

REHABILITATING GOD'S NAME

Scriptures: Ezekiel 36:16-21, 22-28

Recently a man named Duane Jones filed a lawsuit in Texas to gain possession of a one inch piece of human hair. You would not think a one inch piece of human hair would be worth a lawsuit, but this one is. It is a piece of human hair from the crime scene of a murder that linked Duane's father, Claude Jones, to the killing of a store clerk in 1989. Duane is suing to get possession of the hair so that a DNA analysis can determine if it really belongs to his father, thus linking his father to the murder. But there is a complication. Under Texas law, only a defendant can ask for a DNA test on a piece of evidence, and Claude Jones can't do that. Claude was executed for the murder in 2000. But Duane, his son, claims a right to the hair as the executor of Claude's estate (*Time*, May 31, 2010, pp. 27 ff).

Now here is the interesting question. Why does Duane want the hair at all? His father is already dead. Even if the DNA test proves that someone else committed the murder, it won't change anything for his father. Ah, but it will, Duane insists. It will clear his father's name. It will vindicate his father and prove that the prosecutors were wrong. Which, of course, is why the prosecutors don't want to release the hair.

So what does this have to do with the Lord's Prayer? Every time we say the Lord's Prayer we pray to God: "Hallowed be thy name." This is an interesting prayer because it is not a statement, it is a plea. We when pray the Lord's Prayer we are not saying that God's name *is* holy, we are asking God to *make* it holy.

But isn't God's name already holy? Surely the holiness of God's name does not depend on our prayers. But maybe it does. Because God's name, God's reputation in the world, has been sullied by some of the things done in God's name. So God's name, like Claude Jones', needs to be cleared. God's reputation needs to be rehabilitated.

In one of her books Marj Carpenter, a former moderator of the Presbyterian Church, tells of visiting an integrated school in Northern Ireland sponsored by American Presbyterians. In Northern Ireland integration is not about blacks and whites or whites and Hispanics; it's about Protestants and Catholics. An American pastor asked a boy at the school, "Are you Catholic?" "No," the boy replied. "Then you're Protestant," the pastor said. "No," said the boy, "I'm atheist." "Do you know what an atheist is?" the pastor asked. The boy replied, "If you're an atheist, you don't get killed by either side" (*To the Ends of the Earth*, p. 58).

Do you see the problem? God's reputation in the world suffers from some of the things that have been done in God's name. I remember once talking to a friend who studied history. He described for me the crusades in the Middle Ages when Christians marched into the Holy Land and massacred thousands of Islamic men, women, and children. Then he mentioned the Spanish inquisition during which thousands of people were arrested and some burned at the stake in the name of Christ. Then he brought up the Salem witch trials and the persecution of Jews by German Christians during World War II and the lynchings of blacks by cross-burning Klansmen

in the south. When he finished he said, "Considering all the things that have been done in the name of your God, I would have nothing to do with him."

That, friends, is the problem. God's name needs to be cleared. God's reputation needs to be vindicated.

Which brings me to our scriptures for this week. In Ezekiel 36:16 God says to Ezekiel, "Mortal, when the house of Israel lived on their own soil, they defiled it with their ways and their deeds." When Israel lived in the promised land under their kings, they brought dishonor to God's name by worshiping other gods, exploiting the poor, and committing violence against their own people. So God sent them into exile in Babylon to vindicate God's holiness, to uphold God's reputation.

But the exile itself damaged God's reputation. Verse 20: "But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that it was said of them, "These are the people of the Lord, and yet they had to go out of his land." God sent Israel into exile for desecrating God's name, but then God's name was mocked by the other nations for not being able to defend God's own people.

So in verse 22 God says, "Thus says the Lord God: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came." Then in verse 24 God says, "I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land." In other words, God will vindicate God's name by saving God's people. God will deliver the Israelites from exile in order to rehabilitate God's reputation.

When we pray "Hallowed be thy name," we are asking God to do that again. We are asking God to save us, to restore righteousness and peace to this world, to make this world a place where a little boy in Northern Ireland does not have to be an atheist in order to feel safe. When we pray, "Hallowed be thy name," we are praying for the vindication of God's reputation.

But notice what this involves. Let me read the next three verses, verses 25-27:

I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

When we pray, "Hallowed be thy name," we are not only praying for God to change the conditions of the world that cause people to question God, we are also asking God to change us. We are asking God to give *us* a new heart, to give *us* a new spirit, to make us into the kind of people who draw others to God instead of driving them away.

Which is exactly what God is doing right now in Northern Ireland. In the fall of 2008 through the summer of 2009 Megan Buff, Pastor Brad's daughter, was a Young Adult Volunteer

with the Presbyterian Church (USA) serving in Northern Ireland. She worked at the Kilmakee Presbyterian Church just outside of Belfast with a cross-community youth program called Fusion. I suspect the name Fusion came from the goal of bringing together Protestant and Catholic youth into a combined youth program. Fortunately, in this case Fusion did not produce a nuclear explosion but a new spirit and a new heart in the youth who attended. In one of their early events youth from the Presbyterian church met with youth from a Catholic church in another section of town. For some of the Presbyterian youth, it was the first time in their lives they had met a Catholic. They not only discovered that each other was human, but that each other was Christian. Later on Good Friday, Megan joined with Protestants and Catholics in a peace march that wove its way along both sides of the wall separating Protestants and Catholics in Belfast.

That is rehabilitating God's name. That is what we pray for when we say, "Hallowed be thy name."

A similar thing is happening right now in Pakistan. In 1864 a Presbyterian missionary named Charles Forman started a school in Pakistan that came to be known as Forman Christian College. It became one of the premier colleges in south Asia. One of its faculty members in the 1920s won the Nobel Prize for physics. Its recent graduates include two presidents of Pakistan, a prime minister, and a chief justice of their Supreme Court. In 1972 the Pakistani government nationalized the school and took it over, but in 2003 the government officially handed the school back to the Presbyterian Church (USA), figuring that Presbyterians could do a better job administering the school than the government. Today the school is still a Presbyterian college operating in Pakistan. The faculty as well as the student body includes both Christians and Muslims working together to improve the lives of people in Pakistan.

That, friends, is rehabilitating God's name. It was what we pray for every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. When we pray that prayer we are asking God to transform the world for the sake of God's reputation.

But it is also an invitation for God to transform you. It means asking God to give you the new heart and the new spirit, like the one described by Ezekiel. When we pray, "Hallowed be thy name," we are asking that God's name will be honored first by us and then by other people because of us.

- Ken Onstot
July 18, 2010