

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year A
John 14:1-14

Rev. Leslie Nunez Steffensen
May 18, 2014

(Quotes from *Concise Exegesis*, Dick Donovan., lectionary.org.)

Jesus said to his disciples, “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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it” (John 14:12-14.) This is a powerful promise. Jesus had been trying to convey to his disciples that he would be leaving them but that they would continue on without him. Jesus needed them to act on his behalf, to carry out the will of the Father for him. The disciples were nervous and concerned – this was a great responsibility and there was danger all around them. “How can we know the way?” asked Thomas. “Show us the Father,” Philip nervously begged. They were really telling Jesus, “We aren’t sure we can do this without you.” But Jesus assured them they could and they would continue without him.

If you have ever watched a movie about knights in shining armor and kings and queens and princesses, you will have heard the phrase, “In the name of the king.” This is a classic scene: You can imagine a lone figure on horseback, wearing armor and a cloak at the base of a castle crying out, “In the name of the king, I beseech you to open the gate!” The drawbridge lowers slowly and the knight crosses through and into the castle to deliver his message to the lord. The phrase, “in the name of the king,” is a signal to others that this person carries the authority of the governmental power of the land, that he has the trust of his king, and that he knows the will of the monarch. Throughout history, “to act [or speak] 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.” (Dick Donovan)

The messenger is someone who holds the trust of his king. We can imagine that he would be someone who has served faithfully or fought bravely in battle. The one who speaks in the name of the king is someone who has earned the confidence of the king. They can be a relative, tied to the king and the seat of power by blood, such as a brother or nephew who has a vested interest in ensuring the king’s will is made known. They can be someone who has pledged to serve the king.

The one who speaks in the name of the king has an obligation to know the will of the king and to carry the message or action faithfully to those to whom the king has sent him. 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 (Ibid.) In modern times, diplomats serve in this capacity, making the will of their governments known to foreign powers.

The message will be something important, possibly a signal that has been looked for or news that will affect the state of the castle and its surrounds: word of a battle, instructions of what the king wants from this lord, a summons to come to the palace. “In the name of the king” signals that it will be essential information. But the emissary would first want to be certain that he understood the king's mind so that he could represent the king faithfully (Ibid.)

We see the lone figure in the movie, calling out “In the name of the king,” and by our culture and history, we understand all of these details without any explanation. In the same way, when St. John wrote Jesus’ words, “I will do whatever you ask in my name (14:13a),” he understood it clearly as not just a promise from Jesus to his followers of his abiding care, but to the disciples to act as trustworthy emissaries of Jesus’ will.

What does that look like – for us to be trustworthy emissaries who are given the authority “pray in Jesus’ name?” Who are we to even hope for such trust? I believe Jesus wanted his disciples to pass on the way to discipleship to every generation all the way down to ours, to step into the role he asked of them: to do as he did, in his name.

To pray in Jesus' name...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. (Donovan)

To pray in Jesus' name...requires that we be in a close relationship with him — that we do what we can to understand and submit to his will. Prayers for revenge, wealth, power, and other selfish or petty requests are not covered by this promise. (Donovan)

Praying in Jesus' name... is not a matter of whether we include the formula, "in Jesus' name" at the end of our prayer. It is rather a matter of discipleship — of bringing our lives and prayers into congruence with Jesus' will. Praying in Jesus' name is praying for those things that Jesus can gladly bless. (Donovan)

It is about discipleship.

As we approach the seemingly impenetrable castles of this world: of despair, of fear, of brokenness, of sin, we can enter into the midst of these situations and speak in Jesus’ name. We can look to Scripture, we can pray, we can lean on the traditions handed down to us by the disciples and apostles that came before us. In this way, we are always seeking to discern the will Father through the actions and words of Jesus – the one who showed us the way to Father and showed us the Father by his words and deeds.

Jesus said, “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. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it”(14:13-14.)

We can invite our Lord, Jesus, to enter into and transform any situation so that it reflects God’s glory. Where there is despair, in Jesus’ name we bring the message of hope. Where there is fear, we speak of the trust that Jesus taught us. In the face of brokenness and sin, we carry the message of healing and forgiveness. In Jesus’ name we have his authority to love the world.

Amen.