us than others.

But if we worship an image of God, it's going to restrict where and how we can experience the sacred, whatever it is. Now we're at the Third Commandment, and I believe this is about not getting lost in language, not getting lost in labels, not getting lost in theological arguments, but staying in tune with that mystery, that sense of "I am."

I have some quotes that are from not very pious people, which is why I like them. This is one of my big heroes, if some of you have never read, Robert Green Ingersoll, is a great atheist and one of the great human beings of all time. So if you want to get past the indoctrination that you have to worship a certain idea of God, Ingersoll is a great way to get somebody who loves humankind as much as anybody does, somebody who rejoices at the universe and the beauty of nature without needing all of the particular paraphernalia of the Christian faith.

He says,

"This crime called blasphemy was invented by priests for the purpose of defending doctrines not able to take care of themselves."

How dare he? How dare he? Blame it on the clergy. Then this is also from Ingersoll,

"An infinite God ought to be able to protect itself,"

he said *"himself,"* which shows you even an atheist can... (laughter)

"An infinite God ought to be able to protect itself ... themselves ... without going in partnership with state legislatures."

And this is Ricky Gervais, who has some problems with religion. (laughter) It almost seems like he's against it.

"Blasphemy. A law to protect an all-powerful supernatural deity from getting its feelings hurt." (laughter)

Well, that kind of makes sense, doesn't it?

One of the things, in addition to realizing that the Ten Commandments are not rules, they're not really commandments, is to not think of whatever the source of this as a critic or a judge, and see it as a love letter that's been sent to you to help you from losing the sacred core and ground of your being.

It makes all the difference in the world between if the third saying is, *if you stub your toe, don't say GD*. Now, I'm not recommending that you do, but I know I swear like a sailor someday. That's not what it's about. It's not against cussing. It's about something deeper and much more

profound than that. But when you think about this coming from a friend, it's more realizing how we lose our happiness. That when you cuss, the problem isn't that you say GD, the problem is that you're unhappy. Right?

If you cuss when you're happy, there's not a problem there. *(laughter)* It's silly to think you shouldn't say certain words. That's silly. But there's also a despair that gets expressed when we're off balance, when we feel alone, when we don't feel like how we're living matters.

We've gone through the first three Commandments. Today, we're looking at the third. In the Protestant tradition, this is not true if you're Catholic. They're numbered differently, which the people that want to force the Ten Commandments down everybody's throats don't seem to realize. They're numbered differently by the different denominations.

I think there are three suggestions that are here. Number one is taking the sacred name in vain means not seeing the burning bush in yourself. You get lost in words and you lose your sacred core. The second is not seeing the burning bush in others, getting lost in labels, positions, these verbal definitions that block communication. Then finally, not seeing the burning bush in the whole life process itself.

Because if modern science and the ancient mystics agreed on anything, it's that life is ecological. It doesn't just belong to individuals. It's something we share. We're cells in a common body, and our happiness is tied to that interwovenness.

Let's look at the first idea Again, this is... Could we go to the next slide. Get Monty Python out of here.



Remember, that's the Divine Name. You didn't say it in that way. It might be pronounced Yahweh, which means I'm going to hell now if I said it right. *(laughter)* Which is a shame if you think about it.

But in the past, they thought it was Jehovah, and that's the name that they use in the Monty Python thing. But neither Hebrew nor Greek has a 'J'. So that can't be what you say to get you in trouble. Jesus would not know who you were talking to. You realize that? If they didn't have a J

in those languages. It wasn't J-E-S-U-S. That's the Divine Name. It's this experience. This deeper sense of where you come out of. Without that, life seems very hollow.

So this third insight may be about living from your roots that go into this mystery, to not be superficial, to not get lost in pretending, just saying words because you were taught that.

It sounds like I have something against the Apostle's Creed, and I really don't. What I have a problem with is if that has replaced the sacred experience. I was raised in the Presbyterian faith without the slightest suggestion that there was a mystery happening at the core of my life, in the core of my being. I was taught answers to questions I wasn't asking. They call it "catechism," you may remember. It was all words! It doesn't make the words bad and evil to say that's not the heart. That's not what you're longing for as a human being. That's not what you're thirsting for as a human being.

What if this third suggestion is coming from a loving friend, maybe a cosmic friend, but someone who isn't sitting there judging you for making mistakes? Some of the older of you will remember Neil Diamond. If you're children, you may not remember that. But he had a song called "*I Am, I Said*," which is really interesting in today's context.

Why would the Divine Name be translated as "I am" so many times if it's not calling you to the root of your being? If it's not words that are attempting to lead you past words into this sense of who you are in the universe. In the first part, he talks about, he's kind of lost his roots. He's gotten famous now. He's in Los Angeles, which is you know, beautiful, wonderful, but it's not home. He tries to get back to New York, and it's not, he says, it's not mine anymore. Let me read the verse. He goes,

*Well I'm New York City born and raised
But nowadays
I'm lost between two shores
L.A.'s fine, but it ain't home
New York's home
But it ain't mine no more.*

*"I am"... I said
To no one there
And no one heard at all
Not even the chair.*

which is maybe the most pathetic reach for a rhyme in all of the literature. (*laughter*) And maybe if he had more time.

But you get the scenario that he's experiencing. He's probably in a motel room and he's got all this fame, and he's gone back home, and he's alone, bone-chillingly alone.

*I am"... I cried
"I am"... said I
And I am lost and I can't*

*Even say why
Leavin' me lonely still.*

Isn't it wonderful that an artist would share that kind of vulnerability? That you could have everything externally. And if you don't have the sense of your own roots into the universe, it feels like you're afloat. It feels like you're untethered.

So this is a call into your own depths. It's not a criticism of you as a person. I would not have the presumption. Too many of you know me to say, "Don't curse, don't cuss." (*laughter*) One of my most horrifying memories, and there are a lot of them ... (*laughter*) But one of my most horrifying was when I was in seminary the last semester, I was working on a double degree. I had four little jobs that I was doing and going around, and I was having stress headaches, migraines. So, I was sometimes not in a very good mood.

I'm cleaning the chapel late at night, and the plug pulls out. Now, at this point, I'm Joan of Arc. I've suffered, I've suffered, and now this cord pulls out. I let loose a string of inappropriate words. Words I deeply regret. The reason I regret them is because I turned around and the President of the Seminary was there. (*laughter*) He and his lovely wife were sitting there. To their credit, they pretended like they didn't hear it. I don't know if they did or not. (crowd: They heard) (*laughter.*) Probably.

If the first insight is about the burning bush, I think what it's saying is you are the burning bush. This isn't something you just see externally. Jesus said you are a light shining out of the darkness. That is literally who you are. Leave religion aside for a second. Just think of the cosmos. Think of the Webb and Hubble telescopes. All of that churning that's taking place in the cosmic sphere. And so far as we know yet, yours is the only consciousness that rises above that. That through you, the universe itself rises up, looks at itself, and says, "Yes."

You are a miracle. It may be within the laws of physics, but it's still a freakish miracle that you are able to sit there and be conscious and aware. If you think about it, your consciousness may be the most valuable substance in the universe. Now, there's lots of stuff we don't know yet, but you think about how we trade that off as though it was worthless.

The third suggestion is saying: Don't use the Name. Don't trade it off. Don't think that you can use this sacred moment to get something that's better than you. That's a sense of hollowness that you don't deserve. There is nothing outside of you that's worth more than what is inside you.

So that light shining in you should not be suffocated by words, by theologies, by doctrines, by dogmas, by the dress-up game that many of us were taught in the Church. Pretend that you believe something. Just pretend it. It's okay. I don't believe it either, but if you just pretend. I'll never forget when I was getting ready to go before Presbytery, and I say, "I don't know if I can pass this thing." And one of the ministers said, "It's okay, we all lied to get in." (*laughter*) Maybe that's a problem. So, realize how incredibly important that light within you is. Maybe that's what Buddha meant when he said, "*Be a light to yourself. Be your own lantern.*"

Then the second thing is not seeing the burning bush in others, not being able to see past your labels, not being able to relate to somebody who has nothing to give you. That's also using the Divine Name for something that's less. A lot of times people try to get me to get excited about different systems of understanding human beings. I think those all can be helpful things. But I think they all also can be trying to understand human beings like we understand objects, to fit them on a grid, to measure them, to be able to diagram what the qualities are.

I think what the second suggestion or insight is reminding us is, you have to see the other as completely other, or you're not seeing them at all. If you see them in your life plans, in your designs, in your beliefs, you're not seeing the cosmic mystery that's shining in front of you. If I cannot see that in you, I'm absolutely alone.

It's like the song goes, when I've only got this right here, when I can't see the mystery shining through, it feels very lonely. When you can love others as *other*, you don't have to control them, you don't have to possess them, and yet that light feeds you. So just as Moses took his sandals off in the presence of the burning bush, to set aside for a moment your psychology, to set aside for a moment your theology and just relish the mystery that's shining in front of you. Other people are your window into the depths of the name.

Here's the last point for the morning. Again, you're welcome to come up with 30 more if you want. But that is not seeing the burning bush in life itself. When you give up on life, when you renounce life itself, that can be desperately, desperately lonely. And so the Christian text that we use says it's okay to blaspheme anybody else but the Holy Spirit. Now, it lists the chosen one. So it's okay to blaspheme Jesus and things will get better. It's okay to blaspheme God and things will get better. But not if you blaspheme the Spirit of Life, the Spirit of Love. I don't think anything is unforgivable, but that makes it a lot harder for you to receive the love that's there for you. If you open up a flower, it always has the sun trying to give itself. But if the flower won't open, then it doesn't really matter what the sun does.

The Divine Name is a symbol of the intelligence written all through creation, all through the universe. And you don't have to believe anything to realize this incredible intelligence that's throbbing in everything. Let's go to the next slide. Obviously, this is the periodic chart.

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PERIODIC TABLE OF ELEMENTS

1 H	2 He											13 Al	14 Si	15 P	16 S	17 Cl	18 Ar	19 K	20 Ca											35 Br	36 Kr																	
3 Li	4 Be	5 B	6 C	7 N	8 O	9 F	10 Ne	11 Na	12 Mg	13 Al	14 Si	15 P	16 S	17 Cl	18 Ar	19 K	20 Ca	21 Sc	22 Ti	23 V	24 Cr	25 Mn	26 Fe	27 Co	28 Ni	29 Cu	30 Zn	31 Ga	32 Ge	33 As	34 Se	35 Br	36 Kr															
19 K	20 Ca	21 Sc	22 Ti	23 V	24 Cr	25 Mn	26 Fe	27 Co	28 Ni	29 Cu	30 Zn	31 Ga	32 Ge	33 As	34 Se	35 Br	36 Kr	37 Rb	38 Sr	39 Y	40 Zr	41 Nb	42 Mo	43 Tc	44 Ru	45 Rh	46 Pd	47 Ag	48 Cd	49 In	50 Sn	51 Sb	52 Te	53 I	54 Xe													
55 Cs	56 Ba	57 La	58 Ce	59 Pr	60 Nd	61 Pm	62 Sm	63 Eu	64 Gd	65 Tb	66 Dy	67 Ho	68 Er	69 Tm	70 Yb	71 Lu	72 Hf	73 Ta	74 W	75 Re	76 Os	77 Ir	78 Pt	79 Au	80 Hg	81 Tl	82 Pb	83 Bi	84 Po	85 At	86 Rn	87 Fr	88 Ra	89 Ac	90 Th	91 Pa	92 U	93 Np	94 Pu	95 Am	96 Cm	97 Bk	98 Cf	99 Es	100 Fm	101 Md	102 No	103 Lr
101 Fr	102 Ra	103 Ac	104 Th	105 Pa	106 U	107 Np	108 Pu	109 Am	110 Cm	111 Bk	112 Cf	113 Es	114 Fm	115 Md	116 No	117 Lr	118 Og	119 Ts	120 Og	121 Nh	122 Fl	123 Mc	124 Lv	125 Ts	126 Og	127 Nh	128 Fl	129 Mc	130 Lv	131 Ts	132 Og	133 Nh	134 Fl	135 Mc	136 Lv	137 Ts	138 Og	139 Nh	140 Fl	141 Mc	142 Lv	143 Ts	144 Og					

Have you ever realized how strange the universe is that the subatomic particles that have no qualities whatsoever can be rearranged to create everything there is. You take two hydrogen atoms, put them with one oxygen. I can't tell you what that creates because you wouldn't understand. (*laughter*) But think about that. You take two atoms of one gas, mix it with an atom of another gas, and you have a liquid. You move these things around, and all the different qualities of the universe are there in that little chart. That's one version of the Divine Name. DNA is another version of the Divine Name.

The ancients tried to get as close to it as they could. But there's an intelligence that's weaving leading your life together with everything else. When we say 'no' to life as a whole, there's a poverty inside us that nothing can really cure. Now, I don't believe in an unforgivable sin, but I do believe that despair can make it really hard. In the Zoroastrian religion, the unforgivable sin is despair, because you stop trying. You stop even looking or listening for any kind of love or beauty or goodness.

When I had graduated from college, we're doing the musical stuff. That was when the Stevie Ray Vaughn stuff happened. Then this musical partner that I'm with has some links to the Dooby Brothers. We were nowhere near good enough, but that was very exciting. So, I've graduated. I've finished college, thank God. I'm walking down the road, have every reason to be happy, no reasons to be sad. And somebody comes up behind me, I see the lights, and they're going to play chicken with me. They're coming right close to the curb, and I'm supposed to jump up on the curb in fear. And, I go, "No way." So I stay out in the street and the person steers around. When I get finished, I say, what did I just do? Does my life mean so little to me that I wouldn't even preserve myself to step to the curb? And I had this weird moment where I kind of committed a happy suicide and said, if my life means so little to me, why not give it away? Why not? I mean, if it's not worth stepping up on a curb, maybe I can bring joy to other people and meaning to other people.

That idea that life has no meaning is really easy to fall into if we haven't given ourselves to Life. Once you've given yourself to Life, then you see opportunities everywhere. Your life is a part of a much greater Life. And even if circumstances don't make sense for you, and they're not enough for you to want to keep going. If you consider your larger Life and what you could mean to other people, I think it will change that equation radically and deeply. I think that's what that Third Commandment is about, saying 'yes' to Life itself.

So, I don't believe that this third suggestion is about cussing. If it is, I'm in trouble. But it's stupid, right? I mean, it's dumb to say those syllables makes you bad. But it makes perfect sense if this is a suggestion coming from a friend that says, "This is where your pain is really coming from." It's when you let yourself get untethered from the root of your being and you just live superficially. You let words replace the mystical experience. Or you live life at a distance. You just treat other people as objects. You understand them through labels, through formula, instead of the ravishing mystery that they can be. And finally, when we don't say 'yes' to Life itself as a whole, there's a misery that follows us that I think whoever it is that wrote this ancient tablet loved us too much to leave us there.

I want to close with something by Anne Lamott that I think is a positive way of saying these things.

“Your problem is how you are going to spend this odd and precious life you have been issued. Whether you're going to spend it, trying to look good, and creating the illusion that you have power over people and circumstances, or whether you are going to taste it, enjoy it, and find out the truth about who you are.”

Well, these are my struggles with this text. We'll take a moment now for you to think how you would have preached it.

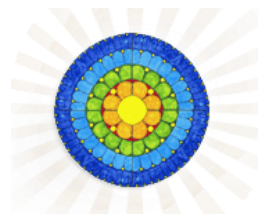
Benediction

Well, thank you so much. I think that a lot of times the religion that we're taught as children consists mainly of words. I think what we're being reminded of today is that there's always something deep, profound, mystical when we go deeply within ourselves, with another, and with Life itself.

Would you take us home? Take it home, Erica.

You are the light of the world. The love and light and life that you yearn for is already within you, and it's all around you. And there is nothing that can sever you from that connection to life and to love. To me, you go out more aware of that love that lives within you, ready to share it with everyone who crosses your path. Go in Peace. Amen.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.



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