

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

Rev. John V. Callahan Jr.

Sermon Text: John 14:12-17

Sermon Title: "In Jesus' Name: A Solid Connection with God" (Trekking through the Gospel of John)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

August 14, 2011

A magician stands before us with a top hat on a table. He says, "Watch me pull a rabbit out of it." He spreads out a deck of cards and says, "Watch me pick your card." He places a red ball in his hand and says, "Watch me pass this ball from my hand to yours." Before he does any of these things, he may say the magic words, "Abracadabra. Hocus Pocus." These magical words supposedly make strange things happen.

For us who know Bugs Bunny, we might remember the time he visits a haunted castle, and a vampire tries to make a meal of him, but Bugs Bunny has a few tricks up his sleeve. He calls out, "Abracadabra!" and the vampire turns into a flying bat. Then Bugs says, "Abracapocus!" and the vampire has a human body with a bat's head. Bugs says, "Hocuscadabra!" and the vampire has a human head with wings on either side. Bugs changes up the magical words and says, "Newport News!" and the vampire is now a witch with a broom stick. Finally, Bugs Bunny says, "I can do

better than that. Walla Walla, Washington!” and the vampire becomes a two-headed buzzard. According to cartoons and magicians, words can be magical and makes things happen.

If we listen to only a part of the conversation Jesus has with his disciples, we might think he just shared with them some magic words. He tells them in John 14:13, “Whatever you ask in my name, that I will do.” Now we know there is more to the conversation, but sometimes we read the Bible and get stuck on certain words. Because the Bible has chapters and verses, we tend to take those verses we like and pull them out of context, missing what the other verses are saying. Books are not written with numbered verses like the Bible, so we read them from start to finish, taking in the entire story. The Bible, well, we don’t read it from start to finish normally. We read this verse and that chapter, and we don’t get the full story. We only get bits and pieces. One of those bits and pieces people may get is, “Jesus said, ‘Whatever I ask in his name, that he will do’.”

We might think it is childish to believe that Jesus would do *anything* we request of him. This is ridiculous, right? He is obviously not going to drop a SLK-Class Mercedes Benz or a Cadillac Escalade in

front of us, if we ask for them. Christ is not going to allow us to magically win the lottery and take home \$100 million, if we ask for such a thing in his name. This isn't what Jesus is saying in John 14, and that seems obvious to us. But there are Christians out there who believe Christ wants to bless them with a Benz or a Cadillac. They believe in the Prosperity Gospel – “Name it and claim it” – and they've been told that they must pray the right way in order for God to rain his blessings upon them. Those blessings aren't love or grace or peace, but money, money, money. They know they are praying rightly, saying the magic words correctly, when the cash and possessions start coming in.

Okay, so we can laugh at such nonsense and say that Christ didn't mean he would do anything, if we ask in his name. But what about the removal of cancer? That is something, and something significant, to pray about. It seems noble enough for us to pray in Jesus' name to remove cancer; so he ought to do it, right? If this is what Christ meant, then we wouldn't need to send millions of dollars to cancer research. It should just be gone; but it isn't. People pray hard for cancer to go away, and it hasn't yet.

What about an illness we have been struggling

with for a long time? Or, some problem in the family that keep rearing its ugly head? Or, the yearning to get good grades on every test and every paper, and to find the right college, and to find the right job when school is over? These requests sound noble enough. Christ would honor them, maybe? They certainly must fit under the category of “Whatever” that he was talking about with his disciples.

“Whatever you ask in my name, that I will do.” What is Jesus trying to communicate to his disciples, especially by using that prepositional phrase “in my name?” Jesus doesn’t say to his disciples to end their prayers with “In Jesus’ name, amen.” We do this when we pray – we end every prayer with “In Jesus’ name, amen” as though that prepositional phrase will make the prayer real. Those last four words don’t work like magic words to make the prayer real, or not. The prayer itself is real enough – it is real communication with our Father in heaven. We could end every prayer with “In Jesus’ name, amen,” and still not talk with God in the way that God want us to talk with him. We can pray it all we want, and still not get to the essence of what God wills for us and others. This isn’t to say we should stop ending our prayers with “In Jesus’ name, amen” – I certainly am not going

to stop doing that – but uttering the words is not like uttering a magical incantation that will truly make God do what we want him to do.

When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are not just saying words. We mean something behind those words. We mean to speak with God just as Jesus did during his time on earth. We also mean to live as God wants us to, just as Christ lived.

Before Jesus gives his disciples these instructions on prayer, he tells them that they know God the Father because they know Christ the Son. “From now on you know him and have seen him,” Jesus says. The disciples don’t understand what their Teacher is saying, so they ask Jesus to reveal the Father, and Jesus says, “The person who has seen me has seen the Father. Do you not know that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me? *The words that I speak* (There is a reason I am emphasizing these words) to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does the work.”¹

What does it mean to ask anything of Jesus in his name? It means to speak not by our own authority, not by any selfish ambition. It means to speak the words God the Father would want us to speak. It

¹ John 14:7-10.

means asking for whatever God the Father would ask for.

Time and time and time again, throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus constantly reminds his disciples and anybody else listening that he is not somebody special by anything he does on his own. Anything he teaches doesn't come from his own brainstorm. Any time he heals, he doesn't heal through his own magical power. "I and the Father are one," he says. "The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."² When we pray in Jesus' name, we are joining together with God the Father, so that our intentions might be one. Whatever we are going to ask Jesus for, we hope to discover God's intentions for us and those around us. We hope the outcome is the outcome God the Father would desire. There is nothing Jesus would do, unless it was the will of God the Father. In John 14, Jesus is asking his disciples and us to act the same way.

Over five years ago, I thought it was time to move from my last church in PA. I sensed that my family and I should make the move, but I had no clue where we should go. I prayed in Jesus' name that we would

² John 10:30 and 5:19.

stay near Pittsburgh, where I was raised. The city is very familiar to me. That didn't happen – God didn't will it to happen. I prayed to serve a church south of Chicago that looked as though they were doing great ministry. That didn't work. I thought I was praying in Jesus' name, although as a sinful human being I was not praying as Jesus would. I know that full well today. Only Jesus could perfectly pray and speak and act just as the Father would. We try our best – sometimes it takes praying in Jesus' name over and over again, sometimes for 2 to 3 years, before our intentions finally match with God's intentions, before we start desiring the things God wants us to desire. I prayed about coming to Georgia, and it seems as though it has been God's will. For 3½ years it has been God's will, and I am very happy for it (as my family is, too). The entire time I prayed, I hoped to use the sort of word Jesus would use. I hoped to know the will of God. We eventually got there, although we never stop praying in Jesus' name, and continue to seek God's will in all things.

We all have a story, in which we prayed what we thought were sincere prayers. We repeated ourselves in those prayers, using the same words over and over again. We pleaded with God to make things happen, and we ended each plea with “in Jesus' name.” At

times, we get lucky. Those prayers were answered exactly how we prayed them. Most times God did something else. We didn't pray for a certain outcome, but we got something more appropriate, more of whatever God wanted. With some discernment we realized that was what was needed to occur. When we pray in Jesus' name, we want God's will to be done, not ours. We want God's perfect outcome, not ours, to become real. We want to know the will of God a bit better, surrendering our will every time.

When Jesus tells his disciples that he will do whatever they ask for in his name, does he only want them to ask for stuff when praying. Is this the point of praying: to ask for a bunch of stuff and hope it is all agreeable to God?

When Jesus says that he and the Father are one, he is talking about relationship. A deep, open, powerful relationship that we could never understand entirely. And yet, just as the Father and Son (and the Holy Spirit) is one, Jesus is telling his disciples that he wants them to be one with him, and him with them.

Way back in John 4, Jesus is speaking with a Samaritan woman next to a well, and he tells her, "A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth,

for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks.³ God the Father doesn't want people who are off doing their own thing – this is a result of sin. God the Father seeks people (us) to become closer to in a meaningful, strong relationship. Here in John 14, Jesus tells his disciples during the Passover meal, “If you love me, keep my commandments... If anyone love me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and We (God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) will come to [that person] and make our home in him [or her].”⁴ Again, relationship is what God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is after with us. Relationship that doesn't have the burden of sin clouding judgment or confusing signals. Relationship that doesn't have any obstacles blocking the free flow of love and grace. Relationship in which we can ask anything of God, and know that they are the things God would want in the first place. Relationship in which we do what God wants, and are happy for it. God doesn't just want our words and good intentions and carefully, thought-out plans. We wants us, all of us. Everything about us. God will not stop until his will is done.

Speaking with God in Jesus' name and building a

³ Verse 23.

⁴ John 14:15, 23.

relationship with God in Jesus' name is an awesome gift, and yet it is a frightening undertaking. Jesus asks his disciples and us to let ourselves go. That is the frightening part. Let go of our understanding of any situation. Let go of our making sense of things through logic or willpower. It is very difficult for us to seek the will of God, when we have our deadlines and schedules to meet. It is very difficult to ask for the things that God would ask for, because we tend to be selfish. We tend to be pushy and assertive about our opinions. When things get out of hand and too many circumstances are zapping our energy and stealing our joy, it is rough going trying to let go and let God.

Fulfilling Jesus' request in John 14 is hard, because it means we have to let God be in charge. We have to open our hands, open our arms, open our hearts, become completely vulnerable, become completely out of control, and fall into God's arms to do whatever God wants to do. We have to trust God can do whatever, and believe that the "whatever" that God accomplishes is the best for us and every one.

That is some magic trick, if we are willing to let it happen. When it does, God does great things.⁵

⁵ Cf. John 14:12.