

16 Sunday After Pentecost

Naming Our God by Intern Pastor Jory Mickelson

Good morning. GOOD MORNING! It is so good to be back at Christ Lutheran Church with you all. I had a two week break from both school and work and had a wonderful time. For the next week I will be working full time in the congregation with Pr. Jana, then it's back to school for me starting Saturday 18. Please pray for me, it is going to be a very challenging academic term.

The reading from Isaiah puts some extra pressure on me this morning. "The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word."

How are you doing this morning? Are any of you weary? Is there some part of your life that just feels heavy? I know, there are parts of my own life that feel heavy to me. Parts I would rather set down, take a break from, or forget about entirely. I've been praying for all of you this week, for each of you and the parts of your life that may feel especially heavy right now. I hope my words this morning may help sustain you.

That next passage in Isaiah, 50:4, says "Morning by morning he wakens, wakens my ear." One way to look at it is that each morning is a new beginning. Our cares from yesterday and our worries for tomorrow are just that—in yesterday or in tomorrow, but not right now. We have today. Just for today, we might be able to carry the heavy part of our lives a little way. We don't have to think about carrying it tomorrow, but just for today we might make it.

If God is taking things one day at a time, so might we. In Isaiah 50:7, it goes on to say, "The Lord God helps me; therefore, I have not been disgraced." Another way we might say this is, "God remembers me. I haven't been forgotten." "God is with me; I am not alone."

This morning's readings have something to do with prayer—which some people might call talking to God. These readings have something to do with speaking and listening. Something to do with having a conversation with God in our lives. We talk to God in our private prayer lives and as a community of believers. Christ Lutheran Church is having a conversation with the Holy One too.

Psalm 116:1–2 reassures us, "I love the Lord who has heard my voice and listened to my supplication, for the Lord has given ear to me whenever I called." Sweet words. Words of reassurance to me when I call out to the Loving One, I am heard. But how often do we pray and feel that no one is listening to us? No one is hearing what we have to say? In a previous sermon I talked about a time in my own life when I prayed and it felt like opening an empty drawer, God seemed entirely absent. Are there areas in our lives where this might be the case? Spaces and places we have locked away tightly for years?

But Psalm 116 knows about that empty drawer. The psalmist knows how bad it can get for us. They know the heaviest parts of our lives. Just listen to verse 3, "the cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me. I came to grief and sorrow." This almost sounds like a blues song, doesn't it? "I'm a man of constant sorrow, I've seen trouble all my day."

We have had times like this in our own lives. Where all of our plans have fallen into ruin. Where what we have hoped for crumbled away to nothing. Where someone we loved and relied upon has failed us. Even our church sometimes fails us. A minister didn't understand what I needed even though I asked as well as I could. Someone in authority said an unkind word when we needed kindness. The church seemed to turn away, just when you needed to be embraced the most. I have experienced all these things from both institutional church and church members in my own life. And I am sure some of you have as well.

It might be easy for us to believe that God doesn't hear us. Or maybe even that God is mad at us and has turned away. Just like an angry parent might. Or a romantic partner or friend who is giving us the silent treatment. Some of us might have even taken a break from church for a very long time. After all, if these people are followers of Jesus, then I might not want anything to do with them. So long hypocrites! Don't let the door hit you on the way out...although it is us that are leaving.

But while we are entangled in those cords of death, when we lay in the grave of anguish, in the most painful part of our grief and sorrow, Psalm 116:4 says, "Then I called upon the name of the Lord, "O Lord, I pray you, save my life." In other words, HELP!

But the psalm doesn't stop there, in verse 5 it tells us, "Gracious is the Lord and righteous; our god is full of compassion." A little more translation on my part. God isn't being a gracious hostess here, seeing if everyone is comfortable and if anyone needs a warmup on their coffee. Another way to say this is God is GOOD and Faithful to their promises. Righteous also means faithful. Our God is a God of Compassion. If we called God the Compassionate One, how does that change our view of who God might be?

Let me say this again. How we name God, changes who God is for us. When we call God the Loving One, how does that change our perception of God? How does it change our experience with prayer when we suddenly turn to someone called the Loving One? Is it hard to be loved by God for you? It is hard for me to accept all that love sometimes.

The easiest way to think about this in my own life is with my spouse. For those of you who are single, I apologize for not finding a better metaphor this Sunday. It is a failure of my own imagination not to find a better comparison. But for now, let me use the example of my spouse, and hopefully I will still be married at the end of this sermon.

When I met my spouse, he was just one more person at a party. Justin. Good looking, sure, but there were a number of good-looking people there. No big deal. I was single and ready to mingle as they say. But at some point, mostly through a series of tricks and conniving on his part, we ended up going on a few dates. And over those dates something happened. He went from being a date, to being a boyfriend. In my head we were just going on a few dates, but my heart surprised me. When I listened to how I felt, I suddenly realized it was much more serious than I knew. Eventually Justin went from being a boyfriend to being a partner. Each of those words, I used to describe him to other people signified a change in our relationship. The words I used, changed how I saw him. So, to with our God.

The names we use for the Holy, whether it be the Triune God or the Loving One, the Prince of Peace or my personal Lord and Savior Jesus Christ all shape how we see and think about the person we are praying to, who we are having a conversation with. How do you see the Creator? Is your God of the Bible judgmental, angry, and condemning? Or are they Almighty and All Loving, the Good Shepherd? Is the God you find in the scripture each week the one you pray to in private?

I can tell you that there was an undefinable but infinite change in my relationship with Justin when I could finally stop referring to him as my partner and called him my husband. Our new language, also gave me a new depth and appreciation for the person I had chosen to marry. It also changed how other people saw us. We too, suddenly became more real to them. We were married, something most of our friends and families had experience with. They saw us better, or more comfortably because they could relate to the language we now used. As my mom likes to say, that is when she realized we were in for as much long-suffering as any other married couple.” Fools!” she said, “Fools, now you will suffer like the rest of us.”

Many years ago, I had a friend who had had several bad early experiences with church. When he had a spiritual crisis later in his adult life, he didn’t know if he could ever see himself praying. Considering his painful background, I didn’t know if I could see him praying either.

A mutual friend of ours said, “What if, you just add one more O to the word and try having a conversation with the GOOD capital G. Or if that doesn’t work, what if G.O.D. just stood for Good Orderly Direction.”

What would happen if you thought about God as the GOOD or Good Orderly Direction in your life? What if you asked that Good to come and help calm the chaos in your soul, or help untangle you from those cords of death that have nearly lain you in the grave? Any time you feel like you have lost the instruction manual to life, just ask for some good orderly direction about what to do next.

Dear Good, I am in the middle of so much. I don’t have any hope. I am so tired. Everything around me seems to fall apart. Please send some good orderly direction. Good, please give me a thread. Just a small candle to follow, to know that you are here, that you have a way to clean all this up, when I don’t see any way out at all.

What if our prayers were that simple? Or as another wise friend once told me that there are really only two kinds of prayers for some people, they are “God, if you get me out of this, I will never...” and the second prayer being, “Phew! I am glad that’s over with.”

Hopefully we also know some other prayers like, “Good morning,” and “Thank you,” and “Good night.”

In Matthew today, we hear Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” There were all sorts of answers. All sorts of names that people were putting to Jesus: Elijah, Messiah, prophet, John the Baptizer 2.0.” Even the believers in Jesus, who had met Jesus weren’t exactly sure. They all had their own experience and understanding of the Son of God.

So too, with us. Each of us have been given a unique personality, or in my case, my father says a “difficult” one. Our Loving Creator made us each a little different, with different gifts, talents, and passions. We are never able to see ourselves all at once. It sometimes takes our whole lives to discover all the things that God has put inside of us.

So too with God. Our relationship is one that grows and changes over time. In some periods of our lives the Holy One feels close. At other times God feels more like the Absent One. But how we name God, how we address the person we talk to outside of church changes how we talk to God. Changes who we know God to be.

This week I encourage you to do a little holy experimentation. Maybe to be a little playful in your prayer life. Try picking a new name for God. It doesn't matter what name you use, because God will know who you are talking to. There are no rules for picking the new name. Just that you try something new. Think of it like trying on some new hat. It's okay to try on several for size. Some might feel ridiculous and that is okay.

My friend who had so much trouble praying used the name Gus. He figured if he could try talking to his friend Gus about things, it might be easier. My friend talks to Gus every day, and God is fine with it, as far as I or anyone else can tell. It works for him and that is what is important.

So let us try out our name for the Holy One this week. Who knows what kind of new conversations we might have?