

WELCOME

Grace and Peace from United Protestant Church in Morgan Park, Duluth, Minnesota, where the cold and gray has returned as the air from Manitoba and Ontario sweeps down.

...Have to say for us Duluthians, there is a cold comfort in knowing that we are warmer here than they are in places to our south and east. Another reminder that in another way that "we are all in this together."

I've heard that phrase a lot in this time, when I grumble about isolation and limited opportunities—"you're not the only one, Paul" "we are all in this together"

And so we share. We walk together, live together, reach out to one another, check in with one another, wave from a distance...

and so, too, we pray together. Let's dive in.

SCRIPTURE

Acts 7:55-60

But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. "Look," he said, "I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!" But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him; and the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, he died.

John 14:1-14

[Jesus said:] "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. 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? 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. And you know the way to the place where I am going." Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?" Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him."

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied." 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'? 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. 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. 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."

SERMON: "In My Name"

"In My Name" Jesus says...

"If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." He says.

Wow. Think about that for a moment. What an amazing statement!

But then I look closer, and I can almost see the small asterisk following that sentence, and then I look down at the fine print and imagine this question: "Do you know what it means to "ask in my name"?"

Friends, I struggle often with that—as a person by vocation trained and disciplined to listen to God's call and God's presence in the life of myself and in those I love, I struggle with that fine line between inspiration and impulse.

I often wonder: what is authentically Jesus's call to me? And what is coming from my own selfish actions, my quirks and foibles, my ego—what comes as a response to my own attachments? Fears? Discomforts? Do I ask for guidance and respond to Jesus's call really and truly "in his name?"

Years ago, in my twenties, I was a landscaper—not the lawnmower/weed-whipper sort, but for a relatively high end company that focused on water features and fountains and sculptures and such...

And I would consult with homeowners about their hopes for a gorgeous yard and unique features. I remember one instance—the homeowner noted that water would often collect in a corner of their yard and thought: what if I put a small pond there, with a fountain and water lilies and goldfish—well—talking to the landscape architects, I mentioned my concern about sediment buildup in the pond –incidentally, never install a decorative pond and fountain in the low area of your property, you'll gum up the pump and the fish and lilies will die. And I remember vividly one landscape architect, looking down past her reading glasses over a fresh cup of coffee still steaming: *"Do I give them what they ask for? NO! I give them what they want!"*

So what do they want? Do they really want a fountain? Or do they want to get rid of that water that builds in the corner of their yard?

We put this here at United Protestant Church in a different context. Do we want to create something beautiful, or do we want to solve a problem? And the energy is unique to both. Are we functionally responsive to a perceived need, or are we, like the history of so much of our Christian churches, embellishing? Beauty matters to us. Good music matters to us. An attractive church matters to us.

Yet I remember being down in Mexico and standing in front of a gorgeous gold-plated altar of a stunning Church, and right outside the door is an old man shaking coins in empty steel can. As so many things are “open air” in warmer climates, you could hear him through the silence inside. And I wondered where Jesus really was? Up on that gold plated altar, or kneeling beside that old man, maybe washing his feet?

See, here God gives us a guidepost... a lens of interpretation, through Jesus, through those words: “In my name”.

Are we doing what we are doing in “Jesus’s Name”?

Through what lens do we act, do we witness and name brokenness and seek change? See, that’s where that asterisk comes in after that sentence in scripture. And there’s Jesus asking: “Do you know what it means to ask in my name?”
By what authority do I do what I do? Self determination? Cultural norm?

It was at that same landscaping job, and a fellow I worked with, from a very different culture than mine, tells me this story one morning as we’re getting the truck ready. Over the weekend he went to visit his momma. Back in the city of his birth. And in the evening he gets all dressed up and is ready for a night on the town in his old haunts. Momma stops him: “no son of mine is gonna go around town looking for mischief to get into.”

What could I do? That’s momma talking!

Yeah, we’re still momma’s kids. In Christian parlance we tend to nod to our patriarchal history and say we are “our Father’s” —
--but we put upon ourselves, as we engage the presence of Christ in our lives, the humility and vulnerability of a child. Wonder and awe, to be sure. Amazement in the myriad of ways that God is making all things new.

--Then we try to get out there and use our wisdom and experience and show how we’re growing up.

But we are all children...and enter in His presence with the wonder of a child.

I think of my kids growing up... and that endless ebb and flow between desiring independence, then longing for security. I see it in my kids (I'm sure you've witnessed in your own): instances of maturity, then back to cuddling.

We're like that. As Christians. We take a step forward, independent, with anticipation, excited to live into our new-found maturity.

Oh but we need to come back, don't we? Come back to the security we know.

What is in that "security" and that "parenting" feeling of God that nurtures us? What is in that teacher and mentor that guides our values and morals and governs our actions? What is in that presence that we recognize as being deeper, or more significant, than our everyday lives?

It is in answering those questions that we learn what means to have Jesus tell us: *"If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it."*

Often we see it clearly when we're really tested... Lessons that measure our morals and values often do not come through theoretical speculation, but through lived experience, through action/reflection. We're tested. And the measure of our character is how we react in the midst of challenges. How we turn from our own brokenness and selfishness and fear and anger toward doing the right thing and asking the right questions. Toward repentance.

"Do I give them what they ask for? No. I give them what they want."

Because in those times, turning to God, we draw on a presence deeper and more significant than our everyday selves.

I had that happen this morning, friends. My ex-wife calls me this morning and tells me her brother passed away. Now, she and I had been arguing over all the things a divorced couple argue about—emotionally charged, angry words, cold shoulders, on and on—and as she's crying on the phone I'm thinking *How stupid and selfish and immature I've been acting*—and in an instant my hands are outstretched in care and love and offerings of support and assistance. All those petty little things are right out the window.

It may seem strange to thank God in a moment like that—a moment of tragedy—but what a gift it is to be pulled away from all that petty nuance and be reminded what really matters.

I thank God for the gift of repentance. For the ways I'm guided to repair even my own brokenness.

If in my name you ask for anything, I will do it.

Do I give them what they ask for? No. I give them what they want!

The story in Acts today...Stephen, at the violent act of his death... sees the presence of God. "But they covered their ears" the text reads. "And with a loud shout they rushed together against him."

What does Stephen say? Through the pain...through the fear... he says: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" and then... "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

I can't help but remember a confirmation class, years ago, and we're talking about the stoning of Stephen—and one teenager asks, so innocently-- "they had marijuana back then?"

But really, how many of us would say: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them?"

How many of us witness violence or injustice in our lives and around us, and think: "Love?"

How many of us can hear of the atrocities of a world at war, the death toll rising from global pandemic, the portable morgues outside the hospitals, the mass graves of the unclaimed, the personal stories of those that fought courageously and still died—how many of us can bear witness to all of that and still respond with the word: Love?

Because where do we draw from in our responses to life all around us? I wish I could say that I always respond through the lens of Christ's presence within me—but I don't. I'm a work in progress. A child still growing up. We all are.

But faith is, deeper than rationalism. Deeper than our immediate responses.

I recall Rabbi Lawrence Kushner – on Krista Tippett's radio show "On Being." I found the quote in my notes. He says: "Rationalism is not enough. Auschwitz and the gas chambers was a perfectly rational decision in the context of the problem at hand."

Problem is: the problem at hand was utterly ridiculous and misguided. The wrong questions were being asked. The wrong problems were being solved.

How many times has our human behavior influenced our claims to righteousness? I think of all the instances where God has been invoked as a justification of cruelty. Justification of the ownership of slaves and of segregation and apartheid and colonialism and dictatorships and mobs and cults... ruled by human fear and human anger and human tendency to behave in ways that ignore the presence of Christ in our lives.

And how are we to respond?

When I was looking up that quote by Rabbi Kushner, I found another by David James Duncan—a fantastic writer and one of my favorite links between faith and nature. In his book “God Laughs and Plays” he writes about those that justify cruelty in the name of God, and says this:

There is a self-righteous knot in me that finds zealotry so repugnant it wants to sit on the sidelines with the like-minded, plaster my car with bumper stickers that say “Mean People Suck, No Billionaire Left Behind, and Who Would Jesus Bomb?” and leave it at that. But I can’t. My sense of this life as pure gift—my sense of a grace operative in this world despite and even amid its hurts and terrors—propels me to allow life to open my heart still wider, even if this openness comes by breaking.

Friends, we are called to “reimagine” –in every aspect of our lives, who we could be with Jesus there right beside us, teaching, guiding, protecting, nurturing... even as we, like children, gaze out in our independence at the wonder of it all.

That’s what God calls us to do. That’s who God calls us to be. Do I know what it means to “Ask for anything in Jesus’s name?” I’m learning.

JOYS AND CONCERNS

Mother’s Day

Next Week, Cathy Dale will be returning to grace us with her music. I have no idea how all of this is going to work out right now, but I know there’s more to worship than my words and wild hand gestures...music helps us pray.

Helping Hands: Mask Drive. Garden.

Thank you for offerings. I am proud to say that we are balancing our budget. Thank you for sharing. We’re in this for the long haul, friends. Church will return with more passion and energy than ever.

Prayers to the family of Mark Dowell. My brother-in-law, who passed away last evening.

PRAYER