

# In Jesus' Name I Pray

A message by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
May 10, 2020 – Fifth Sunday of Eastertide

- Scripture: Gospel of John 14:1-14 (New Revised Standard Version) <sup>1</sup> Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. <sup>2</sup> In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? <sup>3</sup> And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. <sup>4</sup> And you know the way to the place where I am going." <sup>5</sup> Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" <sup>6</sup> Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. <sup>7</sup> If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." <sup>8</sup> Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? <sup>10</sup> Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. <sup>11</sup> Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. <sup>12</sup> Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. <sup>13</sup> I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup> If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.

You probably have done it hundreds, or even thousands of times: ended a prayer by saying, "in Jesus' name I pray."

Did you ever wonder why you were taught to do that? What does it mean to pray "in the name of Jesus?" What right do we have to pray to God "in Jesus' name"? And what are we hoping to achieve by doing so?

"What's in a name?" Sound familiar? It was Shakespeare who put that question on the lips of young Juliet:

*"What's in a name? that which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet...."*

That's what Juliet wondered aloud. Awash with teenaged passion for her new heartthrob Romeo, she struggled to reconcile her feelings for him with her awareness that he was from a family that was feuding with her own. What she wanted to know was what difference does one's name make, really – isn't it the person behind the name that matters more than the name itself?

In ancient times that certainly was true. A name was more than a label intended to identify you and distinguish you from others. Your name represented your character, your way of thinking, your authority. Your name was the holder for your reputation.

To act in another person's name was to use that person's authority as a basis for one's actions. For instance, a king might give an emissary authority to act in the king's name. If so, that emissary would speak for the king. He

might spend the king's money or obligate the king to a treaty or exercise the king's power in other ways.

However, the emissary would first want to be certain that he understood the king's mind so that he could represent the king faithfully. An emissary who failed to represent the king faithfully would not retain the king's authority for long--and might even suffer dire consequences for unfaithful service.<sup>1</sup>

Acting in the name of someone else, then, has power but also consequences. This is true when we act claiming the power of the name of Jesus. Today's reading from the Bible ended with these verses: [Jesus said,] <sup>13</sup> *"I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. <sup>14</sup> If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it."*

The common practice of ending a prayer with a reference to the name of Jesus comes from those verses. We may not give it a thought, but if we do, we might imagine that it's like a "magic formula" to have our prayers answered the way we desire: if we say "in Jesus' name I pray," then Jesus will grant our petition; but if we omit it, Jesus will ignore our prayer. We might imagine that.

But praying "in Jesus' name" is not a magic formula, nor is it a contractual demand. After all, obviously we don't control Jesus. We can't dictate what he will or won't do. So what did Jesus mean, then, when he said he would do whatever we asked 'in his name'?

Recall the example of a king and his emissary. The king's representative had both the authority and ability to act because he knew the king, he understood the king, he was willing to live in service to the king. The emissary knew the king's vision, the king's preferences, what the king was able to do; the emissary knew the king's heart and mind so well that he could act in the king's place with the effect that it was as if the king himself were present in that moment.

For us to want to pray "in Jesus' name," then, "requires that we first try to understand Jesus' mind so that our prayers represent his will as closely as possible. To pray in Jesus' name is to bring our prayers into accord with the essential character of Jesus."<sup>2</sup> Prayers for revenge or harm, personal wealth or advantage or power – those would not be in line with the Jesus we know.

Praying in Jesus' name, then, is not a matter of whether we include the formula, "in Jesus' name" at the end of our prayer. [Praying in the name of Jesus] is rather a matter of discipleship[, of following him] – of bringing our lives and prayers into [alignment] with Jesus' will. Praying in Jesus' name is praying for those things that Jesus can gladly bless.<sup>3</sup>

What's in a name? We pray in the name of Jesus that our hearts and minds will be aligned with his will. That's when our lives will embody the compassion, the acceptance, the love of Jesus through what we say and do.

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<sup>1</sup> Dick Donovan, *SermonWriter: May 10 (Easter 5A) John 14:1-14* (online subscription, accessed 5/5/2020)

<sup>2</sup> Dick Donovan, *SermonWriter: May 10 (Easter 5A) John 14:1-14* (online subscription, accessed 5/5/2020)

<sup>3</sup> Dick Donovan, *SermonWriter: May 10 (Easter 5A) John 14:1-14* (online subscription, accessed 5/5/2020)