

# “Anything”

Valley Presbyterian Church – May 23, 2010

Pentecost Sunday

Genesis 11:1-9

Rev. John Wahl

John 14:8-17

Jesus says to his disciples: “If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it.” (v. 14) Anything? Yes, anything. This is a dangerous statement for anyone to make – because it can set you up to be taken advantage of. Imagine making this promise to your kids – the requests would never end.

Maybe you’ve seen the TV commercial that has been playing for Subway where a son follows his father around barraging him with questions like: *can I use the chainsaw?* and *can I put the dog in the dryer?* His father – mean parent that he is – apparently doesn’t let his son do anything, so it’s a good thing the boy can go to Subway and get anything he wants on his sandwich.

So, it seems either that Jesus will decide to do anything that we say, or instead that he will say anything, even if it’s beyond what he can do. Is it possible for Jesus to be like the father in the television commercial and tell us no? What if our requests are unsafe or unreasonable or selfish? Jesus did say that anything that we ask for, he would do.

There was a movie about twenty years ago called “Say Anything,” starring a young John Cusack, who plays a motivationally challenged high school senior. Everyone around him is trying to get his commitment about what his area of study will be when and if he goes to college. All he knows for sure is that he is in love with a girl and is willing to do whatever it takes – even if that means moving halfway across the world – to be with her. This does not make a particularly good impression on the girl’s father, who wants to know about his career goals. A less-principled person might have concocted lies about a fictitious future occupation, but Cusack answers honestly. His exact wording was memorable enough that I had to look it up. He says:

*I don't want to sell anything, buy anything, or process anything as a career. I don't want to sell anything bought or processed, or buy anything sold or processed, or process anything sold, bought, or processed, or repair anything sold, bought, or processed. You know, as a career, I don't want to do that.*

Many people will say just about anything, if they think it’s what you want to hear. But, not Cusack’s character; and, surely, not Jesus. When Jesus tells his

disciples that he will do anything that they ask, he requires that the request must be in his name. He does not explain why this is important, but we can imagine. Is it possible to ask for a Porsche, or to win the lottery, in the name of Jesus? Maybe, it only works when the object of the request is in line with what Jesus would wish for himself – food for the hungry or maybe wine for wedding guests. But, Jesus did say anything. Maybe, Jesus – who would soon depart from his disciples – trusted them more than they – or we – could ever know.

Jesus already knew (and takes this opportunity to tell his disciples) that, upon his departure, he would give them another advocate: the Holy Spirit. He would no longer be there with them in body and in voice, but would continue to guide and comfort them. It would seem to make sense that if Jesus is speaking to them about another advocate, then Jesus must have been the first advocate. The second will be like the first – always advocating for the poor and the outcast, but never giving up on those who have strayed. We know the Holy Spirit by what we have heard and seen of Jesus, and Jesus trusts that he can deliver on anything we ask for, because this second advocate will be with us.

In Latin, the word used here to describe the Holy Spirit is *confortare*, which means “comforter.” It literally means, “to strengthen with” as in a walled fortress or a cereal that is fortified with vitamins.<sup>1</sup> But, the way that we, in this century, have grown to understand the word “comfort” is much different. We associate comfort with anything from a hug to a quart of ice cream. We love to sit in our comfortable couches and have brought the art of preparing comfort foods to the pages of *Gourmet* magazine.

So, how would our understanding of the Holy Spirit, the second advocate, change if we thought of the “comforter” instead as the “strengthener?” Could it be that Jesus, knowing that the Holy Spirit will provide us with sufficient fortification, trusts that those things that we request, anything that we request in his name, will align with his purposes and lay within his realm to bring to pass.

Jesus also said to his disciples: “the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these.” (v. 12) We know that Jesus did some very impressive works – miracles we call them – things that we cannot imagine anyone else being able to do. And so, for example, Jesus walked on the water. But, why he did it, we are not sure. Yet, when the disciples saw that it was Jesus on the water’s surface and not a ghost, they were comforted and no longer felt afraid.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Long, “Jesus and the Holy Spirit”

Tony Campolo talks about how this particular passage always fascinated him, the one where Jesus says to his followers: "See what I'm doing. What I'm doing you'll be able to do," and then adds, "and greater works than these shall ye do because I go unto my Father." Campolo says:

"I asked my pastor about that when I was a young boy he said it's because we don't have enough faith. That didn't quite wash with me because Jesus doesn't say you might do it if you have enough faith. He says, you will do it. I think that the problem is this, that we are so impressed with the power of God that we fail to see that the miracles are not about his power but about his love. What Jesus did he did not so much to demonstrate his power but to express his love. How many times does he perform a miracle and say to the people who benefit: don't tell anybody, keep it quiet; I don't want people to get the wrong idea. Jesus broke into history not to demonstrate his power. He came to express his love. That's what his miracles were about."<sup>2</sup>

And so, in the eyes of God, if we are to do things that are even greater than what Jesus had done, those things would revolve around love and not power. They are not likely to be things that would impress a crowd – having a Porsche or winning the lottery; or that we wouldn't want to keep quiet. Instead, they will be acts of love and not act of power; maybe not walking on water, but certainly helping someone calm their fears.

These acts of love are not easy: they require us to listen and be patient; we are tempted to solve the problems of others with the power we have instead of supporting them with sources of comfort – and strength – that we know lies within them. It would often be easier to ask for their pain – and ours as well – to simply disappear, but that is not what we ask for when we do it in Jesus' name.

Anything we ask for, in his name, Jesus will do it. Sometimes we want to undo all that seems to complicate life. We want the miracle of Pentecost, and the coming of the Holy Spirit to create the Christian church, to undo the scattering which took place in the story of Babel. With so many different languages, cultures, traditions, and ways of thinking and believing, life can seem overly complicated. On that one morning in the city of Jerusalem, when the wind blew and the fire burned, the Holy Spirit allowed each person to hear the good news of Christ in their own native tongue. On that one day, the first Pentecost, the church was birthed and the journey of the gospel to all nations began.

But, Babel was not reversed by Pentecost. Neither did God desire that it would be; nor should we. We have been designed by God to be a varied people,

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<sup>2</sup> Tony Campolo from *30 Good Minutes*, 1997

knit together into a beautifully complex fabric – both in the church and in our communities. We have been made each to seek God for ourselves and to experience the comforting strength of both the first and second advocate uniquely. God never designed us to be carbon copies of one another; the story of Babel offers the biblical explanation of how we are not just Adam and Eve multiplied, but each altered and changed along the way. We are changed by our encounters with God and one another. And, it is through those encounters that we accomplish greater things even than Jesus was able.

Campolo, still contemplating on this text that confounded him as a child, says: “When Jesus was here in the flesh he was only able to look into the eyes of one person at a time; only able to express love personally to one person at a time. But he has ascended to be with the Father and has come back as a spirit, the Holy Spirit that comes into our lives and fills us and drives us to love. Now if thousands and thousands of people go out tomorrow morning and each of them performs one act of love in his name, then it can be said -- you can hear Jesus uttering these words -- "The work that I do you are doing and you're doing it greater than I did it because thousands are greater than one. I could only love one person face to face at the time. But there are many thousands of you now and each of you at any given moment can love someone intimately and powerfully in my name."<sup>3</sup>

Anything that we ask, in Jesus name, it will be done; thousands of times over. You may not trust yourself to ask for the right things, but Jesus has sent the Advocate to be with you, to give you strength. You may not think that your small action can make a difference, but like Jesus, we are not intended to focus on power, but on love. That is the good news of the gospel that we have heard and received, and that is the power of the love of God. AMEN.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.