

Claiming Our Place

a sermon based on

Romans 6:1*b*-11 & Matthew 10:24-39

and delivered on-

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Fathers Day

for

Cherry Valley United Methodist Church

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"Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."¹ Okay. My name is not Inigo Montoya, my name is Mark Harkness; but you knew that. For those who don't know, Inigo Montoya is a character in the movie *"The Princess Bride."* Although the title sounds like some sort of sappy girls movie it's more than that. For this character, Inigo Montoya, this repeated line, "My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die," serves as an expression of who the man was/is. In the movie, Inigo – who's not even the main character, by the way (this is a subplot) – is seeking to avenge the death of his father by a six fingered man, who'd killed his father. When he first speaks about this, he describes his love for his father and lauds the man's character and his skill in sword making, along with his own powerlessness (as an eleven-year-old boy to save him). So, his life quest is to honor his father by taking revenge on the man who killed him. That's not exactly the best image for Christian living; but even in human frailty and failure that divine purpose that God put in each one of us - stirs and pokes through. For Inigo Montoya, that was to honor his father, even though there may have been a better way; but this is the way the world says to avenge death – even the score.

In the entire movie, the only character with a first and last name, is Inigo Montoya. Just Inigo is not enough: we need to know his relationship to his father. His last name provides that and serves as a persistent reminder.

Last names – or surnames – at least in our culture and many others – are inherited from one's father. Right? Rather than getting distracted by a discussion or thoughts about patriarchy, can we just think about it as the convention we have? In Western culture, the convention is that the family name comes after the personal name. In other cultures, like in the Far East, the family name precedes the personal name. Neither is right, they're just the convention adopted (most of the time) hundreds if not thousands of years ago.

It's not enough to know a man without knowing to whom he belongs. In the south, one might get asked, "Who are your people?" when a surname doesn't get it.

Even in the inconsequential, somehow, that surname keeps popping up. For athletes, the name emblazoned across their jerseys aren't Michael, Dick, Ernie, Otis, or Sammy; they are: Jordan, Butkus, Banks, Wilson and Sosa. Right?

How often have you filled out a form last name first? We come to accept that that's the proper order. One of my frustrations when I switched to an Android phone from a Palm Pilot was that all my contacts showed up in alphabetical order by first name instead of last. It shouldn't have been that big of a deal, but it felt like that. In some way it separated my family. I don't want that.

Which might be why it's hard to hear Jesus today when he says, "For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household." (Mt 10:35-36)

I don't want to be set against my father and mother, my daughter, my sister or brother. It seems to contradict the commandment to "honor your mother and father" (as St. Paul says) the first commandment with a promise. (Eph 6:2) Doesn't it?

My name is Mark Harkness. That name Harkness was imparted on me to identify me as the son of my father, as it was on him through his father, and so on. Because of that name, whatever I do reflects on him. It does.

I remember that my parents seemed a little surprised when my report card in grade school had such high marks for "citizenship" (i.e. good behavior). It might surprise some people, but I could be a bit ornery. Not in school, though. Generally, not when my parents weren't around.

There was a sense that if you got into trouble at school that the punishment at home was going to be worse than what a teacher would dole out. More than that, however, was this sense that I would embarrass my parents, and that (although I wouldn't have articulated it that way) that I

¹ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0093779/characters/nm0001597> (Accessed June 21, 2020)

would bring dishonor to the name Harkness which would diminish not only my parents and grandparents, but my siblings, and eventually any descendants.

Maybe that's why the worst punishment I ever received wasn't a from the belt or a grounding or even shouting, but on those couple of occasions where my exasperated dad, just looked at me and said, "Mark, I'm disappointed in you." I can't remember what I'd done, but I do remember thinking, "Just take off your belt and whup me. That'll go away soon enough." I don't remember what I'd done, but I suspected it was something that was more than normal childhood naughtiness, and that there was probably some sense, that it reflected on his and my mother's parenting – and therefore their character.

I have to remember that when I'm driving. My license plates say, "HOLY GUY." Even in a bigger metropolitan area where people may not automatically recognize my vehicle, it serves as a pretty good hint (along with the cross hanging from the mirror) that I'm a minister – that I'm a Christian. So when I'm tempted to give the one-finger salute to some bonehead that should either have his license revoked or at least stay off the road when I'm there, I catch myself.

Obviously, it shouldn't matter whether I'm easily identified as a pastor or not – or as a Christian or not; but let's face it sin and temptation don't just magically leave us when we become Christians. It doesn't excuse us. As Paul said in that passage from Romans which Andrew read a few moments ago, first asking, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" and then answering, "By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it?" (Ro. 6:1b-2)

Maybe we can look at it this way, we can't avoid encountering sin (we really can't) but we can choose not to live in sin. We can choose to live in such a way that what might seem normal or even somehow noble in the world like in the case of Inigo Montoya's quest for revenge; or the bumper sticker which says that calls us to hoard up all that we can regardless of how we get it or whom it deprives because, "He who dies with the most stuff wins."

We're reminded that Paul continued in that passage saying, "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? [He didn't stop there] Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life." (Ro. 6:3-4)

This is where it can get difficult. This is that conversation about being born again that so befuddled Nicodemus. (Jn 3:2-12) When Jesus tells us that we will be divided even in our families, it means that Inigo has to consider a better way of honoring his father in his quest for justice rather than poisoning his love for his father with a purpose of hatred, even though everyone else in his family was on board.

When we strive to honor God in all that we do, sometimes it causes division even among those whom we love or admire.

Merle Franke tells a story about Cory. It was Thanksgiving and Cory had come back to his small town from college. He'd been a star football player in high school and had been recruited by a prominent state university to play football there. Even though he was only on the third string at college – he'd been rushed and accepted as a pledge by the most popular fraternity on campus. He had it goin' on. Life was good.

So, when he seemed uneasy being home, his mother asked him what was bothering him. "Nothing," he said, "really, it's nothing." Now we all know that that's a big clue that it's something.

His mother suggested that he talk to his pastor while he was home, commenting that he'd always had a good relationship with him. Cory took her advice and arranged to meet the pastor.

After a few minutes of the usual banter, his pastor asked, "What's up, Cory? When you called it sounded like you had something serious on your mind."

Cory followed up, "I guess it's kinda serious." He went on to explain that he was in this great fraternity, that he'd never thought he'd be in.

The pastor said that he'd heard that from Cory's father who was so proud of Cory.

"That's part of the problem," Cory continued. He went on to explain that in the fraternity, some of the brothers had gotten access to a professor's test and were selling the answers to questions to others who weren't doing so well.

When the pastor asked if he was certain, Cory confirmed that he was. He went on, "I know what they're doing is wrong, and I don't feel right about covering up for them."

The pastor changed the subject, "Didn't I hear that you joined the Fellowship of Christian Athletes?"

"Yes, and so have some of my frat brother." Then he paused. "I've thought about blowing the whistle on them but then I might as well quit the frat. I'd be ostracized."

Silence fell upon their conversation for a moment, then the pastor said, "I suppose it's a toss-up between having that happen to you and having to live with yourself for a long time for almost being a party to the theft."

"I guess it's like you noted 100 times: what's the worst that can happen to you?"

As Cory left, his pastor put his hand on his shoulder and said, "To put it in a biblical context, it might also be a matter of whether we are admirers of Jesus or followers."²

We have a choice. Will we be admirer? or will we be followers? Will we wear a t-shirt or jersey emblazoned with our hero's name? Or will we take his name and claim our place in God's household?

No one expects me to hit a home run because I'm wearing a Kyle Schwarber jersey. Look at me, certainly no one expects me to slam dunk just because I might wear a number 23 jersey with "Jordan" printed on the back – even if I'm wearing the "right" shoes. Right?

I have no relation to those men. My ability or character has no reflection on them. What I do doesn't matter.

But as a Christian – as one who has claimed the promise of life that Jesus died on the cross to offer – as one who isn't just a fan of Jesus' teachings but who has confessed with his mouth (and promoted with the symbols of faith) that Jesus Christ is Lord, people do notice. Even the vilest has some expectation that we will live up to a better standard than the world. Sometimes that will bring conflict, even in our families and among those whom we love and within groups to which we belong. The question is how do we honor both or all? Maybe we can't. But maybe when realize that even in that conflict in the context of the sword of division God will do something wonderful through us for others it can give us hope.

It's been over fifteen years since I've smoked a cigarette. The last time I quit was February 9, 2005. I hope that "last" means "final," because I quit several times before. I lost count. One thing I notice, though, whenever I'd quit but started up again, it wasn't the non-smokers who were angry or disappointed, it was other smokers. They – the smokers – wanted me to be a successful non-smoker. The non-smokers not so much, they were usually happy that I wasn't as irritable. The smokers on the other hand wanted me to succeed, because if I did it, then it might be possible for them too. Do you see where I'm going here?

² Merle G. Franke, *Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: For Cycle A* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Pub. Co, 1995), 75-76.

When we claim our place as God's children – when God really is our Father – it might cause some strife among those in our group. Even though it might cause some rifts, I believe that even those who get angry and lash out do so only because they doubt God's love for themselves (even if they'd never say it that way – or claim that they don't need to believe) and our faithfulness seems to make them look bad. We have to be careful of that: we should never live out our faith with arrogance of some how being better. Rather we are more fortunate, but it's a fortune we can share.

In Cory's story, I wonder how many of those frat brothers in the Fellowship of Christian Life were looking for one of their own to do the right thing so that they could, as well. Sometimes those who seem against us are really rooting for us to be successful in righteousness because it gives them hope.

My name is not Inigo Montoya. You didn't kill my father, so you don't need to prepare to die. My name is Mark Harkness, my father is (depending on the decade) either Gary or Chuck Harkness. There were time's my behavior disappointed him, but he always loved me, and there were way more times when he told me that he was proud. He wasn't perfect. I struggle to overcome some of his imperfections like squashing the profanity that comes with car repairs of fixing a pipe.

I honor him best – I honor my mother best – I honor all my associations best – when I claim my place as man who has been offered life through Jesus Christ – and when how I live honors God. AMEN.