

LESSONS IN LIVING

The Disciples' Prayer *Part III: Hallowed Be Thy Name*

A St. Andrew's Sermon
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby
February 21, 2010

Scripture Reading: John 8:31-59 and Exodus 3:13-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

This is a large package to try to unwrap in a short time...although it may seem like a *long* time today (*laughter*). The vocabulary is different from what we learned in traditional religion. It's a mystical poem...the *I AM* sayings. Jesus isn't putting other people down. It's written 100 years after the fact. The people that are chosen are dramatic figures, and, Jesus isn't speaking as a regular person.

In the *I AM* sayings, the person speaks as the spirit of life itself, as the tree of life. The little argument is with superficial religion, which is misunderstanding it. John is using a device that was familiar at the time, but if taken literally, the punch line is lost.

In Jewish Scripture, the *I AM* story is in Exodus, in the story of Moses and the burning bush.

Moses said, "when I go to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has Sent me to you,' if they ask me, 'What is this god's name?' what am I to tell them?" God replied, "I AM AS I AM. This is what you will tell the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

God spoke further to Moses: "Tell the children of Israel: 'YHWH, the I AM,' the God of your ancestors, the God of Sarah and Abraham, of Rebecca and Isaac, of Leah and Rachel and Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my Name forever; this is the name you are to remember for all generations.

"Now go. Gather the elders of the Israelites and tell them 'I AM, the God of your ancestors, appeared to me—the God of Sarah and Abraham, the God of Rebecca and Isaac, the God of Leah and Rachel and Jacob—and said: 'I have heard you and I have seen the way you are being treated in Egypt. I tell you now that I will lead you out of your oppression in Egypt into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.'"

We are looking at the Disciples' Prayer where it says, *Hallowed be thy name*. The name is referring to this mystical experience that Moses had at the burning bush. If you read the Old Testament in Hebrew you would find peppered through it a curious word of four letters put together, which symbolize this experience...3,800 times. *It doesn't show up in English*. In the Hebrew text, those four letters, which are

the verb *to be*, have under them vowel points, which are the words you would use instead of saying that name. You would never say this name...you would say God, Lord, Adonai. The point was to symbolize the mystical experience. That flame went out in many people's religion a long time ago. They kept those little vowel points underneath, they kept the idea of God, but the mystical experience that God refers to the symbol *God* has been lost in many people's lives.

So, through this story, we are trying to remember in our own lives what that symbol points to. Theology can be very, very helpful to you if it is revealing to you the deep grounds of your own being. It can be very harmful if you are given the same symbols with no sense of what they point to.

Traditionally, this divine name has been translated in three ways. *I AM WHAT I AM* is one way...another is *I AM*...and the last one is the idea of being...the unity of being...*the tree of life*. Often when you see Jesus speaking *I AM* sayings...*I am the way, the path, the door, the gate*...that's the name that's being talked about. Praying in the *name* of Jesus was an attempt to keep prayers grounded in the mystery, which under girds all life.

Talking about this stuff is very, very difficult. In philosophy it's called metaphysics...the study of being itself. You can't really talk about it...it's too basic. The *ideas* need to be used to discuss the *ideas*. As a way of illustrating this, I looked up the word *word (laughter)*...this is the second definition from Miriam Webster – *the entire set of linguistic forms produced by combining a single base with various inflectional elements without change in the part of speech elements (laughter)*. Beautiful...pithy...let me read it again. I've read it twenty times, and it doesn't make any sense at all! (laughter) *The entire set of linguistic forms produced by combining a single base with various inflectional elements without change in the part of speech elements*.

It's hard to talk about the concepts without using the *concepts*. Stephen Wright used that kind of paradox all the time...he said, "Why is there no synonym for *thesaurus*?" (laughter) It's not too hard when you're thinking about objects, but when you start thinking about *thought* or about *being*, the brain short-circuits! That's where religion comes in. Where traditional thought stops, religion begins. It's not a contradiction and a fight against science...you follow science as far as you can...but when it gets to the burning bush, the mystery that weaves your world together...you need something that takes you further into your own life. So, that's what I believe these stories were intended to do.

The *I AM WHAT I AM* translation of the *name* is that kind of shock and jolt of the strangeness of the universe. Have you ever looked at the moon, nature, the ocean, another person, a baby and almost said *wow!* But you knew that you couldn't express it? That's the *name*. That thing underneath your tongue that you cannot say that responds to the mystery that confronts you every day in the beauty and majesty around you. But it has been forgotten that the word is a *verb*. That's very strange...*to be* is a verb...*God* is a noun...*Lord* is a noun. None of these words are adequate to talk about the experience you have of awe and wonder. You can use them to point at the awe and wonder...but what has happened in Western theology is that the pilot light has gone out and all you have are the vowel points. You have the nouns, and you don't know that they should be referring to the very ground of your experience.

One of my favorite words for this particular aspect is *Yahoo!* (laughter) Another aspect is the personal aspect...that which is so deep within you that you can't express it...that you are part of a story. This week I was thinking of the man who flew into the Echelon Building as the opposite of our calling...what sane theology would be. This person whose despair was so great that the radiance of life, the worth of life, had gone out for him. Every person goes there. The purpose of theology is to get you through that...past that.

This person had also given up on the story...his online manifesto is all in the past. Have you ever been there? When talking about your life, you only talk about the past, and you lose that since of the *wow!* and you lose that sense of who you are because you're repeating the same things over and over again. You are so trapped in memories of the past that you are not even there in the present moment...life feels so empty and despairing that you don't care if you live another day.

People talk about *the leap of faith*. That's one of my least favorite religious terms. Usually, when you leap, it's not because you have faith...*(laughter)*. Let me talk about myself. When I have made those decisions where I was going to try to grab happiness in one fell swoop, it's been because I was afraid...or tired. I think a better image for faith is the journey, the path...sometimes on your hands and knees. When God reminds Moses that he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, he is calling to memory the story again. When we remember the story, the present moment seems less devastatingly ultimate. When God speaks in the burning bush, the tense is in the future...rather amazing. Bad religion calls you to the past... good religion calls you to the future, choosing rituals, hymns and prayers that build a world better than you were born into.

The second translation of the *word* is the *I AM*...the personal. Here's a twelfth century piece from Westminster Abbey...it sounds like people I talk to today:

When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamed of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it too seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing only my family (laughter), those closest to me, but alas, they would have none of it. (laughter) And now as I lay on my deathbed, I suddenly realize: If I had only changed myself first, then by example I might have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would then have been able to better my country and who knows, I may have even changed the world.

Twelfth century...spoken to us.

The man who flew his plane into the building committed one type of suicide. Moses committed another kind of suicide. When you decide that your life does not belong to you, when you feel that nothing has meaning, the two ways to react are to either plunge into death or plunge into life. The man in the airplane plunged into death. Moses heard a call...*I heard my people cry...I need you to go back to Egypt...* that's kind of suicidal, too. *Go tell the Pharaoh, "I don't like what you're doing."* They are both a type of ending the life that you have. If you're not using your life...if it means nothing to you...then why not give it to us? Do you understand that part of the calling? If your life means nothing to you...you've got how many years left? Do you know what difference that could make to the world? To live each day out of love, out of communion, out of compassion?

Which leads us to our third understanding of the divine name, which is the common tree of life...being itself...as a verb...that life that we share...the breath that we share...is that third meaning of the word. Have you ever hurt so bad that instead of communicating with the other person, you hurt them so they would know how you felt? Has anyone not done that? You hurt so bad and your trust level is so low, that instead of saying *You hurt me, I love you but you hurt me*, you hurt them so they will know how you feel. That's terrorism in a nutshell! It doesn't have to happen with an airplane...it happens everyday in families, in schools, in your own head, where you hurt and you want everyone to know it. You have the option of sharing that with love and to teach or to inflict more suffering on the world.

Again, we can plunge into life or into death. But, one of the ways people plunge into life in this culture is into virtual reality. There are whole worlds now on the web with whole currencies, whole identities, and there's nothing wrong with that, but there are people who choose that over their real lives. And, what's even worse is theology that's a virtual symbol system, where you believe in invisible people, invisible places, and you'll be happy there. You'll have friends there. The symbols call you to the very core and ground of your experience; right here, right now, with the people that populate your world, your life.

You can't talk about this stuff. A couple of days ago in a restaurant, a mother and baby were "talking," but they were just giggling...the baby would giggle...the mother would giggle back. And you realize that you're listening to primordial speech (laughter). They were speaking in tongues (laughter). That's what we're being called to here. Not to a burden...not to righteousness...but to an exquisite opening to happiness not just for ourselves but to all beings. But you can't talk about it...so we need symbols.

When this prayer says *Hallowed be thy name*, it is really saying that we realize that there are things that are so deep that we can't talk about them. *Hallowed be thy name* means that we honor them anyway. It also means that there are parts of us that are so deep that we live our lives out of them, but we can't express them. We can only share them by living them out. *Hallowed by thy name* means that even though we cannot say them we honor them. And, finally, that there is a connection we have with others that is so intimate that we can't say it. It's always under our tongue. *Hallowed be thy name* means even though we can't say that, we still honor it.

I want to close with this quote by Robert McAfee Brown, a theologian who died not long ago. This is what he thinks Moses heard:

I will be anything you need. If you are thirsty, I am water. If you are starving, I am food. If you are all alone, I am friend. If you are an orphan, I am your parent. If you are weak, I am strong. If you are afraid of death, I am eternal life. No matter what you need, I am all things for you. I am. I am. I am. I am with you. I am in you. I am for you. I am everything you need. I am. I am. I am. For that is the secret name of God.

Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.

The Disciples' Prayer Series

Part I: February 7, 2010, Matthew 6:7-13 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part II: February 14, 2010, John 14:1-4; 8-19 (*The New Oxford Bible*);

World Scripture: Chandogya Upanishad

Part III: Hallowed Be Thy Name. February 21, 2010, John 8:30-59; Exodus 3:13-17 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part IV: Thy Kingdom Come. February 28, 2010, Matthew 6:25-31 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part V: Our Daily Bread. March 7, 2010, Exodus 16:13-21 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Part VI: Forgive Us Our Debts. March 14, 2010, Matthew 18:21-35 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

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By calling ourselves progressive, we mean that we are Christians who...

- Have found an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus,
- Recognize the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God's realm, and acknowledge that their ways are true for them, as our ways are true for us,
- Understand the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus' name to be a representation of an ancient vision of God's feast for all peoples,
- Invite all people to participate in our community and worship life without insisting that they become like us in order to be acceptable, including, but not limited to:
 - believers and agnostics,
 - conventional Christians and questioning skeptics
 - women and men,
 - those of all sexual orientations and gender identities,
 - those of all races and cultures,
 - those of all classes and abilities,
 - those who hope for a better world and those who have lost hope;
- Know that the way we behave toward one another and toward other people is the fullest expression of what we believe,
- Find more grace in the search for understanding than we do in dogmatic certainty – more value in questioning than in absolutes,
- Form ourselves into communities dedicated to equipping one another for the work we feel called to do:
 - striving for peace and justice among all people,
 - protecting and restoring the integrity of all God's creation, and
 - bringing hope to those Jesus called the least of his sisters and brothers,
- Recognize that being followers of Jesus is costly, and entails love, conscientious resistance to evil, and renunciation of privilege.

(Developed by the Center for Progressive Christianity)



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