

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

July 6, 2008

www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

Thou Shalt Believe With Passion!

Exodus 20:7

Some years ago the writer Fulton Ousler told of a woman named Nanny, who was destined to raise many children but to never have any of her own.

Irrepressibly cheerful, ebullient, loving and sunny, she was committed to raising the spirits of others.

Nanny was especially known for encouraging children to live positively.

At the end of a long, fruitful career, Nanny grew old, sick and poor, and had to have surgery in a public hospital, after which she was placed in a large, common ward to recuperate.

Her recovery proceeded slowly, not least of all because she was placed next to a grim old woman who seemed only to want to die.

The woman's dark outlook grated on Nanny, who finally asked her, "Don't you ever smile?"

The woman replied that no, she didn't smile because she had nothing to smile about.

"Honey," Nanny pressed, "have you ever laughed in your life?" The woman replied that yes, she had laughed once, at a clown she had seen at a circus – he had made her laugh.

"What did the clown do?" asked the curious Nanny. The lady replied, "He stood on his head."

Nanny thought a moment, then pushed back the covers, standing somewhat unsteadily, since she hadn't been out of bed very much of late. She tottered over to a wall.

Using the wall as a brace, she slowly, incredibly, managed to stand on her head, until her legs were pointing straight in the air like goalposts.

The grim woman began to laugh, and as the entire ward looked Nanny's way, they began to laugh, too.

Then they broke into a spontaneous, raucous ovation. The spirit of the entire ward was uplifted.

Nanny and the old woman became friends, and both began to improve.

Do you remember the complaint leveled against the first Christians by the people of Thessalonica?

They cried, "They are turning the world upside down!"

We will only be worthy of that criticism if we are willing to turn *ourselves* upside down first!

Our church will only be worthy of that criticism -- will only make that kind of impact upon the world – if we are willing to turn our congregation upside down first!

Stated positively, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," should be understood as

"Those who take upon them themselves the name of the Lord must live their faith with energy, discipline, urgency and commitment."

The Third Commandment really means, "Live passionately the values that you claim to believe!"

How profoundly pathetic are attempts to turn the grand Third Commandment into a narrow prohibition against cursing. The Third Commandment has nothing to do with cursing!

The Third Commandment is a broad divine injunction, not an interdiction of a small sin.

The Third Commandment speaks to the very heart of how we live.

The ancient people would intensify the urgency of their promises to each other

by making a parallel commitment to God. Essentially, we perform a similar act at a marriage altar.

Our marriage vows are mutual promises to each other whose intensity and sincerity

we seek to solemnize and intensify by making a similar mutual promise unto God.

Yet, as I say to those who stand at this marriage altar, there is no magic in the speaking of marriage vows that will make their words come true.

Likewise, the ancient people were warned that invoking the name of God was not magic either. The Third Commandment warns people, “Do not make a vow that invokes the name of God unless you are willing to back those words with your very life!”

In other words, the “oaths” prohibited in the Third Commandment are not the “oaths” that come out of your mouth when you hit your thumb with a hammer.

The oaths that were prohibited in the Third Commandment were those vows where people lightly linked their integrity to the integrity of God.

“Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain,” really means,

‘if you are going to link your name with the name of God, do so with the whole of your being!’

The parallel for us cannot be missed: if we are going to link our lives with the name of ‘Christ,’ then we must live the values of Christ with all the sincere passion and energy of which we are capable.

A few years ago a couple of disc-jockeys were doing a show when a distraught person called them on the air, obviously suicidal.

The two dee-jays correctly and professionally talked to this person off the air,

calming him and trying to convey to him that life was meaningful and full of purpose and beauty.

While one of the disc-jockeys was counseling the man, the other pulled out their play list and began to examine their upcoming songs to see if any were dark and negative, if any might tend to move a person toward self-destruction.

He found several such songs and replaced them with tunes that he regarded as uplifting, positive and inspiring.

Meanwhile, they directed a crisis counselor to the man’s home who eventually brought the man out of his despondency and toward a positive path.

What a parable for Christians!

We are endowed by the vibrant Holy Spirit of God! We are promised the sacred energy of God!

We are commanded by our Lord to be agents of transformation!

We have been given the opportunity and strength to move people out of despair.

We have been given eyes to see those downcast in spirit and to act in such a way as to change the direction of their being.

The Third Commandment says to us,

‘Do not claim for yourself the values of God and then treat them as trivial amusements.’

The Third Commandment says to us,

‘Do not claim the great power and promise of God and then live as one who is apathetic.’

“Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord in vain.”

Think about the importance of names in the history of our faith.

When God calls Moses to go to Egypt to be an instrument of liberation for the Hebrew people, he provides Moses with the very name of God.

“Tell them the God named ‘I will be who I will be,’ sends you!”

When Abram is ready to claim the fullness of the divine promise, his name is changed from Abram to Abraham.

When Jacob is ready to graduate from being a deceiving supplanter to serve as an instrument of God’s will, his name is changed from Jacob to Israel.

When Paul and Barnabas are gathering a group of believers around the values of Christ in Antioch, they searched for a name by which to call themselves.

They settled upon the name, “Christians,” “people of the Christ.”

The book of Revelation contains this promise of Jesus to us as individuals,

“To him who conquers I will give him a white stone with a new name . . .”

Would we live our lives any differently if we sensed that the name of Christ was emblazoned upon us?

Like most guys, I occasionally listen to sports radio, which is generally a waste of time, but every now and then one hears something of value.

A noted sportswriter was asked why few successful college coaches enjoy similar success when coaching at the professional level. He answered:

“At the college level, what matters is the name on the front of the jersey.

In the pros, what matters is the name on the back of the jersey.”

What a remarkable observation!

In college, generally the name on the front of the jersey is the name of the institution.

The name on the front of the jersey connotes a certain set of expectations, communicating a certain ethic to which every athlete is called to rise and conform.

The athlete knows that he or she must discipline his or her behavior in accordance with the values and demands of the institution.

However, at the professional level, the name of the player is written upon the back of the jersey.

The name of the star is on the back of the jersey!

The star is not going to do that which is for the good of the team.

The star is going to do that which is good for the star.

So, too, if we go through life governed by the motivation, *what is good for me? what promotes my life?* then we are going to live a selfish, self-oriented existence.

If we live our lives governed by the demands of the Christ,

then we arrange our priorities and direct our passions in accordance with the values of Christ.

Of course, I do not want to imply that just because we are passionate about our faith, we will always be enthusiastic, upbeat and joyful in our relationship with God.

When spirituality is genuine, spirituality is a struggle.

Any viable relationship has a far more nuanced character than a stagnant one.

If you passionately love God, you will know just as many moments of dryness and doubt as you know moments of excitement and ecstasy.

To love someone keenly, passionately is to experience moments of joy and despair, fulfillment and anxiety.

I think of the testimony of a young woman who stands in a deserted Louisiana church on a Saturday morning. She is in her early 40's and has come back to the town of her childhood after many years away.

She finds her way to the church of her childhood, and walks through the halls of the deserted church, remembering the old saints who shaped her life.

She walks up to the baptistery, as is Blythe is wont to do, she removes her shoes and enters it.

She stands where she stood when she was ten years old, trying to remember what she felt on that decisive day of her baptism. Was she excited? Was she nervous? She can't remember.

But she does remember that even at age ten she knew she was doing something vitally important.

A strange and penetrating sadness sweeps through her.

As she looks into the empty sanctuary and ponders the sunlight slanting through the stained glass windows, she realizes that her sadness has a name, the pressing realities of life.

This woman is a committed Christian, an ordained minister, a seminary professor –

but she senses in her early forties what she could not have known at age ten,

that the weight of reality tries to press out of us all of our energy, all of our enthusiasm, all of our joy -- *and it takes great strength of spirit to resist that pressure.*

She stands in that baptistery, tears beginning to roll down her face, and she finds herself aching to experience again that original excitement, that primal ecstasy, that marked the beginning of her faith.

Then suddenly, her dry soul begins to fill the presence of the Spirit.
Suddenly she feels the nourishing presence of God, and a smile breaks across her face,
reflecting the warmth of the Spirit within her.
In that moment she senses once again the excitement, energy and enthusiasm with which she first began her
spiritual journey.

If we are going to take our faith seriously, we necessarily open ourselves up
to an entire spectrum of experiences, anguish and joy, height and depth, fire and ice.
But this entire spectrum of emotions and phases is experienced within the matrix of a prolonged relationship
with the divine.
Periodically, all of us need metaphorically to stand in the baptistery where we began our spiritual journey
and open our being afresh to the reviving, renewing presence of God's Spirit.

Though we seldom take cognizance of it, blasphemy really is a big deal in the Scripture.
But blasphemy, like the Third Commandment, is not concerned with the actions and attitudes of
nonbelievers.

Blasphemy has to do with the behavior of believers who take upon their life the name of God
and then do nothing about it.

The blasphemy our Lord condemns is the action of taking the name of Christ upon our lives
and then treating the Kingdom of God as something that does not matter.

How do we combat such a sin?

We do so through the emptying and opening of our being to an infusion of God's presence,
an action the Bible terms *kenosis*.

That is how the apostle Paul described the ministry of Jesus,
who though he was in the form of God,
considered equality with God not a thing to be grasped,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant,
accepting the limitations and vulnerability of living as a human being,
humbling himself unto death, even death on a cross.

Having done so, God exalted him, and gave him a name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus

every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

We are to live with our knees bowing and our tongues confessing that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Do not take the name of the Lord in vain!

Translated, that means, commit yourself to living the values of Christ with the whole of your being!

That, my friends, is what it means to take the Third Commandment seriously.

Dr. Wm. Richard Kremer

July 6, 2008

Third in a Series