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First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
East Hartford, Connecticut

September 30, 2012

*Acts 3:1-10; 4:5-12; Psalm 113:1-3*

Hallowed Be Thy Name

(Third in series, The Ten Commandments: More Than They May Seem)

*Thou shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. –Exodus 20:7–*

To think that the third Commandment only means not to swear makes it too easy. As good as it is not to use the words God or Christ as swear words, there is more involved in keeping the third Commandment than that. A similar sort of reductionism was also possible for the first two Commandments, in those cases by making loyalty to God synonymous with loyalty to one's religion. It is quite possible that a person can faithfully identify with his or her religion, and be a faithful member of his or her religious organization, and still have other gods and worship things made by human hands and minds. These gods are gods, of course, with a small g, such as an entertainer or entertainment itself (we even have a television singing contest now called American Idol). But modern idols can also be athletes or athletics, a politician or politics or a political theory or party. Gods can be made of science and technology, or of the scientific method, or of some sort of success or the accumulation of money, or the experience of sensuality, or anything else that we might sometimes prioritize in our lives before commitment to God. Keeping the first and second Commandments involves much more than supporting and participating in our religion.

In a similar way the meaning of the third Commandment is much broader than simply not taking the Lord's name in vain or using it as a curse. It is that at least, it can even start there, but that is not all there is to it. The stated consequences of breaking the third Commandment suggest its importance. *The Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name*, God says. Now, the Bible teaches us that God is a forgiving God, and as John writes, *If we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)* Jesus said that the only sin which will not be forgiven is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. (Mark 3:29) Theologians have argued about just what it means to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit since the beginning of the church. But since God said that those who break the third Commandment will not be acquitted and Jesus said that every sin will be forgiven except blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, maybe the third Commandment and blasphemy are related. I think they are.

Consider closely what it means to use the Lord's name in vain or as a curse. To do so is to connect God to a situation which is inconsistent with whom God is. In recent English vernacular, to use the Lord's name in vain is understood as speaking it petulantly, in the context of some unkindness or feeling of self centered frustration. To do that is to

associate God with that which is ungodly, thereby implying that God is other than who God really is. Each of the first three Commandments insists in its own way that there is only one God and that God is of only one character which never changes. To have ultimate loyalty to anything other than God, or to create an idol of something which is not God, or to call upon the name of God for a purpose other than one which is worthy of God, is to break at least one of the first three commandments, and perhaps all three. And the consequence of that is serious, the most serious of any other moral turpitude. It is to deny who God really is, and that is blasphemy.

In the ancient centuries in which the Bible was written and in which Jesus lived, the concept of a person's name represented that person's character. Today we might say that so and so has a good name or in the case of someone who may not be as trustworthy, such and such a person has a bad name. In that sense the name of someone or something still implies reputation as it did in the ancient Middle East. *Do not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God.* Do not sully God's reputation! Do not use the Lord's name in any way that reflects more who we are than who God is.

Surely we have all done this at one time or another, confused our own self-righteous indignation with the purposes of God. Let us have no fear of eternal damnation because of it. To quote Jesus once more, much of blasphemy will be forgiven, it is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit that is the unforgivable one. And if Jesus is not just speaking hyperbolically here, as he sometimes did to get our attention about how important something is, if there really is no forgiveness for this blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, then let us understand the meaning of it to be a life-time conscious commitment to make God other than who God is—to make ourselves God and to amplify in some way our own importance as if we are God, and to assume that the things that we want are the purposes of God. The unforgivable sin would be making our simple self-satisfaction the driving force of our whole lives, not breaching now and then one of the first three commandments.

To suggest otherwise and think that God would not forgive us for human lapses of judgment, would surely be to use the Lord's name in vain.