

This morning, I would like to spend a few minutes with you thinking about swearing. Not because I have noticed that there is too much swearing in this congregation. Not because any of you have complained about the language being used by other members of the congregation, or by yours truly, but simply because our text for today is the Ten Commandments and the one which covers the use of foul language is probably the one least understood and most often violated.

Many years ago, a long time before comedian George Carlin came up with his famous list of the seven dirty words that you are never supposed to hear on radio or television, and many years before the virtuous members of our United States Senate decided to levy \$500,000 fines against crudity in broadcasting, I had a lesson on the wickedness of foul language. It was in a Sunday school classroom in about 1960 in the small rural town of Killbuck, in the hills of Holmes County, Ohio. I was eleven years old and as a practitioner of the fine art of swearing, I didn't amount to much at that point, although I had several remarkable role models.

In my Grandfather and my farmer great uncles, I had notable examples of how one could turn the sky blue on a gray day with colorful language. They were very good at swearing and I heard them often, but I also knew that my Great-grandmother, the matriarch of our family did not approve of taking the Lord's name in vain, and so

they never did it around her. Like most small children, it was a matter of do as I say, don't do as I do. In those days, I existed under the constant threat of having my mouth washed out with soap if I was ever caught using the sort of language that punctuated the day to day life of many of the men in my family.

I remember the Sunday school lesson very well. It was a lesson on the third commandment: "You shall not take the name of God in vain." (Ex. 20:7) And every child in that classroom thought they knew the words the teacher didn't want us to say. And every child there that day probably knew every one of those words and so did the teacher, but none of us dared say them in church and so the first part of the lesson was spent talking about what we were not supposed to talk about. And then came the part of the lesson I still remember: the list of forbidden words. And these words were not the words we knew but were not allowed to say, but the words we all said to keep from saying the words we knew we were not supposed to say.

The list the teacher read went something like this: Gosh, golly, gee whiz, garsh, gee whilickers, jeepers, crimony, gul ding, drat, dern, dang and darn. And then the teacher went on to explain that each of these was taking God's name in vain, and as vile a sinful sentiment as any of those more powerful swear words we had heard and knew, but did not dare to utter. As I recall, the lesson probably did nothing to improve the language of any child in that room, but it did heap up a

good measure of guilt and leave most of us feeling that we were indeed wretched little sinners fully deserving of God's punishment for having taken the Lord's name in vain in ways far from innocent.

So what do we say about swearing? According to the people who study language, swearing is a cultural universal. Every language, dialect and patios ever studied, living or dead, spoken by millions or a small tribe has its share of forbidden speech. (NY Times, Sept. 20, 2005, p.D1) And many scholars believe that the use of off color language is an emotional necessity and a way to let off some of the steam that builds up in day to day living. It may not be polite, it may reflect a lack of education, it may be all sorts of things and it may give great offense, but it is normal and natural and maybe even healthy.

Now, before any of you leave here today and tell you friends and neighbors that your preacher encourages "potty talk," let me tell you why I think blue language has nothing to do with taking God's name in vain. I would like to suggest to you that the third commandment is the foundation for everything that makes civilized life possible. That is has nothing to do with words and everything to do with behavior.

Taking God's name is vain is about knowing the truth and failing to do it. Taking God's name in vain is about sensing that some action or attitude is true and then not living your life according to that conviction. Jesus was asked once about swearing oaths, and he replied that for the person of faith, it should always be a simple matter

of yes or no—of telling the truth and living the truth in every one of our relationships.

Let me offer you a silly example. It is the middle of the night and you are driving a lonely road twenty miles from the nearest town and you happen to come to a Stop Sign. The way is clear, no one is watching, there isn't a sheriff's deputy within miles and there are no other cars. You are absolutely alone. Do you stop? Why do you stop? What harm would not stopping do? Think about that and discuss it with your friends.

I would like to suggest that our whole legal and ethical system is based on the fact that the vast majority of people will voluntarily do what is just and fair and will tell the truth and live the truth in their dealings with one another. We have in this great country of ours a tremendous system of laws and checks and balances and layer upon layer of government, but the whole thing is based on the little idea of good people choosing to do the right thing not because they are afraid of getting caught doing something bad, but because they choose to act with honesty and integrity.

To say it simply, taking the name of God in vain is talking the talk, without walking the walk. Honoring God's name is living with integrity and honesty. Let's make that sort of living, our way of living.

Amen.