

What Are We Doing in Jesus' Name?

Mark 9:38-50

How do you pray? Whatever else we may say, most prayers still end with “in Jesus’ name.” So we pray in Jesus’ name and this adds some credibility, and perhaps some accountability, to our prayers.

What are we doing in Jesus name? Who is acting in Jesus’ name? Who is doing God’s will? This question arises from today’s scripture passage in the Gospel of Mark.

Even people in the Bible were confused about who was really acting in Jesus name. Sometimes they didn’t even think Jesus was doing it right! It is not surprising that we struggle today with what we should be doing and who is really acting in Jesus’ name. In our world, there are competing voices to represent Jesus’ name. Some of them are pretty loud. Who right and where do we stand on the subject?

As I often do, this question sends me straight to the fantasy land of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, to the last book in that series, called *The Last Battle*. A heroic young soldier of the army fighting against Narnia is captured and awaits the judgment of Aslan. This is a metaphor for final judgment and the stakes seems extremely high and he awaits the eternal sentence of the great lion who is the Christ figure in all the Narnia books. The young soldier has served his nation and their god Tash faithfully and with honor and integrity all his life. He does not, however, hear condemnation from Aslan. The lion tells him simply, “All your service to Tash I count as service to me.” To serve in Jesus’ name means to act as Jesus acted – to give yourself to deeds of compassion and acts of mercy.

The scripture passage from Mark’s Gospel is a continuation of Jesus’ teaching about the *way of the cross*. Jesus is teaching the disciples about the nature of God’s Kingdom and how to live in it now. It is based on mutual servanthood, not one being over another. It is *non-dominational*. There is no exclusivity, no in-group and no out-group. Sadly, much of the history of Christianity is littered with the consequences of the failure to hear this teaching. From a desire to maintain the right way to be Jesus’ followers, we have gone the way of the Pharisees who believed, “You’re only right if you think like we do.” It’s risky business this freedom! Many clergy struggle with this problem, but some don’t struggle enough!

The disciples of Jesus are trying to consolidate power “Jesus, there’s this guy and he’s doing the same thing you do, but he’s not part of our group. We told him to stop.” Jesus says, “No”.

To do something “in Jesus’ name” really means to do the kind of work Jesus did -- compassionate ministry. It is not about adhering to the right doctrines and belonging to the right group. That’s what was so radical in the early Jesus’ movement, especially in relation to Judaism. The Apostle Paul kept saying that it does not matter about circumcision or dietary restrictions as far as God is concerned. It doesn’t matter AT ALL!

That is still hard for us to take in. Today, Christians really struggle with our own bits of in-group/out-group stuff. You’re only *in* if you believe in the literal divinity of Jesus, or the literal reality of the second coming, or the acceptance of all sexual orientations. This approach comes out of a desire to maintain a monopoly on the status and power of being the representatives of Jesus. The disciples are wanting to “be followed” rather than follow. They’ll follow Jesus, but others better follow them!

Jesus tells the disciples they are wrong in their approach. Being exclusive and drawing barriers around Jesus may cause some people to turn away and reject the idea of following Jesus.

Sadly, we see this all over the world now. Many reject Jesus' name because they have seen Christians condone or engage in acts of oppression and violence. Many people today are also rejecting Islam because they see some Muslims condone or engage in acts of terrorism.

Jesus is talking about destructive ways his own followers were acting – evil being done by the church! He says that condemning and exclude those outside your religion just because they're outside your religion is so bad that it would be better to lose your hand or foot or eye than to act that way. These were the parts of the body that were, in 1st century (and in some places still today) amputated as punishment for crimes: the right hand in case of theft, fraud, or forgery; the right foot in case of robbery, persistent theft, or with fugitive slaves; and the eye in the case of adultery and other sexual misconduct.

Whatever Mark is saying about this type of punishment within the Christian community, he is drawing attention to the seriousness of the disciples' actions being exclusivity within the community of faith. The tendency for most of us is to affirm what is good inside and condemn what is bad outside ourselves. Jesus calls for us to affirm what is good from outside the church and eliminate what is bad inside. As individuals, we are also well advised to affirm the good from outside ourselves and eliminate the bad from inside.

When he says, "you will be salted with fire," that may be a reference to the way the wounds of punitive amputation were cauterized in the first century. More importantly, salt is a symbol for hospitality, shared fellowship, and covenant relationship. The community of faith is healed and purified through the hospitality and shared fellowship of loving relationship.

"What are we doing in Jesus' name?" The easy answer is that we are seeking to do God's will. My sense is that *God's will* is a crutch the way we tend to use it. God's will may seem to be some mysterious direction or answer *out there somewhere* that we are supposed to divine or discover in order for life to be good.

God's will can also be a way of helping us feel better when things don't go as we hoped. To say, "I guess it was just God's will" provides some measure of comfort, though it tends to create a lot of anger toward God – and the church. Some even use *God's will* as a weapon to coerce people into accepting a their particular point of view.

Jesus, in Mark's gospel, speaks to this in a powerful way when he says, "whoever is not against us is for us". Matthew's gospel changes this completely by reversing the wording: "whoever is not for us is against us". The difference in these two versions of Jesus' perspective reflects all the difference in the world -- within Christianity, between religions, and between people in the world. Mark's version is likely the earlier one and provides for a great deal of freedom in the doing of "God's will". For Mark, unless one is actively working to thwart what Jesus stands for, one is working for the cause of Jesus.

Matthew's version leads to a very exclusive view of discipleship and God's will, that what I say is God's will really is! Matthew's version is helpful as a check and a balance on Mark's version because there is certainly a difference between not actively opposing Jesus and actively working to support him. I suspect that was the original purpose of the rewording by Matthew. The bottom line is that God's will is an image describing the trail we are blazing in our lives, working out of the partnership each of us has with the Spirit, the community of faith, and our own self-examination.

So, what are we doing in Jesus' name? Last Sunday, out at the *Sermon on the Mound*, we talked about the core-business of Crossroads Church. We divided into several different groups for discussion, then brought back some ideas about our core business. The responses were more on the *being* rather than the *doing* side of things. They reminded me of a story.

The twentieth century spiritual giant Thomas Merton once encountered a young priest from Mississippi. This was during the 1960's and the young priest was feeling guilt-ridden because of segregation. "I don't know what I should do?" Said Merton, "Don't do a damned thing. First, take the time to become who you profess to be, then you'll know what to do"

So, I took your responses, consolidated them with my own thoughts, and came up with the following:

The core business of Crossroads Church is to be a certain kind of community: a loving, nurturing, and teaching community for the purpose of:

1. **living** the presence of Jesus in the world by expanding love, decreasing fear, and sounding a prophetic voice in our culture (incarnational theology)
2. **listening** (paying attention) to God and responding as a community and as individuals (spirituality)
3. **helping** people hear and respond to God by supporting them as they search and ask questions (discipleship training)
4. **accepting** people as they are and helping them grow as disciples of Jesus in loving relationships (community)
5. **acting** on our passion for truth and justice as God's Spirit calls us (missions)

The first thing to do, in Jesus' name, is to *be* – to be this community – and we are! That's what every group said. That's why you all are here. Crossroads is this community – not perfectly, but clearly. Merton said, "If you're going to be yourself, you are not going to fit anybody else's mystique." That's the truth!

The second thing is to do. As a result of being who we are, what will we do as our core business? Here are a few more questions to ponder, to think about, this week and the next week. How we answer them will have a lot to say how the future of Crossroads Church. How you answer these questions for yourselves will determine much of the future of your own life.

- What will we be doing as our core business?
- What will you be doing as your core business?
- What opportunities do we have?
- What opportunities do you have?
- What do you need from Crossroads Church to help you do it?
- How will we know if we're successful?
- How will you know if you're successful?

These are a lot of questions. I hope each of us, all of us, takes them personally. They are very important, not because God may or may not love us, approve of us, or ultimately save us. They are important because you matter and we matter. How we live and what we do matters in this world. Elizabeth O'Conner summarizes this for us:

One evening, I was serving as part of the volunteer staff at an overnight shelter for women. It was very cold. Gradually, the women arrived, thankful for the sanctuary, the food, and the warm atmosphere. Then, morning came and it was time to leave. The atmosphere in the shelter turned cold and hostile. These distraught women were being pushed back out on the streets by the very people who had welcomed them the night before. As one old woman knelt to pray, she was taunted by another: "Get up! God don't hear your prayer." I asked myself, "Does God hear her prayer?" Then I remembered that God is in me. Where I am God is. The real question

is, "Did I hear her prayer?" What would it mean [for me / for us] to hear her prayer? -- in Jesus' name. Amen.