

*Dangerous Prayers  
In Jesus' Name*

In this country we have a whole system of laws designed to protect the good name of people and companies. *Trademarks* these protections are called. If you take steps to protect your unique name, or the singular image of your product, under American law, you are entitled to keep others from using that name in a way that might confuse people about whether that's you. There are lawyers who spend their whole careers immersed in this area. You probably already know some famous trademark cases.

Apple Computers v. the Beatles' record label Apple Corps  
McDonalds v. McCurry, a Malaysian fast food restaurant  
Starbucks won trademark infringement actions against a small coffee shop in Astoria, Oregon called 'Sambucks' and a bar owner in Texas who was selling a beer called 'Star Bock'

And here are some name protections you may not be so familiar with:

Kit Kat candy has legally trademarked its shape: "four trapezoidal bars aligned on a rectangular base".  
The names 'Sarah Palin' and 'Bristol Palin' have approved trademarks  
Subway tried unsuccessfully to trademark the word 'footlong', restricting that word to describe the length of a sandwich  
Donald Trump once applied to protect the exclusive use of the phrase 'You're fired.' He lost that one.

We have these laws because a good name is worthy of protection, our system says; it's something valuable.

You may have wished someone had thought of applying for legal protection of Jesus' name a few weeks ago when rioters stormed the Capitol Building in Washington, DC. It was startling to see signs that claimed the protection of God and the model of Jesus for a violent, hate-filled invasion of an institution of American government. Maybe you heard the recording of costumed men in the Senate Chamber, praying for God to bless their insurrection 'in Christ's name'. It took my breath away.

The Church has never tried to trademark the name 'Jesus' or the symbols of Christianity, for one good reason. Jesus himself never seemed to think it was necessary to limit the use of his name. In fact, Jesus seemed to entrust his name to others fairly indiscriminately, almost like seeds a farmer scatters on both good and bad soil. 'Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it,' Jesus said in the part of John's Gospel we read this morning.

And it wasn't just praying that Jesus suggested using his name for.

He told his disciples to gather together in his name. (Matthew 18:2)

He talked to them about welcoming children in his name. (Mark 9:37)

Offering someone thirsty a cup of water in his name. (Mark 9:41)

No doubt the use of that phrase ‘in my name’ was a cultural idiom. It was common in the ancient world to use the name of a powerful person as a form of honor. It dignified the act being done in that name. We have vestiges of that practice now: ‘Stop, in the name of the law.’ In Jesus’ time and place, it was the name of the Roman Emperor that signaled an ultimate authority. To do something ‘in the name of Caesar’ conveyed that whatever that act was, it had the power of the Empire behind it.

So Jesus’ use of that phrase, authorizing his followers to use his name rather than Caesar’s when they wanted something to change, was a political subversion. ‘Caesar’s is not the ultimate power,’ those Jesus-followers would have heard in his words. ‘Our authority comes from a truer, more powerful God.’

But it wasn’t just political. In both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, to do something in the *name* of another was to do it in keeping with the character, the thinking, of that person. We see this in the writings of the Bible. There are a number of Psalms, for example, whose titles say they are “a psalm of King David”. The king of Israel didn’t actually write those psalms, we know; but they were written in a way that was meant to honor King David’s reputation and to replicate his faithfulness. The same is true with the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, that are sometimes called the Books of Moses. No one actually believes that Moses wrote those books. They’re not all even about Moses; but in some way all their stories become part of the tradition that Moses led. In the New Testament, a number of the letters we call the Letters of Paul were written by people who were not Paul himself but his proteges and followers, leading the churches Paul founded, refining the theology Paul understood first.

‘When you ask in my name,’ Jesus said, ‘I will hear you. And my God will answer.’ And so, the Christian Church has always said its prayers in the name of Jesus. You’ve probably noticed this. Maybe you’ve wondered why.

But this practice of praying in Jesus’ name isn’t universal, even among Christians. Other strands of the Christian tradition pray in the name of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit. You’ve probably seen Pastor Sam make ‘the sign of the cross’ over her chest as she says those words and when she closes her prayers in worship. That’s how we did it in the Orthodox tradition I grew up in as well. In the Roman Catholic tradition, it’s not unusual to pray in the name of saints, or Mary, the mother of Jesus.

In Islam, there are 99 names for God. 99 known names; the last one, the hundredth, remains hidden, to signify that God is always beyond us, unknowable. In their prayers Muslims call out the first two of those 99 names. They pray “in the name of Allah, the compassionate, the merciful” (Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Raheem). Jews focus on the singularity of God as they pray each day: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” (Sh’ma, Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad). People who pray in public places, or who are being intentional about honoring multiple religious traditions will sometimes say they are praying “in all the holy names of God.”

What we’re doing when we employ those names of God in our prayers is like putting a lens in between our words and this One we pray to. A name for God says “this is how I see you.” Like a

father or a mother who listens to me and cares for my well-being; like a lord or a king, with power over all of life. Compassionate and forgiving, the way I saw you act in Jesus. Praying in that name is asking God to see us through the same lens. To pray in Jesus' good name is to say, in effect, 'I stand with Jesus in my dependence on You. I ask for what Jesus would ask for; I want what he would want.'

Is praying in Jesus' name necessary for God to hear us? Is Jesus' name—or Mary's, or St. Christopher's, or your pastors's—like a password that unlocks some door that is otherwise closed to us? Do our prayers somehow not get to God's ears if we don't speak the right name of authorization? I don't know for sure, but I don't think so. I think God always hears us. I think your prayers have equal power to mine, and to the Pope's, and to every one of those saints that has come before us. I think God loves no one, no holy person, not even Jesus, more than God loves you. That there is nothing that stands between you and the Creator of life, the Creator of your life, who looks at you with compassionate eyes and wants your life to flourish.

Even when our words fail, when we have not only inadequate words but *no* words with which to pray, God's Spirit comes alongside of us to help. Paul said this in his letter to the Romans: If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. God's Spirit, nestled deep inside of us, does our praying for us, makes a prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. That Spirit knows us far better than we know ourselves, Paul said. Whether we use the right words or not, maybe even whether we pray or not, the Spirit is always there, keeping us present before God. (Romans 8:26-28, *The Message*)

So what happens when Jesus' name is invoked for causes that are plainly *not* what Jesus would have wanted? Christian nationalists storming the Capitol; but also slavery and segregation, capital punishment, all kinds of exclusion and harshness. *My* prayers that are sometimes short-sighted or spiteful or selfish. We humans are capable of the most creative contortions of Jesus' ideas of love and justice.

What do we do when Jesus' good name is tarnished by the ways it has been misused?

There is no trademark litigation to be had here. It's tempting sometimes to walk away from the name, to abandon it to those who claim Jesus' support for hate and fear and exclusion. I think many of us have gotten very practiced at saying what kind of Christian we *are not*. But we cannot leave it there. We can't leave Jesus in the hands of people who corrupt his name. Can we use this moment to get very clear about the kind of Christian we *are*? To help build a quiet, solid movement that gives Jesus' good name back to the one it belongs to? To proudly attach his name to the character and integrity and passion for love that drew us toward a life of faith?

To say: I am a Christian. The identity of my life, the thing that gives my life shape and purpose, is that I am a follower of Jesus.

The pastors of this church—all of us—have a friend and colleague whose name is Brian Adkins. A few years ago, we heard Brian end a sermon by saying he no longer prays simply in the name of Jesus. He prays 'in the name and *in the way* of Jesus'; because while we can do anything we want with a name—abuse it, manipulate it, speak it thoughtlessly—the *way* of Jesus is sharp and clear. It's not ours to hold or to distort. It's bigger than us, beyond us, better than even our best intentions.

To pray in the name *and in the way* of Jesus is a dangerous prayer. To pray in the name and in the way of Jesus is to include in every prayer an invitation to God to unsettle us, to question and clarify our motives, to expand the field of our vision, to guide us in a way that is not our own. To bring us to a fierce honesty about the reality of our lives. To change us.

This is my prayer for you, and for me, and for us.  
In the name and in the way of Jesus.