

CALL TO WORSHIP: *Let every word and action, everything you do, be in the name of the Lord Jesus, and give thanks through him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:17)*

January 31, 2016

John 16:16-27

IN THE NAME

Our Scripture passage this morning begins with a big conundrum. Jesus is talking to His followers about some things about to happen, trying to prepare them for what they will be facing when He is no longer physically present with them. Of course, that is the only life any of *us* have ever known. The physical presence of Jesus of Nazareth is gone, and our relationship with Jesus is carried on with His Holy Spirit – or not at all.

And so, for once, the conundrum seems much clearer to us than it did to them. They have not yet come to terms with the fact that Jesus will be killed – taken from them: that Jesus will no longer walk and talk with them. It is always interesting how confused we can be when we do not want to face one of the possible options or scenarios that is coming toward us.

The loss of Jesus would have been even bigger than the loss of other loved ones for those who had begun to build their whole lives around Him; for those who were now beginning to put all of their hopes and dreams on what He was telling them and showing them; for those who were finding themselves in a stunning New Reality because Jesus was revealing to them a God who loved them far more – and far more personally – than anything they had ever before contemplated.

In any case, many of us have not yet come to terms with the possibility that some of the people *we* love might not be around much longer. Oh, to be sure, we all know about death. We all know that all of us will die. Most of us – not all of us, but most of us, I hope and presume – are convinced that we will see and recognize our loved ones in a realm beyond this one, and that we will go on with our relationships, our development, our purposes, and our challenges in a different reality that seems very real to us, yet is nevertheless still quite fuzzy to us when it comes to any of the details.

But how much we have really come to face and believe such things is often brought to light when we personally encounter the death of a loved one. How can the greatest certainty in life still surprise us? How can we still feel so “unprepared” when it comes

our turn? “Well,” we say, “we didn’t expect it to be this soon.” And that’s the game we play. We know the truth, but we put it off to some distant future so we do not have to be bothered with believing it quite yet. I am not talking at you; I am talking to me. I have been recently reminded of all the times and ways in which I try to stay comfortable in the present moment by applying the principle of what a friend of mine calls “deferred repentance.”

So, according to John, Jesus is telling His followers about “a little while” and you will see me no more, and then “a little while” more and you *will* see me. Why is “a little while” confusing them? Why does it seem so vague and mysterious to them? It seems completely obvious to us. But they have not yet faced it; they have not yet come to terms with Jesus’ imminent death. We have known about it for as far back as we can remember, but for them it had not yet happened. “What is He saying? What is He talking about? I can’t understand a word He is saying.”

By the way, *our* “clear understanding” of what this passage means still divides a good deal of Christendom. That is, about eighty percent of Christendom still claims that “a little while” refers to the time between Jesus’ death and the Second Coming – a time when Jesus will return to earth on the clouds to close out the age. (Do you remember the opening scenes of Walt Disney’s version of *Mary Poppins*?)

A much smaller contingent of Christendom, and where most of us find ourselves, would claim that “a little while” refers to the time between whatever is “now” for us and the time when we ourselves will die and find ourselves transferred to the next realm. In other words, Jesus does not come back here except as Holy Spirit. Jesus does not come back here – we go there.

I only mention this because this passage supports either version equally well. That is, this passage itself will not convince anybody to change their perspective. That kind of situation often causes the most heated arguments. I well remember a scene between Mariana and Sally Wood. Sally and Jerry Wood lived in the next apartment over from us (Kendall Hall) at Andover Newton Theological School. We were good friends. But Sally and Jerry were born and raised in New England, and of course we had come from Southern California. Their accents were charming, but clearly wrong. “Pak ya ca at Havad Yad”? And Mariana sometimes got tired of being called “Mariane.” One day she and Sally stopped cutting slack for each other and got into it.

A New England accent was cute but wrong. Only, Sally insisted it was not merely a New England accent but the correct way to speak. So they went for Webster's Dictionary, the top authority for words and language in the Western World. The pronunciation guide told them to pronounce "a" as in "park." To Sally that meant "pak." To Mariana that meant "park." So the top authority was reassuring each one of them to go on saying it like they had always been saying it. My suspicion is that the Bible does that to us a lot more frequently than we realize. How else can we have so many disagreements, or allow them to last for so long?

But we have more important things to consider this morning.

I.) WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Hopefully we do not need to stay on this point for very long in order to be reminded that the New Testament was written in a different time. Most of us know that "names" were far more significant in the ancient world than they are in ours. In our time and culture, names are mostly used as an identification digit rather than as a hint or sign of destiny and purpose. We can barely imagine the level of discernment that ancient people were seeking when they "named" something. We can understand this, on an information level, but such a way of thinking and perceiving is a very different world from ours.

The name "Moses," for instance, means the delivered one who comes to deliver us (from slavery in Egypt). Perhaps the way Moses so narrowly escaped being killed by Pharaoh's soldiers helps for the first part. But could anyone have foreseen how his full life story would unfold?

Or turn to the early verses in the Gospel of Matthew. It is mythology, but that makes it even more clear how the ancient world thought. The angel comes to Joseph (Matthew 1:20-21) and instructs him what name to give to the baby about to be born. "You shall call him *Yahweh is salvation*." In Hebrew: *Joshua*. In Greek: *Jesus*. In Aramaic: *Jeshua*. The text wants to make it perfectly clear that THE NAME contains the full destiny of what is about to unfold. Sandwiched between the two verses which insist that THE NAME of the child is Jesus is the prophecy of Isaiah: a young woman will conceive, and the child will be called *Immanuel*. (Isaiah 7:14) This is not intended as a contradiction. Yahweh will save us, but in and through this child, and Yahweh will be with us – in ways far closer than ever before.

The New Testament illustrations of the significance of a name are nearly endless. Just to move through a few of them, to get us all on the same wavelength:

“For where two or three are gathered together IN MY NAME, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matthew 18:20)

Or on Palm Sunday: *“Blessed is he who comes IN THE NAME of the Lord.”* (Matthew 23:39)

From the Lord’s Prayer: *“Hallowed by THY NAME.”*
And obviously they are talking about something beyond what I am usually thinking or hearing.

Partly this sermon is preached for those who keep asking, “Why do we end our formal prayers with ‘in the name of Jesus Christ?’” Or “Why do we so often use the phrase ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit?’” Technically we should say “in the name of Jesus, the Christ.” Christ is not the last name for Jesus. Christ is a title: The anointed one. Jesus is God’s anointed. But please, I am not in any way implying that God will answer our prayers better if we get the formulas right. We have superstitious claims and sentiments that hang on and dog our religious beliefs no matter how conscientiously we try to clean our spiritual closets. Trying to trust Jesus more and more, we are always in the process of turning away from our fears and superstitions – and claiming the love and mercy and forgiveness of God with ever greater certainty.

But the superstitions hang on tighter than we realize, don’t they? [knock on wood] If we say something pleasant, something hopeful, we knock on wood to distract the demons so they will not ruin what we are hoping for. We all believe in a good and loving God, of course. But underneath is the quiet fear that if we draw attention to something wonderful, it might be stolen away from us. We have good theology on the outside, perhaps, but what is the *real* theology on the inside?

So do we claim it out loud and out in the open? If we say our prayers correctly, God will respond with as much influence as God can, without breaking our free will, and with as much guidance and power as our level of receptivity will allow. And if we say our prayers incorrectly, God will still respond with as much influence as God can, without breaking our free will, and with as much guidance and power as our level of receptivity will allow. Of course, we struggle for clarity and understanding, but for *our* benefit – not for God’s.

II.) TRUE NAMES CARRY GREAT POWER.

Most of us know THE NAME of Jesus. That is, we recognize having heard that NAME before, and we assume we know to whom it refers. But if that is the extent of it, we know almost nothing of THE NAME of Jesus. Some of us know very little of our own true name, never mind comprehending the true power of Jesus' NAME. *“Written on him was a NAME known to none but himself; he was robed in a garment dyed in blood, and he was called the Word of God.”* (Revelation 19:12-13)

Perhaps that is way beyond us, at least at present. We have so many far more important things to think about ... perhaps.

Jesus' friends, who caught only the faintest glimmers of what He was trying to tell and teach them when He was here and walking on earth in person, found themselves in a very interesting and quickly expanding reality when they tried to keep up with the presence of the Risen Lord – when they tried to keep up with the Holy Spirit. In Acts, Peter encounters a crippled beggar. The man wants money. There is no implication here about greed or inappropriate behavior. The man is crippled, and he begs because he is trying to survive. Peter has no money to give him, but says, *“What I have I will give you: IN THE NAME of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, get up and walk.”* And the man is suddenly able to walk. (Acts 3:1-10)

Also in Acts, Paul discovers some early Christians at Ephesus who do not know about the Spirit. I guess they were second cousins to many Christians of our own time. Anyway, they said they had never even heard of the Holy Spirit. So Paul baptizes them IN THE NAME of the Lord Jesus, and they receive the Spirit and are never the same again. (Acts 19:1-7)

And again in Acts, the seven sons of a Jewish high priest named Sceva, seeing how much power there is in THE NAME, try to invoke it themselves. But the demon they are trying to exorcise, realizing that they do not truly know THE NAME, beats the dickens out of them and sends them off bruised and naked. The demon says, *“Jesus I recognize, Paul I know, but who are you?”* In other words: Am I supposed to recognize you? You don't even know your own names, never mind Jesus' NAME. (Acts 19:14-17)

We cannot just mouth the words. We cannot just pretend we know the story. If we really live with the Holy Spirit guiding and directing our lives, it is not just about cute little formulas, or six ways to reform the church, or eight ways to achieve serenity and success in a world that knows almost nothing about any of these things from a spiritual perspective.

In the ancient world, a name carried power. It carried the true essence and the spirit of whomever it truly represented. People went into battle crying the name of whomever it was that they represented and fought for. It did not mean they would survive the battle; it only meant they knew for whom they fought, and for whom they were willing to die.

Do any of us know a name of power? It cannot be faked. It is not magic. It cannot be pretended.

III.) WHAT DID THE NAME MEAN FOR PETER AND FOR PAUL?

Peter is the one who realizes that Jesus is the Christ. Paul is the one who realizes that the Risen Christ is the Holy Spirit.

For Peter and for Paul – not in the beginning, but after a while – THE NAME of Jesus carried the full interior identity and power of the ONE to whom they had given over their lives. It was the heart and core of their true allegiance, and behind that allegiance was all of their TRUST, all of their HOPE, all of their dreams of what LIFE could and should be under God.

So if they did, said, or asked anything IN THE NAME, there was no part of that which was “false” to the Spirit – to the purpose, the meaning, the truth – of Jesus, the Christ of God.

Some of you have heard me say that I do not believe in “miracles.” And most of you, I am very grateful to say, tried to *hear* what I was really saying. I do not ask or expect God to break the natural law in which and by which this place was created. The truth is, I expect *more* from God – not less – because I do not expect miracles, as commonly defined. We do not yet understand all the possibilities built into the laws of Creation. In any case, I do not think it is faithful for us to expect God to operate by mere whims of the moment; miracles that mean we do not need to be responsible; the suspension of order and meaning so that we do not need to learn, pray for guidance, or keep the disciplines by which we grow and become more obedient. Most

people use the notion of “miracles” to claim that God sometimes sets aside the principles by which this world was created – in short, that we live in a place of chaos where it is not possible for us to learn or grow. People who trust God to be that capricious end up having to believe in “luck” – not in faith. I expect authentic transformation, new vistas opening up, and genuine hope and true love. People who believe in miracles are waiting for that “one chance in five million” when they might win some kind of heavenly lottery.

In any case, I know and believe that God has incredible influence. God waits and watches all the time for ways to open up life’s possibilities for us. But I still know and trust God not to break anyone’s free will. God waits, no matter what it costs him, for authentic growth and conversion and transformation. The ultimate proof is that God does not interfere on Good Friday. I think that took more “self-control” than all the dimensions of all the universes can fully fathom or comprehend.

IV. RESTRAINT (AND PATIENCE).

So I risk an addendum – a postscript – to what has been said so far, hoping it will not distract you.

Because of God’s patience and restraint, one of the deepest principles of the Christian Life is RESTRAINT. Paul calls it “patient endurance.” We often refer to it as PATIENCE. No human I have ever known loves the concept of patience.

Nevertheless, most of us are well aware that our first reaction or assumption when we hear this comment in the sixteenth chapter of John – “*If you ask the Father for anything IN MY NAME, he will give it to you*” – is “Oh goody! We can ask for and receive anything we want!” And when it doesn’t work out that way, our next reaction is “It was a lie. Just more religious double-talk.”

Yet this statement *is* true, it is coming true, and it will be more true all the time. Only, we have to feel and know the full spectrum of what is being promised. The IN MY NAME part is not just filler. It is the key. Under Christ, we wait and learn and grow as fast as we can. But under Christ, we are also aware that IN THE NAME is a huge precept and principle. More and more we are realizing that what we truly want is also what *God* wants. And whatever remains within us that wants things other than what God wants, it is not according to our true name, and it is not really our true will either.

So our second reaction is that we are not advanced far enough to use THE NAME. Who would dare to try it? Who can think that they have come to such purity of heart and purpose? Yet Jesus is teasing and enticing and begging us to try it: Take the dive; make the leap; you can only get to this next level if you take the risk. And if you do it – if you ask anything IN MY NAME – whatever you ask will be granted by my FATHER.

Because: If we truly ask IN HIS NAME, it cannot do any deep harm. It will be in tune, in harmony, with the will and purpose of God. And when that is true, the power can flow and unfold, and it will neither break free will nor work against the Kingdom of Heaven.

Have you ever made a list of all the things you used to want that you no longer want? My list is long. Some of the things on that list I have merely outgrown. But quite a few things on that list I now have a real aversion toward. I am so very grateful now that I did not get some of the things I used to think I really wanted. I am so grateful that God loves me more than I love myself.

The way we sometimes try to read the Scriptures and the way we sometimes want God to treat us would be like unleashing a little child into a cosmic candy store. And while that might sound delightful on the surface for a little while, it would not end well. It would in fact be truly horrible.

Like it or not, we are still God's little children. So there are conditions – restraints. And we are constantly called on to learn patience, and to wait for the timing to be right. We often tend to see this as God's stinginess, God's punishments, or God's indifference. But all of them are for our benefit and for our protection.

Finally, did you notice where the passage ended this morning? *“Until now I have been using figures of speech, but a time is coming when I shall no longer use figures of speech but tell you of the Father in plain words. When that day comes, you will make your request IN MY NAME, and I do not say that I shall pray to the Father for you, FOR THE FATHER LOVES YOU HIMSELF.”* That, in the end, is what changes everything.