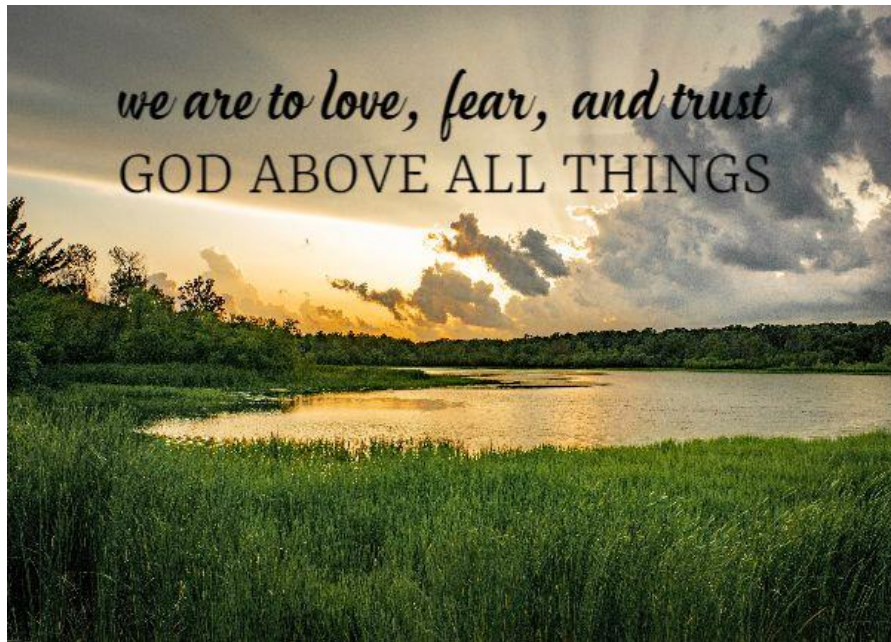


HEARTBEATS-Staying Connected 2-12-2021



Dear friends in Christ,

Next Wednesday is Ash Wednesday, the beginning of the season of Lent. During Lent, St. Andrew will offer worship services by Zoom at 7:00pm on Wednesdays until Holy Week. I will be doing a sermon series titled "Blunders of Biblical Proportion." On Wednesdays you will receive a link for the service. An Order of Service will be sent by email the day before. For Ash Wednesday, you are encouraged to have matches ready and a small plate or ash tray. They will be used in the service that evening.

This past Wednesday, I wrote an article that challenged the idea of putting prayer back in school as a way of restoring Christian values to our nation. What I didn't say is that this is really the wrong focus for this issue. As believers, as followers of Christ, our goal is not to make sure our nation bears those values. Rather it is that we personally have those values and that we share them with others—not for the goal of making our nation Christian—but for the goal of spreading the Kingdom of God. Our concern should begin with ourselves and the question of how am I doing as a follower of Christ?

The Ten Commandments begins with the directive to "have no other gods" but the One God. Any time we make something more important than seeking to do God's will, putting God's priorities first, we have broken that commandment. Martin Luther explained the meaning of that commandment this way: "We are to love, fear, and trust God above all things." Whenever we look elsewhere—to ourselves or to someone or something else—we have broken that commandment.

But really, as a starting place for seeking to improve our discipleship—our following of Christ—I'd like to focus on the second commandment. Luther gave this explanation for this commandment: "We are to fear and love God, so that we do not curse, swear, practice magic, lie,

or deceive using God's name, but instead use that very name in every time of need to call on, pray to, and give thanks to God." Certainly, there are others, but I think this is one place where we have been strongly influenced by society and let the honoring of God's name slip away. In the first part of Luther's explanation, we are challenged to avoid using God's name as a swear word. There is a common use of God's name that is actually calling on God to condemn someone, to damn someone to hell for eternity. That is what is meant by that expression that hopefully we are not using but certainly hear others speaking. Today, there are with many other curse words that we say without saying them by using another word that sort of sounds like it, and we, often without knowing it do the same with this one which uses God's holy name. What is the origin of the expression "Gosh darn"? Can you even tell me what a "gosh" is? The same is true for "golly gee" or "gee whiz". These are all expression that find their roots in that condemning expression. Avoiding such phrases is one place we might begin to show greater honor to God's name.

A much more common phrase that is used today without a second thought is "omigod". We often say it so fast that it has become one word instead of three. Luther urges us to use God's name in holy ways such as in prayer or to call on God in times of trouble. We can also use God's name to give praise when something marvelous is done or seen. But when we use it as a "throw away" phrase by saying it almost without thinking, we diminish the importance we claim God has in our lives and who God's name represents. Orthodox Jews are so careful not to say the name of God and thereby perhaps dishonor it, that even when reading scripture, when they come to the name of God, they substitute another word that means God but is not that name. We would do well to seek to be cautious in our use of God's name and try to only speak it the most sacred of times: in crisis, in prayer, and in thanksgiving.

I realize that if we have been using God's name in ways that are less than honorable, it can be hard to break the habit. When I was first in college, I began to use a curse word to better fit in with my peers. I soon found that I just didn't like saying it, but I also couldn't stop using it. I decided that if I couldn't stop speaking that word, I might at least use it in a more socially acceptable way. So, I started saying, "Oh, feces!" It sounds kind of silly, doesn't it? But because it was, it became much easier to drop the habit of using it at all. Perhaps we can do the same to break the habit of misusing God's name. I'm not suggesting substituting something silly, but maybe just by using something like "goodness" or "heavens" we can move a step further away from the name itself. Certainly, those terms also refer to our God or God's dwelling place, but without the use of God's name. Then from there, maybe we can step further away with some other expression.

The challenge to use God's name in honorable ways that give reverence to our Creator is an important step in moving ourselves to a position that seeks to give glory to God alone. If we want to lead other into relationship with God, it needs to begin with the example we set. Know first that we will always fail. But know, too, that God will always give us another chance. Recognizing that kind of love is a good place to begin in trying to conform our lives to become more and more who God wants us to be.

In Christ's love,
Pastor Jeffrey