

“In God’s Name”

Matthew 18:19-20

Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco, Texas

January 3, 2021

Our Gospel reading consists of just two verses from a longer passage in Matthew 18 in which Jesus talks about life in the church. You get the impression that he does so in anticipation of the day when he will no longer be with his followers. He assures them that he is not going to abandon them: *“Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*

Jesus commits to being among us when we gather, a promise we claim each time we gather, even virtually. But there was a qualification in his commitment to be present with us, a qualification we would do well to consider seriously. He said, *“Where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them.”*

What does it mean to gather “in his name”? For that matter, what does it mean to pray in his name, as we often do? Or give a cup of cold water in his name? What is the meaning of that phrase – in Jesus’ name?

One thing is clear from an incident in the book of Acts -- there was nothing magical about the name of Jesus.

The incident involves seven exorcists who were the sons of a Jewish priest named Sceva. They had seen Paul perform “extraordinary miracles” and concluded that the secret to his power must be in the magical name “Jesus,” which evidently Paul had pronounced. They found a demon-possessed man and tried out their new theory. “I adjure you in the name of Jesus – whom Paul preaches,” they said. To which the demon replied, “Jesus I know, and Paul I know. But who are you?” Then the demon chased the seven sons of Sceva down the street.

There was nothing magical about the name of Jesus. Which would have come as a surprise to me when I was a boy, because I believed that God didn’t hear your prayer if you didn’t pray “in Jesus’ name.” That really confused me. If you had to say the magic words in order for God to hear your prayer, why did you put them at the end of the prayer, after you had asked for all the things you wanted? Shouldn’t you put it up front?

Simply saying the words – “in his name” --doesn’t guarantee Jesus’ presence. Consider this example, which is extreme, admittedly. But sometimes we can see our own circumstances in a fresh light if we consider a situation that is out of the norm. In August 1861, four months after Confederate guns fired on Fort Sumpter, Presbyterians of the South met in Augusta, Georgia, and officially withdrew from the national body, forming a new denominational entity.

Of course, they had to come up with a name for the new organization. They could have identified themselves with John Calvin, or they could have chosen a name that connected them with the New Testament church or with some theological concept. Instead, they chose to be known as the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. That was the official name. They chose to associate themselves by name with the Confederacy and in so doing to link themselves – and Christ's church -- with slavery. They kept the name until 1883, 18 years after the Civil War was over and the Confederate States of America ceased to exist. Make of that what you will.

I'm not picking on the Presbyterians. The reason Baptists did not split over slavery in 1861 is because they had done that 16 years earlier. Like the Presbyterians the gathered Baptists had to come up with a name for the new organization. They chose Southern Baptist Convention. They chose Southern, not to distinguish themselves from the Northern Baptist Convention -- there was no Northern Baptist Convention at that time -- but to identify with the region, the South, and the cause that even then united the region – slavery.

When the church leaders – Baptists and Presbyterians – met and voted to identify the church of Jesus Christ with the South, the Confederacy and therefore with slavery, did they gather in the name of Jesus? There were more than two or three of them. And Jesus promised his presence. Did they believe Jesus was with them as he had promised?

Or did they gather in the name of something else, a political/cultural/regional cause, an abomination that was completely alien to his name? Of course, they did.

As I said, that is an extreme example. So let's look closer to home.

Suppose you moved to the city where I live, a city of a quarter of a million people and 300 churches, give or take who knows how many, and that you moved into my neighborhood. And suppose that I knocked on your door and welcomed you to our block. Suppose that in the course of our getting acquainted you asked if I could recommend a church for you and your family.

I would ask a series of questions: what denomination? Baptist. Large, small? Medium sized, a couple hundred people in worship on Sunday. I would ask a few other questions: Are you looking for a church with a strong children's program? Youth program? Music? Missions? Then my final question: Are you a liberal Democrat or a conservative Republican?

That may seem like a strange question, one that no one would actually ask. But it would be in the back of my mind, whether I asked it or not. And it is relevant. Because in our town, if you are a liberal Democrat you probably would want to go to Parkway United Church of Christ, Wake Forest Baptist Church or Highland Presbyterian Church. If you are a conservative Republican, I would suggest First Assembly of God or Calvary Baptist.

Ask yourself, if you're a liberal Democrat, and I assume many of you are: If I were looking for a church, and I drove into the parking lot of the nearest neighborhood church and saw a lot of red MAGA bumper stickers, would I turn around and keep looking for a church where I would be more comfortable?

We could do the same experiment in a more conservative church setting.

The point is that when we talk about how divided our country is; how we spend our lives in informational silos, receiving only that which supports what we already believe; how our social groupings are just extensions of ourselves, people like us; how the result of the splintering of our society is less knowledge and less understanding of and less appreciation and empathy for people outside our group – we're talking about the church, aren't we?

If you want to see Forsyth County, North Carolina, you don't go to a church; you go to the Carolina Classic Fair. That is the only place you can see some of everybody.

For all our talk about diversity and inclusivity and "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female," churches are defined by race, ethnicity, class, level of education, economic and political affiliation as sharply as any other institution in American society.

But no other institution so consistently condemns the divisions in our society, no other institution makes the bold claim, "In Christ there is no East or West/In him no South or North/but one great fellowship of love/ Throughout the whole wide earth,"

All of which raises the question, in whose name or in the name of what do we gather? Really.

In the first sermon I preached last fall when I became your virtual/interim preacher I said that I think progressive Christians have forfeited Jesus. He has been so trivialized by so many of his followers – who claim him to be everything from a superhero to a cosmic mascot – that we have said, "You can have him."

But if Jesus does not provide our core identity as Christians, who or what does?

Last year an impressive group of religious leaders put out a statement titled "Reclaiming Jesus." The statement led to a book of the same title, authored by Jim Wallis, founder of the Sojourners community. Wallis sounded the theme: "Our identity in Christ precedes every other identity." (283)

I liked the idea of reclaiming Jesus. That is why I said at the outset that in this interim we are going to focus on the life and teachings of Jesus. I have come to think, however, that perhaps the need -- and please excuse me if I sound too religious -- is not so much that we reclaim Jesus as that Jesus reclaim us.

