

Who Owns the Name?
Mark 9:30-41, 50; James 3:13-4:3; Psalm 124

Psalm 124

- ¹If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—
let Israel now say—
- ²if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,
- ³then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
- ⁴then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
- ⁵then over us would have gone the raging waters.
- ⁶Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us as prey to their teeth.
- ⁷We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
- ⁸Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a

- ¹³Who is wise and understanding among you?
Show by your good life
that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.
- ¹⁴But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts,
do not be boastful and false to the truth.
- ¹⁵Such wisdom does not come down from above,
but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.
- ¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition,
there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.
- ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure,
then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield,
full of mercy and good fruits,
without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace
for those who make peace.

^{4:1}Those conflicts and disputes among you,
where do they come from?
Do they not come from your cravings
that are at war within you?

²You want something and do not have it;
so you commit murder.
And you covet something and cannot obtain it;
so you engage in disputes and conflicts.

You do not have, because you do not ask.

³You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly,
in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.

⁷Submit yourselves therefore to God.
Resist the devil, and the devil will flee from you.
⁸Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you.

Mark 9:30-41, 50

³⁰[Jesus and the disciples] passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.” ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.

³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.” ³⁶Then he put a little child

among them; and taking the child in his arms, he said to them,
³⁷“Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.”

³⁸John said to him, “Teacher, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him, because he was not following us.”

³⁹But Jesus said, “Do not stop him; for no one who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me. ⁴⁰Whoever is not against us is for us. ⁴¹For truly I tell you, *whoever* gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose the reward...

⁵⁰“Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with one another.”

Prayer based on James 3:13-4:3,7-8
in the Wake of a Nationally Divisive Senate Hearing

O God,

We look for wisdom and understanding,
 gentleness born of wisdom,
 made evident in lives lived to be good.

And then we turn on the TV, or the car radio,
 or open up our laptops,
 and just as your Word has suggested,
 boastfulness and being false to the truth seem to be evidence
 of hearts full of bitter envy and selfish ambition.

Someone whose words live today in your Eternal Word said,
 “Where there is envy and selfish ambition,
 there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind.”

And the spectacles that blare for our attention
 have little to do with wisdom that comes down from above,
 and much to do with that which is earthly, unspiritual, devilish.

When we cannot look to those in high places
 for the kind of leadership we crave—
 when we cannot even know who is believable,
 and those who shout “hypocrisy” loudest
 are often its foremost practitioners,

please help us instead to find and cultivate within ourselves
 that wisdom from above
 which is pure, peaceable, gentle, willing to yield,
 full of mercy and good fruits,
 without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.

In your mercy, O God, and in the name of our Savior,
 in some version of our world
 that these days feels slightly beyond our wildest dreams,
 let a harvest of righteousness be sown in peace
 for those who make peace.

These conflicts and disputes among us, where do they come from?
 Today, your Word invites us to consider:
 Do they not come from our cravings that are at war within us?

We want things we don't have, so we commit atrocities.
 We covet things we cannot obtain,
 so we engage in disputes and conflicts.

Maybe, your Word suggests,
 we don't *have*, because we don't *ask*.
 Or, we *ask and don't receive*,
 because our asking is more about being able to spend what we get
 on our own pleasures.

O God, for every woman, child and man
 who carries the emotional, physical and other scars
 of violent sexual attack;
 for everyone whose name is dragged through the mud;
 and for the hundreds dead in Indonesia after last week's tsunami
 and the thousands who can never be comforted;
 for the victims of massacres and war atrocities
 in Sudan, Syria, Myanmar, Yemen, and every corner of the world;
 for the tens of millions all over the globe,
 not one bit different from us, who are displaced from their homes
 and left begging for a scrap of mercy on their journey through hell,
 while governments who could do vastly more
 revoke promises and cancel support
 in order to appeal to political bases who live in comfort;
 for all who go to bed hungry, some of whom will not wake up,
 many of them children,
 in a world where the tonnage of fresh produce discarded every day
 is literally more than can be calculated,
 Help us, O God, to get done what we need to get done.

And help us, we pray, to draw near to you—
 if not for our own sake,
 then for the sake of setting an example
to those appointed to high places
 who are seen and heard by all—

so that we may feel your sacred breath on our shoulders,
 the soul-lifting closeness
 with which you have already drawn yourself near to us.

If it had not been you who was on our side,
 we long since would have been swallowed up alive.

Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.
 We are bold to pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

The Sermon

Everybody has a gift, a power of one kind or another—gifts that, according to Paul, are given by the Holy Spirit for the building up of the body of Christ, the Church.

There are people in this room who can do things that leave me in awe.

Cooking;
 teaching;
 calling, visiting;
 clear and insightful thinking;
 praying;
 assembling volunteers;
 reading and understanding and interpreting to others;
 musicianship;
 financial management;
 organizational management;
 creative artistry;
 incredible amounts of endurance,
 whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual...

a lot of the things that people can do just leave me with my jaw on the floor in awe and respect and *gratitude*.

*To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*ⁱ

It's amazing, really, how blessed we are to have people with so many different gifts and powers.

I don't have any evidence to back this up,
 but I am starting to wonder if, in addition to
 skills and talents and expertise and natural or nurtured abilities,
 I am beginning to suspect that maybe God has also given everybody a *superpower*.

Some *supernatural* ability.

You know, superheroes have all that stuff—Wonder Woman; Spider-Man; Superman—each one has a superhuman power they can use to fight crime (or whatever).

But I wonder if maybe *everybody* has one.

I'm pretty sure that my grandmother had a preternatural ability to induce guilt. She could do it telepathically. It was an absolute phenomenon. Can you imagine the crime-fighting potential of that superpower? Thousands of would-be criminals would just say, "Never mind; forget it. I don't want to have to see the disappointed look on Keith's grandma's face if we get arrested."

The only one I've identified in myself is an eerie ability to lose sunglasses. It's practically superhuman. When I pick out a pair of sunglasses in the store, I just say to it, "Look, I'm sorry, but before the week is out you are going to have disappeared from the face of the earth."

My average retention rate is about 48 hours. My record is having lost a pair between the check-out line and getting in the car.

It's a phenomenal gift. I haven't yet figured out how to harness it.

What's your superpower?

The problem for the disciples was they had seen somebody who was casting out demons in the name of Jesus, but when they saw it—and he wasn't there at the time—they looked around at each other and said,

"Wait a minute...*we're* Team Jesus. *We* hold the rights to that name, and those rights are exclusive. Somebody else can't just come along and say,

“Oh, yeah; I speak for that group too” when they’re not even *in* the group.

According to Mark’s gospel, John and the other disciples don’t tell Jesus *how* they tried to stop that person from casting out demons in Jesus’ name, but they make it clear to him that they did try to stop him, because he wasn’t following them.

And you can imagine why they might want to do that.

They’re the ones whom he had called. He had called their names specifically and each one of them had had the singular, mystical experience of hearing that call and following him. Nowhere in the gospels is any logical reason offered. It was a singular, specific experience for each one.

They’re the ones who had walked away from everything.

They were the ones on the front lines of the places he took them, overseeing huge crowds, feeding people, surviving storms at sea, putting themselves in the immediate vicinity of sick, contagious people.

They were the ones putting themselves at great personal risk for being associated with him and his increasingly rabble-rousing reputation.

And: they were the ones who had to deal, up close, with Jesus.

He made big demands on them, for one thing; but more than that, they were the ones who had to stand, sit or recline next to him every day—a proximity in which they could clearly see themselves in all their flawed humanity.

In the company of absolute purity and goodness—the ultimate expression of a human being—you can see in plain relief, in sharp

contrast, all your own shortcomings, faults and failings, in a way that very few people on earth experience.

It's not easy to be a disciple, and they earned the "distinction," such as it was, day after day after day.

So it must have been at least confusing, not to say galling, to come across somebody who didn't do any of that, who had the chutzpah to be out there claiming to be acting in the name of Jesus. That name didn't belong to that guy; how dare he claim ownership of it?

It may, or may not, have been less complicated had they thought the guy was a phony. But the claim that he was effectively casting out demons they did not dispute for one second; they reported it to Jesus as fact: "We saw someone casting out demons in your name."

And what is the predominant posture of the institutional Church when it sees somebody effectively casting out demons in Jesus' name but in a non-Book of Order-sanctioned context?

"So we tried to stop him, because he wasn't following *us!*"

He was doing something that only someone with the power of God can do, and he was doing it in the name of Jesus.

But he wasn't one of us.

And Jesus said, "Don't stop him. Nobody who does a deed of power in my name will be able soon afterward to speak evil of me.

"Whoever is not against us is for us.

"I'm telling you the truth:

whoever gives you a cup of water to drink
because you bear the name of Christ

will not by any means lose the reward.”

He said, “You know, I heard you all arguing on the way here. What was that about?”

And nobody wanted to answer. They had been arguing over who was the greatest.

Actually, the disciples have been silent a lot on this day. As Jesus was plainly telling them what was going to happen to him, they really didn’t get it. But nobody said anything, because they were afraid to ask him.

When you’re arguing about who’s best,
 and then when confronted about it you don’t have anything to say;
 when you’re questioning other people’s integrity and capability,
 even as they are accomplishing things that you’re not doing;
 when you don’t understand what your teacher is saying,
 but you’re too afraid to ask for clarification;

That’s every indication of massive insecurity,
 profound self-doubt, debilitating lack of confidence
 in your ability to do what God has equipped you to do.

And if God has already empowered you to do it, you don’t need any other credentials to do it.

Whoever gives a disciple a cup of water is worthy of the reward.
Whoever wants to be first has to be last of all and servant of all—and therefore *can* be.
Whoever welcomes a little child in the name of Jesus welcomes Jesus.

And whoever welcomes Jesus isn’t just welcoming the person;
 they are welcoming the God
 who creates, sustains and redeems the universe
 and all who are in it.

We are not just here to make sensible use of our various gifts and talents in the service of being generally nice and reasonably fair minded people.

I am starting to wonder if God has given each of us superpowers that we haven't even begun to touch yet.

Christian Wiman, a poet staring down long odds and a difficult diagnosis, wrote in a book called *My Bright Abyss*: “We may think that it would be a great deal easier to believe if the world erupted around us, if some savior came down and offered as evidence the bloody scars in his side... [I]n fact the world is erupting around us, Christ is very often offering us the scars in his side. What we call doubt is...not the absence of faith at all, but faith latent in the lives we are not quite living, God dormant in the world to which we are not quite giving our best selves.”ⁱⁱ

Brené Brown, in her book about shame called *I Thought It Was Just Me*, talks about how “that imposter or phony feeling at work or school rarely has anything to do with our abilities, but has more to do with that fearful voice inside of us that scolds and asks, ‘Who do you think you are?’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Anne Lamott wrote in *Traveling Mercies*, “It’s funny: I always imagined when I was a kid that adults had some kind of inner toolbox, full of shiny tools: the saw of discernment, the hammer of wisdom, the sandpaper of patience. But then when I grew up I found that life handed you these rusty, bent old tools—friendships, prayer, conscience, honesty—and said, Do the best you can with these, they will have to do. And mostly, against all odds they’re enough.”^{iv}

Neil Simon, the legendary comedy playwright who just died last month, once said, “Don’t listen to those who say, you are taking too big a chance. Michelangelo would have painted the Sistine floor, and it would [have been rubbed out by now].”^v

I wonder if God has given every one of us some kind of superpower that we haven't yet discovered for ourselves.

What do you think your superpower might be?

Of course, with God, nothing will be impossible anyway, so you don't have to have one in order to be the person you were put here to be and do the things God put you here to do.

But whatever powers you've got, you were given them as a child of God and a servant of God.

You have a right to act in the name of Jesus, and so does the person next to you.

“Salt is good; but if salt has lost its saltiness, how can you season it? Have salt in yourselves,” said Jesus, “and be at peace with one another.”

We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken, and we have escaped.

Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth. ■

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ⁱ I Corinthians 12:7

ⁱⁱ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer* (p. 75). Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me (but it isn't): Making the Journey from “What Will People Think?” to “I Am Enough.”* Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Anne Lamotte, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*

^v Unsourced attribution