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The slow-growth oak

Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28; Romans 1:16-17; 3:22b-31; Matthew 7:21-29

After Moses got the Ten Commandments and brought the stone tablets down the mountain to the Israelites, he took a census of the people who were now free from slavery in Egypt and wandering in the wilderness. The Book of Numbers in the Bible begins with that census and that's the Torah portion that was heard in synagogues this weekend. As part of the census process, Moses assigns a leader for each of twelve companies or tribes that made up the Israelites. And if you look at this list of leaders on the first page of the Book of Numbers, you'll find an interesting thing: they almost all have God's name in them.

Shelumiel, Nethanel, Gamaliel, Pagiel, and Eliab, Elishama, Elizur. El, el, el, God's name. But it's been pointed out that the one of the twelve who didn't have God's name in his – Nahshon – is the one whose lineage ultimately led to the Davidic dynasty, and from whose progeny Jesus of Nazareth came.

Having, or using, God's name is not what makes the difference. Just because we're a church, and we act in God's name, isn't what ultimately changes anything. Plenty of things have been done in God's name by many different peoples throughout time, and some of those things haven't been pretty. Plenty of *good* things have been done in God's name also. And every day we invoke God's name in benign and harmless ways. When someone sneezes we say, "God bless you." When my family says grace at dinner, we say, "All this we pray in Jesus' name."

When we come across some questionable activity, we might say, "What, in God's name, are you doing?" We invoke God all the time, in big and small ways. It's not hard, God trips off the tongue pretty easily. In texting language we have the letters OMG which stand for Omigod, almost a word in itself. One of my friends often says, endearingly, "O Good Lord" as an exclamation.

Even more, we tend to invoke the Lord when we express our opinions, when we interpret current events, when we exercise power. If we put God behind these things when we speak, then they have more oomph. There's a real push in many countries, and even now in America, for political leaders to invoke God in their decisions, in their positions on issues, and in their executive and legislative actions.

Jesus said, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who DOES the will of my Father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not interpret current events in your name, and get rid of bad people in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me.'"

You see, it's more about doing God's will than invoking God's name. It's more about the long slow hard work of laying down foundations that will last. No one wants to hear this, because we're always looking for an easier way. Starting

healthy habits is always the hardest. Doing the long slow work of digging a deep, deep foundation into pure, hard rock to build a lasting house is much, much harder than putting support poles down into soft sand for a beach cabana.

Who wouldn't rather hang out at the beach in a cabana than sweat through the labor of post-hole digging in firm ground?

I worked with a tree expert a couple of years ago to choose a tree to plant in a certain location. I wanted an oak. Oaks are the strongest trees I could think of, the most majestic, long-lasting, hardwooded, and tough. I was surprised by how small the sapling was when the arborist brought it to me. Other kinds of trees I'd planted came from the nursery already taller than me. This puny oak wasn't even up to my shoulder. The arborist must have seen the expression on my face because he explained that this tiny tree was already five years old. You have to replant oaks small, he said, so they can get established in the ground right.

Of course. The tallest, hardest, toughest trees grow the mostly slowly of all.

They put roots down slowly and carefully over the long haul. They build up their woody matter in a patient and painstaking way. The oak lays down foundations that will last. The same could be said for good retirement savings investments.

The same could be said for teaching children good manners. Start early, keep at it, be disciplined, go a little at a time over a long haul. And if you haven't started yet, start now.

And Jesus is talking here about ultimate things, the things of the spirit, and how to build and to be part of the kingdom of heaven. Go to church Sunday by Sunday, listen to the teachings little by little, practice your baptismal vows more and more, learn bit by bit how to be more generous and more hospitable, develop day by day more skills in love and peace, keeping working at it steady as she goes. Take the way of sobriety. The way of the oak tree.

I was talking to a parishioner this week who was laughing about our current response here in America when someone says, "How are you?" We don't say "fine" anymore. When someone says, "How are you?" these days, we say

“Busy.” How are you? Busy! I don’t doubt it. And there’s nothing particularly wrong with being busy. But are we busy doing the right things? Are the things we are doing laying down foundations for the kingdom of heaven? What we want is to work smart to lay foundations in the rock that keep us steady in the end when the storms come. We don’t want to be busy, busy, busy slapping up dwellings hither and thither, watching them collapse, and keep on slapping up new ones in a busy, busy cycle that never ends, that chases after love, but never really builds it.

When we invoke God’s name as individuals or as a church without ever really doing the slow difficult work of doing God’s will then we are like the boor at a party who complains about politics without ever having done the hard work of running for office, or like the jerk at the water cooler who spouts off about the boss without ever having tried to run something or manage people herself. My brother used to get really irritated when my dad would critique his soccer game. “Dad,” he’d say, “I’d like to see you get out there.” Religious people are the

worst when we spout off this or that in God's name without ever really buckling down to practice what we promise.

It really gets down to the practices. When I get together with other rectors in the Diocese of Chicago who are mentoring seminarians or new priests, the questions we ask always push us to our practices. To be a good mentor, we start out saying, you have to be firm and supportive, you have to be truthful and loving.

But then we push: what are the practices behind that? What do you DO? What are the habits of a good mentor? What is the work of it?

This is the difference between invoking and doing. This is the difference between the sand and the rock. What are the practices that make you a follower of Jesus? What are the things, day by day, that are laying the foundations of the kingdom? What is it in all your busy-ness that is dig by dig, day by day, bit by bit,

practices that builds a better world, that open up more love, that free up more  
grace and peace?

Such things, my friends, are the works to which we are called.