***IN JESUS’ NAME***

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Texts: 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, 11-12 and Mark 9:38-41

What, if anything, do you do in the name of Jesus? I am not asking about the question that may escape your lips in exasperation: *What in the name of Jesus were you thinking?* I am asking about those things you do in Jesus’ name, with his authority, to his honor. In the passage from Paul’s letter to the Colossians that we read last week we heard Paul say:

*Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Col.3:17)*

What does that mean – do *everything* in Jesus’ name? Is there *anything*, *everything*, or *nothing* you do in the name of Jesus?

Some of you might answer – *I pray in Jesus’ name, and here is the proof: I end all my prayers with “…in Jesus’ name. Amen.”* When I was in seminary we had a vigorous debate in my Romans class about the necessity of adding the name of Jesus to any prayer. Some of my classmates argued that unless Jesus’ name was spoken at the end of the prayer, the prayer would be ineffective. In their view, God only responded to prayers that were offered in the expressed name of Jesus since Jesus said, “Anything you ask in my name will be given to you.” In their view, the words *in Jesus’ name* were keys to unlocking the compassionate heart of God. In response, I pointed out that the Lord’s Prayer which Jesus taught us to pray did not include the words “in Jesus’ name” or anything close to it, yet Jesus seemed to think that prayer should be a model for our prayers. Were they, I asked, suggesting that Jesus had taught us a defective prayer? (At which point one classmate was heard to say, “I really hate arguing with lawyers.”) Our New Testament prof, a renowned biblical scholar, suggested that while we were encouraged to pray in Jesus’ name, it was hardly a requirement for God to hear the prayer. God hears prayers in sighs too deep for words, so surely God can hear prayers from our hearts and lips that lack the spoken name of Jesus!

If the name of Jesus is not verbalized that does not mean he is wholly absent from our prayer, for it is Jesus who invites us to pray, urges us to pray, models for us prayer, and assures us that our prayers will be heard. Praying in the name of Jesus is less about the spoken name than the attitude of prayer that recognizes that the God to whom we pray is the Triune God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit – always ready to hear our prayers and to answer them, even if the answer is not what we want to hear. Do you pray in the name of Jesus – or do anything else in his name?

Some time ago someone was kind enough to give me a coaster with the heartfelt message: “Jesus loves you – but I’m his favorite.” I suppose at one level that may be true – we all are favorites of Jesus – but that does not mean that any one of us is a favorite over another in Jesus’ eyes. As the children’s song reminds us, we all “are precious in his sight, for Jesus loves the little children of the world.” I don’t think anyone taught that song to the disciples, but someone may have given them a set of those coasters, for on the way to Capernaum the disciples got into a debate about which of them would be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, a debate that echoes in the text from Mark’s gospel that we read today.

To recap: in reply to their argument about who is greatest Jesus turns their thinking upside down and declares that the greatest of all must be the servant of all. As we heard two weeks ago, Jesus put a child down in their midst and told them: “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.” In so doing, Gary Charles notes:

*Jesus is asking his disciples to extend their hands and hearts to those who often feel only the back of the hand and the hardness of the human heart. A “child” for Jesus is more akin to an outcast, a person we avoid intentionally, than to an infant whom church members coo over in the nursery.*[[1]](#endnote-1)

Jesus is asking the disciples to extend the circle of their community to embrace those who stand outside that circle, to welcome the outsider and the outcast as they would welcome Jesus himself. For, in welcoming them you welcome me, says Jesus.

How ironic then that on the heels of that teaching, John should be so quick to raise with Jesus the issue of someone outside their circle who is casting out demons in Jesus’ name. We have no idea who he was– a pagan magician perhaps, or a Jewish exorcist using Jesus’ name in his work, or a believer but not a disciple who sought to imitate Jesus. We just don’t know. We know only that he was not one of the twelve. “We tried to stop him,” says John, “because he was not following **us**.” John doesn’t say – *he was not following* ***you***, nor *he does not believe in* ***you***, but only *he was not following* ***us***. In so doing John makes being in the circle of believers the key to faithful action rather than faith in the power of Jesus who stands at the center of that circle. John takes issue with anyone who would dare to work a miracle outside of that inner circle of disciples around Jesus. What right had this outsider to heal in Jesus’ name?

It is perhaps noteworthy that earlier in this chapter Mark tells us the disciples had been unsuccessful in casting out a demon. They had tried and failed; that demon could be cast out only by prayer, said Jesus. Yet here was a man – perhaps successfully – casting out demons in Jesus’ name. Was it jealousy that motivated John’s complaint, jealousy that this man could cast out a demon when the twelve had failed to do so? Was it concern for Jesus and his reputation that motivated John’s complaint, or was it fear that this man might use Jesus’ power for unholy purposes? Or was John’s remark the innocent or not-so-innocent critique from one in the inner circle of one who stood outside that circle, the critique of Jesus’ followers of someone who was not *one of them*? “We tried to stop him because he was not following **us**,” said John.

How tempting it can be to judge those who stand outside our little circle of faith – those who practice faith differently or worship in a different style, those who speak in tongues or sit in silence or shout “Hallelujah!” to the rafters, those who sing praise songs instead of hymns or old hymns instead of praise songs! How tempting to dwell on the differences among us rather than affirming the unity we share in Christ! It is the temptation to be insular, self-righteous people instead of grace-filled communities. It is the temptation to judge, the temptation to exclude – *they’re not one of us*.

As Presbyterians we affirm that we are one expression of a much larger Church, a Church that embraces a variety of traditions and practices; a Church that is multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, and multi-theological; a Church that joins hands in mission and in worship of the triune God around the world; a Church that is the body of Christ. We are one expression of that larger Church that includes Methodists and Mennonites; Baptists and Brethren; Catholics and Quakers; Episcopalians and Eastern Orthodox; AME, UCC, PCA, PCUSA, EPC, ELCA and countless others whose names and letters we don’t even know but whose Lord and Savior is one and the same as our own. Rather than competing with our sister churches we share in ministry to build up the body of Christ and to proclaim the good news of the Gospel as we do at Trinity Soup Kitchen and through the work of SACRA, Habitat for Humanity and ASP mission trips. That is our heritage! That is who we are – Christians from a variety of traditions who come together to call this Presbyterian Church home. There are a multitude of ways and voices and traditions in which Christ’s good work can be done and Christ’s good news shared. Our calling is not to judge those who do that work differently; our call is simply to get out and do the work: healing the sick, caring for the poor, feeding the hungry, and welcoming the stranger in the name of Jesus.

Jesus found no threat in the man who was casting out demons in his name. “Don’t stop him,” he told the disciples. “No one who does a miracle in my name will be able to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.” Jesus recognizes that God’s hand may be at work beyond that small community of believers who surround him. He affirms that God’s power is at work in the world far beyond the disciples, beyond himself, beyond that church to which Mark wrote. Jesus embraces a circle of faith that is bigger, broader and more gracious than the disciples imagined, and he urges the disciples to embrace it too – a circle that encompasses not only those who follow Jesus each day, but also those who heal in his name and those who welcome his disciples with a cool cup of water. “By no means will they lose the reward,” says Jesus, for the circle of faith is bigger, broader, and far more gracious than we dare imagine!

Rita Snowden tells of soldiers in World War II who brought the body of a dead comrade to a French cemetery for burial. The priest told them gently that it was a Roman Catholic cemetery, and he was bound to ask if their friend had been a baptized member of the Roman Catholic Church. They did not know. The priest said that he was very sorry, but if that was the case, he could not permit burial in the churchyard. So the soldiers carried their comrade just outside the fence of the churchyard and buried him there. The next day the soldiers came back to visit the grave, but they could not find it. They knew that it was only six feet from the fence of the cemetery, but search as they might they could find no trace of the freshly dug soil. As they were about to leave in anxious bewilderment the priest approached. He told them that his heart had been troubled because of his refusal to allow their dead comrade to be buried in the churchyard; so, early in the morning he had risen from his bed, and with his own hands he had moved the fence to include the body of the soldier who had died for France.

We are called to move back the fences in the name of Jesus, to be as generous and just as God’s grace, to love all our neighbors not just those in our own community, to welcome all people in the name of the risen Christ, to share with them the good news of God’s never-ending love for them, and to join hands with them in ministry and mission. That is what we are to do – to love and serve together in the gracious name of Jesus, to live in the strong and loving name of Jesus, to do ***everything*** in the name of Jesus the Christ! For, in so doing, the name of Jesus is glorified – in us! AMEN

1. Gary W. Charles and Brian K. Blount, *Preaching Mark in Two Voices*, Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, 2002, p.182 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)