



January 26, 2014

Third Sunday after Epiphany

Matthew 4:12-23

Religion, or Gospel?

—The Very Rev. Dr. Neal Michell

Introduction: My Name is Neal Otis Michell

My name is Neal Otis Michell.

My first name, Neal, was from my maternal grandmother's maiden name. I was always called Neal at home, at school, at church, and at my mother's family's events.

But not by my father's family, or my father. By my father, and by my father's family I was called "Otie." I don't know how to spell it, because I never saw my name "Otie" in print. I was given my middle name, Otis, for a friend of my father's family, Uncle Otis. I know three things about Uncle Otis:

One, he was not really an uncle. He was just a close family friend of my father's.

Two, he worked in a prison.

Three, he dropped me when I was a baby and was mortified. Of course, my brothers will tell you that that explains everything.

Anyway, when I was a child, I could always tell which family I was with by what I was called: Neal on my mother's side, and Otie on my father's side.

To this day, although I don't think I want to be called "Dean Otie," I do view that name as a term of affection.

I tell you all this to say that the scriptures place a big emphasis on names. In the Bible, to name something is to exercise dominion over something.

Jesus Encounters the First Disciples

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus is just beginning his ministry. Leading up to our passage, Jesus has been baptized by John the Baptist, tempted by the Devil, and now he begins his public ministry.

First thing out of the chute, Jesus encounters some disciples and invites them to follow him.

Our Gospel reading tells us: "As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, 'follow me, and I will make you fish for

people.' Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him."

So Jesus comes on the scene, learns that his cousin John has been arrested by Herod for speaking truth to power, and now he begins his battle against religion. Matthew tells us that from that day forward Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

What is this Kingdom that Jesus is announcing?

Jesus' ministry is a battle between religion and the Gospel. He announces that the Kingdom of God is at hand. He is ushering in a new era where grace and not law reigns. Jesus will soon begin battling the Pharisees and Sadducees and high priests who want to impose religion on the people.

Religion vs. the Gospel

It is the Good News, the Gospel of the Kingdom. Tim Keller contrasts the Gospel that Jesus is announcing with the religion of the Pharisees. Religion, he says, is working on the principle "*I obey therefore I am accepted.*" We view God as our boss rather than God.

Consider this: when you have a boss, you are judged by your performance: What have you done for the company lately? Have you sold so many widgets? Billed so many client hours? Filled so many orders?

And so, when we view God as our boss, when we perform well, we are prideful: I'm more obedient than the person next to me. Or we are bitter: the person next to me isn't pulling her own weight around here.

In religion, we obey God out of fear. In religion, we think that when we die, if our good outweighs the bad we will go to heaven.

Do you really believe that? That when you die, if the good things you do outweigh the

Do you really believe that when you die, if the good things you do outweigh the bad things you have done, God will let you enter heaven?

bad things you have done, God will let you enter heaven?

But the Gospel of the Kingdom works on the principle "*I am accepted in Jesus therefore I obey.*" When this is the starting position of our faith, obedience becomes a joy rather than a straight-jacket. We become inviting rather than demanding.

Religion: *I obey, therefore I am accepted.*

Gospel: *I am accepted in Jesus, therefore I obey.*

Religion: *God is my boss. I must perform.*

Gospel: *God is my loving heavenly Father.*

Religion: *If bad things happen to me, God must be angry.*

Gospel: *If bad things happen to me, God will sustain me.*

In Jesus' Gospel, we are all sinners and none of us ever has a right to enter heaven. I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me yet he valued me so much that he died for me. In the Gospel we are motivated by love rather than fear.

In religion, I believe that when bad things happen to me, I am either angry at God or myself. Like Job's friends, I believe that anyone who lives a basically good and moral life deserves a comfortable life.

But in the Gospel When circumstances in my life go wrong, I may struggle but I know all my sin fell on Jesus and that while he may allow this for my training, he will exercise his Fatherly love within my trial.

We see religion had already crept in to the Church in our Epistle reading. Religion, with its rules, divides. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, written about twenty years after the resurrection of Jesus, tells us that there were already divisions in the early Church. Some were aligned with Paul's followers, some with Apollo's, some with Peter's, and to trump everyone, some said they were followers of Christ. Religion. Religion will do that every time. Jesus came to destroy religion by his grace and unconditional love.

What I'm saying to you, and this is the Good News from this morning, is that only the Bible gives us the clearest and best understanding of

- (1) Where we came from.
- (2) What's wrong with us.
- (3) How we can be fixed.

Examine yourself. Have you lived with religion or the Gospel? Would you say that you are free, or feel bound?

What is your Image of God?

What is your image of God? Although my father died when I was six, he formed a lasting impression on me. I knew his unconditional love for me. He used to sing the old Al Jolson song to me, "Climb upon my knee, sonny boy."

Climb up on my knee sonny boy
Though you're only three sonny boy
You've no way of knowing,
there's no way of showing
What you mean to me sonny boy.

It may sound over fifty years later it may seem a little corny, but it gave me. That's why the name "Otie" fills me with warm feelings: it reminds me of my father who loved me unconditionally.

But, with a father who died at six, I grew up without a strong father image during my most formative years. I found that in my loving heavenly father. When I came to faith in Jesus Christ, I found that Father figure that I had always longed for. That has allowed me to be a loving father to my children, even though I had no personal role model myself.

Conclusion: The Whisper of God

God speaks to us in a whisper. And many of us are actually afraid of getting still enough to hear that whisper, because many of us are afraid that if we get still enough we will hear the disapproving voice of our boss, or the stern voice of our father or mother asking demanding that we do a better job of our life.

Yet, if we get quiet enough, we ought to hear that still, small voice of God saying, "I love you. I love you. I love you. You are beloved."

It is that unconditional love that drew Peter and Andrew and James and John. . . and Neal Otis Michell.

If you've never experienced the unconditional love that Jesus has to offer I encourage you to do so today.