

January 16, 2011

IDENTITY THEFT

There is something in a name.

If I were to tell you that the name of tomorrow is Monday, which it is, that might mean a lot of things to a lot of people. For some the name Monday means the start of a new week and that means the chance to start again. The chance to live life with a blank slate. The chance to do it better. For others Monday is the end of the weekend that you were looking so much forward to last week. Monday is the start of something you don't want to go back to. Monday is the start of school. Monday is the start of work. Monday is the alarm clock going off at some dreadful hour. And for others Monday makes you think of the moon. Monday is named after the moon, of course. You are reminded of our attachments to the heavenly bodies ... and our governance by the powers of the celestial realm. There is something in that name Monday.

Now if I were to tell you that the name of tomorrow is Martin Luther King Day – that will also mean a lot of things to a lot of people. For some it simply means a day off – a three

day weekend. The chance to sleep in and watch TV. The opportunity to do chores around the house. No mail. No banking. For others, Martin Luther King Day takes them back over forty years to the days of the civil rights movement. Racial injustice. The March on Washington. The “I Have a Dream Speech”. The Letter from a Birmingham Jail. The fateful day of April 4 when Martin Luther King was shot. And still for others Martin Luther King Day is day to be reminded how far we still have to go for racial justice and economic justice and social justice. Strides have been made, but we cannot rest complacent when so many have so little. That while Martin Luther King allowed us to see the Promised Land, but we still have far to go before we cross the Jordan River. All that and more comes to mind when you give to a day a name.

There is something in a name.

In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* when the four children enter into Narnia they find that it is a land that is ruled by a wicked witch. It is winter and gray and the land is under the witch’s spell. And as they are walking along they end up encountering a talking Beaver. Mr. Beaver he is called. And Mr. Beaver has some news for them. He tells them that Aslan is on the move. Now up until this point – the children have never heard the name Aslan. They don’t know who are what Aslan is. Yet nevertheless when they hear the name Aslan –

something jumps inside of them. Lewis writes, “Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious horror. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.

All of it from a name. There is something in a name.

When Moses encounters God in the burning bush – and receives from God his call to go back to Egypt and deliver God’s people --- Moses asks God, “If they ask me what is the name of the God who has sent me, what shall I tell them?” God replies, “Tell them my name is, ‘I am who I am’.” I am who I am. The translation in the Hebrew is “Yahweh”. Yahweh is his name. Now the Israelites believed that Yahweh was not simply the name of God. But that God actually inhabited his name. The name itself was holy – because God was in the name. In fact, the name itself was so holy – that it was only appropriate to say the name using only the consonants of the name, thus Yahweh came to be known as Adonai – the Hebrew pronunciation of the consonants. There was great power, you see, in the name. And you best be careful how you use the power of the name – because when you used the name ... you were identifying God with whatever you were using the name for ... because God is in the name.

So when God lays out his commandments – he is very clear up front ... that we shall not take the name of the Lord in vain. We shall not misuse it. When Jesus taught us to pray ... the first petition out of his mouth, and out of our mouths – is “Hallowed be Thy Name”. There is holiness in the name of God ... because God dwells in his name.

And so it was that the early church in the wake of the resurrection and the ascension as they came to know and believe that Jesus was Savior and seated at the right hand of God – came to find power even in the name of Jesus. The person of Jesus was in the name. So Paul writes in Philippians, “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human form, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth ...”

There is something, you see, about the name.

So it was a significant step for the church in the first century – particularly the believers in Antioch – that they began to identify themselves as “Christians” – meaning “of Christ” — they began to take on the name of Jesus to say we shall claim the name of Jesus. We shall identify ourselves by the name of Jesus – and more so --- Jesus shall be identified by who we are. We shall bear the name of Jesus. And so it is of particular interest to us this third commandment – when God says, “You shall take the name of the Lord your God in vain.” You shall not misuse the name. Now as a kid I used to think that meant that I wasn’t supposed to attach the name of God to a swear word ... or use the name in anger. That as long as I didn’t use word “God” with any profanity I was all right. Far from the case! This is a commandment that covers just about every moment of my waking life. That if I take on the name Christian – if I live and act in the name of Jesus – I carry with me his identity. How I live determines whether or not the name of God is taken in vain.

I was out in Phoenix early this week and Phoenix was host on Monday to the College Football BCS National Championship. I was surprise to see that Michigan was not in this game. But you could not mistake who was in the game. Everywhere you went in Phoenix – stores, restaurants, hotels, airports, buses – you saw one of two names adorned on people – Auburn or Oregon. Auburn jerseys and Oregon jerseys. Auburn hats and Oregon hats. AU and O. Blue and Orange and Green and Yellow. People were more than proud to bear the name of their university and allegiance. They claimed the name. Just as much as I would claim the big

M ...and the maize and blue. But you know the thing about being a sports fan, any sport – is that claiming the name of a team ... doesn't bring with it an expectation of behavior. You say who you root for ... but you don't say how you're going to live. I've sat in the stands of enough sporting events ... to see with my very eyes that a person's allegiance to a team is no great indicator of behavior. The most passionate fans are often the most foolish.

Bubba Smith, the great NFL and college lineman, was asked after his retirement from football to return to his alma mater, Michigan State, to be the Grand Marshall of the homecoming parade. Bubba Smith was honored to accept the invitation. At that point in his life Bubba Smith had become popular beyond football because of the commercials he did for Miller Lite Beer. The commercials featured celebrities debating whether Miller Lite Beer either tasted great or was less filling. Most of us remember those commercials. So when Bubba Smith was invited back to Michigan State and led the parade to celebrate his university – he was ashamed to discover that he was identified not with the name of the university, but with the slogan of the commercial. Down the parade route, he said, “instead of hearing ‘Go, State, Go!’, I heard, “Tastes Great”, “Less Filling”. It was one of the worst days of his life. He never did another beer commercial again.

You see our behavior identifies the name we bear.

You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain. It is with great sobriety then that we wonder to ourselves what does it mean for me take on the name of Jesus – to be called Christian. To be “of Christ.”

No doubt you have been reading with horror the negotiations this week with a Kansas church and their pastor in the effort to keep them from picketing the funerals of the victims of the shootings in Arizona to make a point about military policy. The civilized world watches these things with sadness. They attached the behavior with the identity – and what was at stake was the name of Christ. How profoundly we can take the name of the Lord in vain.

And while none of us would dare to associate with such behavior – the truth is whatever we do ... whatever we say ... however we live ... we bear the name of Jesus. Jesus gets identified. Mistakenly or otherwise. His power gets used wrongly or rightly.

Not unlike I suppose nuclear power. The elements of uranium and plutonium – we can use those elements to light up a city ... or we can use them to destroy a country. Same material, different uses.

We can use the name of Jesus – to destroy or to build.

What then a profound life we are called to live. Seeking to truthfully identify the person and name of Jesus by who we are. Can you think of a more interesting life to live? Bearing with us the name and person of Jesus.

Life becomes interesting when you enter into a business meeting bearing the name and person of Jesus.

Life becomes interesting when you enter into a gossiping conversation bearing the name and person of Jesus.

Life becomes interesting when you have problems with a certain group of people, or class of people, or race of people – and yet you bear the name and person of Jesus.

Life becomes interesting when you sit down with your investment counselor and you bear the name and person of Jesus.

Life becomes interesting when you have an opinion to express or a political commentary to offer that as you do so you bear the name and person of Jesus.

You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain.

I love that story told of Alexander the Great – the great conqueror and military ruler. One of the soldiers in his army was brought before him having been acting in a manner unbecoming an officer. Alexander questioned the soldier for a time and then asked the soldier his name. “Alexander,” the soldier said, “Well, Alexander,” the general replied. “You have a choice. You either change your behavior or change your name.”

You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain. Because there is something in a name.