

Pastor Kris Litman-Koon
Date: 29 May 2022
Lesson: John 17:20-26

[Jesus prayed,] ²⁰"I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, ²¹that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²²The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, ²³I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

²⁴Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world. ²⁵"Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you; and these know that you have sent me. ²⁶I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them."

I want to start my sermon today by offering some Biblical advice. That is, I'm going to point us to a key part of scripture, walk us through its meaning, and then share how it applies to our lives. That passage of scripture comes from the 20th chapter of Exodus, verse 7. It says, "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." I imagine we've all heard that one before. It's part of the Ten Commandments. It's right up there near the top of the list, which points to just how important this commandment is to God. "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." The way this commandment is often taught – at least how it is often taught in American Christianity – is that you shouldn't use references

to God when cussing. Quite often, that is the end of the instruction about this commandment: simply don't insert references to God in your cussing. If you don't do that, you're golden.

I know someone who has told me that a goal he has in life is to never break this commandment. He told me that up to that point in his life, which was his late 30s, he had never uttered God's name when cursing. As a child he had set the goal to never do that, and thus far he hasn't.

Although his efforts and this goal are commendable, it is likely he has broken this commandment. It is likely we all have, at one time or another. I come to that conclusion because the intent behind this commandment is not simply to keep "God" out of your mouth when cussing. What it means — "You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain" — is that we should not use God or God's name cheaply.

Clearly God is more powerful than us, and anytime we invoke God it should do so with a deep sense of reverence and responsibility. Which is a key point: whenever we invoke God, we bear responsibility for doing so in an appropriate way. So this commandment is to not use our invocation of God in a way that cheapens God. It also means we are not to use God in a way that may benefit us personally while also lessening other peoples' views of God. That leads to today's more pertinent example, and we hear this all the time. It is when people pray to and ask God to do something, but then those same people turn around undermine what it is that God desires to accomplish. That cheapens God's name, and it should sicken you and me, and — since this gets to the heart of the commandment — I'm pretty sure God does not look too kindly on it, either.

So, when someone says their "thoughts and prayers" are with the victims of gun violence and their families, yet that person does nothing or — worse yet — stands in the way of preventing further mass shootings, that person is taking the Lord's name in vain. They are cheapening God's name. They are invoking God's name for their personal gain — to sound so

caring at a time of tragedy – while at the same time, by not doing anything, they make many other people have a lesser view of God because their lack of follow-through is clear.

So here is the Biblical advice I have to share: if you think nothing in our society needs to change in regard to these mass shootings, if you think no more laws or gun safety measures need to be implemented, then you have the right to think that way. However, do not dare invoke God's name when doing so. Don't offer your prayers to the victims if you are going to undermine God's will of curbing this tragic trend in our society. On the other hand, if you are going to pray for the victims and their families, if you are going to invoke God's name in any way that is related to this gun violence, then you are on the hook. Assuming you don't want to take the Lord's name in vain, then your prayers have committed you to doing something – anything – within your power to help bring this tragic trend to an end. When it comes to these increasingly dire circumstances – and they are increasing in frequency – there are only two ways to not take the Lord's name in vain: assuming you don't want to break this particular commandment, you can either not invoke God at all in your response to mass shootings, or you can invoke God's name but you must follow it by doing something to curb this trend. That choice is yours to make.

Today is perhaps one of the strangest Sundays of the church's annual calendar. The Bible says that Jesus ascended to heaven 40 days after his resurrection. That lands on a Thursday every year. The Bible also says that the Holy Spirit was given to the church 50 days after the resurrection. So there is a window of 10 days between Ascension Thursday and Pentecost Sunday. Today is the Sunday that falls in those 10 days.

For the first followers of Jesus, I expect those 10 days were best described by the phrase, "So... now what?" ["So Now What Sunday."] I imagine that time was filled with trying to figure out what God would do next. They have seen the power of God revealed in the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, so... now what? What is going to happen that reveals God's intentions? Would a massive earthquake unfold? Would the sky be torn apart?

Would the ocean boil, or calamities unfold? What event is worthy enough to follow what God has already done through Jesus? Would one of those potentialities be the cosmic sign that reveals what God intends for this world? No. We didn't receive an earth-ending event. What happened instead is that the Holy Spirit was given to people. Most of the world didn't even notice it.

That changes everything. It reveals that God's intent for this world is that it will find its healing, its love, its justice, and its grace not through one grand cosmic event, but instead the world will find those things when God works through and animates the everyday lives of people like you and me. We can be the vessels through whom God makes this world more whole. So it is most fitting that today – this “So Now What Sunday” – can be a time for us to ponder the ways we might be able to bring healing, wholeness, love, and grace to this world. Seek to live in the way of Jesus.

May we long for opportunities to serve others, to care for them, and to be people who bear God's healing and love for this world.

Amen.