

## I

I was one of 22 students in Mrs. Womack's third grade homeroom, and five of us were named Ryan. I was known as Ryan B., not to be confused with Ryan C., Ryan D., Ryan G., or Ryan T. If Mrs. Womack needed to get our attention, all she had to do was call out, "Ryan!" and about a quarter of her class would look up.

For two years of college, I shared an off-campus apartment with two roommates, both of whom were named Paul. This was the dark ages before caller ID and before everyone had cell phones, so we had just one old phone in the house. If a caller would say, "Is Paul there?" I would answer, "Maybe."

When Amy and I learned that we were expecting identical twin boys, we spent a great deal of time thinking about their names. I wanted to go with biblical names like Zerubbabel and Shealtiel. I mean, Zerubbabel Baer just sounds like a linebacker, right? But alas, I was overruled.

## II

Names are a core part of our identity, of our self-understanding, of our sense of place within the world. Our names connect us to past, to a larger family story.

And names have great power, don't they? As Mrs. Womack demonstrated to a room full of third graders, if you know someone's name, it gives you the power to summon their attention. And we know all too well that

one of the fastest growing crimes in the world today is identity fraud – the wrongful use of a name.

## III

This summer, we're making our way through a series of sermons on the Ten Commandments, and today, we come to the third commandment. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for God will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.

As you know, we've also been learning a memory device using our ten fingers, in order to remember the ten commandments. So let's review where we've been so far, shall we?

Put your index finger in the air, and notice that it looks like both the number one and the letter I. The first commandment is, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me."

Now, put out your pinky finger and make the sign for Hook 'Em Horns. The horns remind us of the golden calf that the Israelites once worshiped. The second commandment is, "You shall not make for yourself any idols."

And now for the third commandment. Put three fingers up, and notice that it also looks like the letter "W." The third commandment is, "You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God." And then take your three fingers and put them over your mouth.

A few years ago, when our twin boys were toddlers, just beginning to walk and talk, one morning I was trying to get into my car, while also trying to get my twin toddlers into the car, while also holding an arm full of important papers. I was in a bad mood, having a bad day, and wouldn't you know it, just as I opened the car door, I fumbled the papers, and they went flying across the driveway. In my frustration, I very loudly blurted out three short words that very clearly broke the third commandment, with my twin toddler sons silently looking on.

The very next day, one of them fumbled something he had been holding, and even though he was just learning to talk, in perfect cadence, accent, and diction, he repeated verbatim the words that I had used to break the third commandment. That was not one of my finer moments in either discipleship or parenting.

But I wonder, is the third commandment just about words you're not supposed to say on television? Or is there something more to it?

As we've been saying all along, the Ten Commandments didn't just fall out of the sky one day with a note attached that said, "Obey these, or else." The Ten Commandments are a part of the larger story of the liberation and redemption of God's people.

If we back up a little bit and look at the story of Exodus as a whole, we remember that when the story of Exodus begins, the people of God, collectively

called the Israelites, were not able to live in their homeland, but rather they fled to Egypt because of a worldwide food crisis.

And when they first arrived in Egypt, they were welcomed by the Egyptians as friends and neighbors. Even though they were different from their Egyptian neighbors in almost every respect, initially the Israelites were welcomed into Egypt and they became important contributors to the Egyptian culture and economy, living side by side as neighbors and friends.

But then a new king came to power. And he decided that it would be more politically expedient for him to cast the Israelite refugees and immigrants not as neighbors and friends, but rather as a threat to Egyptian economic and military security. And so he began a new program whereby immigrant and refugee children were forcibly separated from their parents, and as the text tells us, the Egyptians became ruthless with the Israelites and made their lives bitter with hard service.

And so God sees all that is happening – how children are being used as pawns in political games, how a politics of fear and scapegoating is preventing the flourishing of both Egyptians and Israelites alike, and God decides that it is time to act.

And so God calls to a man named Moses and lays out for him God's plan of liberation and redemption. And when God is finished, Moses asks, "Who shall

I say has sent me to your people? Who are you? What is your name?”

And the voice from the bush answered, “I am who I am,” or, as the Hebrew can also be translated, “I will be who I will be.”

The text doesn’t say so, but I imagine that Moses was confused. After all, Moses had been raised in the court of the Egyptian king Pharaoh, and the Egyptians had with impressive and easy to say names – like Ra, Bast, Seth, and Osiris.

But the Voice calling to Moses is the voice of a God who will not be manipulated, a God who will not be easily labeled, a God who will thwart attempts to use God’s name as a weapon or a political tool, a God who makes humankind in God’s image, rather than the other way around. “I am who I am.” “I will be who I will be.”

And so later, when this God whose name is “I am who I am” instructs Moses to write down these ten words, these ten commandments, they become the framework around which God transforms lives. They become the framework around which God moves people from slavery to liberation, the means by which God builds a holy nation and a covenant people.

And did you notice the possessive pronouns in the third commandment? You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord *your* God. These commandments are first and foremost about relationship. And what that

means is that God has put God’s name on *you*.

#### IV

That’s part of what happens in the waters of baptism. When you are baptized, God puts God’s name on you. Even though in our Presbyterian way of being the church we usually sprinkle water on people’s heads, the theological reality is that baptism soaks into every part of your being. In baptism, your entire identity gets drenched. When you are baptized, it’s a reminder of of your adoption into the covenant people of God through Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ. And because in baptism we are adopted into the covenant family of God and we are therefore authorized to use the family name, the name of the Most High God.

And Jesus said, “Whenever two or more of you are gathered in my name, I am there with you. And whatever you ask to be done in my name will be done. Whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven.”

And with great power, then, comes great responsibility. So be very careful how you use the family name, because God takes it very seriously.

And it’s not just about speaking God’s name in an expletive. When we attribute things to God that are not of God, we break the third commandment, because we are misusing the name that has been entrusted to us. Here’s a few

examples of what that looks like in action.

When Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast some years ago, some of our brothers and sisters from other branches of the Christian family tree were quick to go on television and proclaim that God sent the hurricane as a punishment for the sins of Bourbon Street, particularly the Southern Decadence Festival. Nevermind that the storm left Bourbon Street high and dry but devastated the poor and the very old and the very young. Nevermind that the storm destroyed churches and daycares and police and fire stations. Not only did these brothers and sisters who made these claims practice poor theology. They broke the third commandment by misusing the name of the Lord our God.

But lest we get too haughty, here's one I've heard uttered from the lips of deeply faithful Presbyterian. Standing in a funeral parlor, while looking into an open casket at the body of a faithful saint who has died, I have heard a well-meaning Presbyterian say to a grieving family, "God must have needed another angel in heaven." That, too, is a breach of the third commandment. That, too, is a misuse of the name of God.

If God needs another angel, the God who made all that is, seen and unseen, can make another angel, and Scripture is clear that angels are not the ghosts of deceased humans. I'm sure the person meant well and was just trying to offer comfort to the bereaved,

but as Job's friends learned the hard way, better to show up and sit silent in the grief than open your mouth and try to start explaining unexplainable things.

The third commandment is not just about how we speak the name of God. It's also about how we live out our identity as *people of God*.

And because you bear the name of Christ, my brother, people are watching you. Because you have been adopted into the covenant family of God, my sister, people are not just listening to the words that come out of your mouth. They're observing your whole manner of living. They're following your social media feeds. They're watching how you drive. They're observing how you treat people who think, look, vote, pray, and love differently than you do, especially those who are vulnerable, like, for instance, children and immigrants and refugees.

So remember who and whose you are. Remember to whom you belong. Remember whose name you bear out into the world, and for heaven's sake, do not misuse it.

## V

And never forget, we are in this thing together. God has put God's name on us as we live out our discipleship here at First Presbyterian Church. Once we were not a people, but now we are God's people. Once we had not received mercy, but now we have received mercy.

And at the name of Jesus, every knee bends on heaven and on earth and

under the earth, and every tongue  
confesses that Jesus is Lord, to the glory  
of God the Father.

So may we remember who and  
whose we are, and may we speak and act  
accordingly, this day and every day.

Thanks be to God. Amen.