

Sermon Easter 6 2020

May 17, 2020

John 16:23-33

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. This morning we meditate on the Gospel Lesson, previously read.

*“Our Father, who art in heaven. What does this mean? With these words, God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and we are His true children, that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear Father.”* Hopefully, you all are familiar with those words from Luther’s Small Catechism. And what beautiful understanding Luther draws from the introductory words of the prayer our Lord Jesus gave to us. The fact that we pray to God as Father means that He invites us to know that He is our Father, and that we would pray to Him. That we would have the confidence to come before Him and ask, just as a child would trustingly ask their father; hands empty, hearts expecting good.

Of course if you know Luther, you know the struggle he had with God. As Luther heard God’s commands, he took them very seriously. As he heard God’s Law, as I spoke of it last week, he was crushed by it for so long. He knew that he hadn’t kept them, and so he feared God so greatly that we get the impression he couldn’t even confidently pray. Now in our day, I think many people have the opposite problem. I think many people just assume that God would listen to them. We are so entitled and self-important, to think that God wouldn’t listen to me... well that’s just heresy. But when we really wrestle with sin, then we realize it shouldn’t be so simple.

And that’s what our Lord Jesus is resting on in our lesson this morning. He’s resting on the understanding that there is, and rightly so, a sense where we fear that God might not hear us. And so He invites us to call out to God. He tells us: **Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full... In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.**

Now in our American Churches it’s common to hear this and have it misapplied. In what’s sometimes called the “Word-Faith” movement, there’s an understanding that if you append Jesus’ Name to a prayer, that if you sort of “claim” what you’re praying for in the Name of Jesus, then you can declare it to be yours. That’s not so much what Jesus is

saying here. This isn't something where we get to turn prayer into a way for us to boss God around and make demands on what He's going to give us.

So what's He saying then? He's making the point that as we might fear God won't hear us, or won't grant our prayers because of our sin, we have assurance that He will for Jesus' sake. Because we have loved and believed that Jesus came from God. Now, even here I want to clarify a bit. Jesus makes it sound like it could be that we merit God's favor for Him to hear our prayer as a result of our having earned it by loving Jesus and choosing to believe that He came from God. But as we look at the whole of Scripture, we see it's clear we haven't. We haven't earned God's love by our love. We haven't earned God's favor or grace by our faith. No, our faith is what receives the promises God makes to us, in particular the promise that for Christ's sake, for the sake of His death on the cross, we know God has forgiven us and restored the connection with Him that was broken by sin. And it's in that connection in Christ that we can rest assured that the Father hears our prayers.

In fact, to come back to Luther, that's something I so appreciate about how he describes prayer. He always makes the point that prayer is grounded in that command of our Lord to call upon Him and that promise that He makes that our prayers are heard. That anything we ask in His name we will receive that our joy may be made complete. And think about that. The God who created the whole universe has commanded you to pray. Not only as He told you to pray, but He promises to hear it. With the infinitude of things going on in the world, He still wants to hear your voice speaking to Him, and promises to hear it.

You can understand in human terms how those who don't believe would ridicule this idea. But that's how infinite and omnipotent our God is. He can hear all of those voices. And wants to. It pleases Him to.

And as we look at our lessons we see some of the things for which we should pray. In the Old Testament lesson, we have the Israelites. They have this recurrence of their unfaithfulness where the grumble against God. As I always like to give context, here are the people of Israel, having been rescued from their slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt. They have been saved by God, going through the waters of the Red Sea, they're living with God's care from the Manna that He gives daily, and what do they do? They grumble in unbelief. They grumble about how miserable things are. Now, I'll sometimes say that God even invites us to complain to Him in our prayers. We see this in the Psalms. But that complaining is something we do in faith. Acknowledging that things are challenging, even

asking for help. But here we see grumbling in rejection. So what does God do? He sends the serpents who bite the Israelites.

What happens? They pray for forgiveness. And so we see how God calls us to pray in repentance and seeking God's forgiveness. So, that's maybe a bit simple, but it's a great reminder for us. Pray in confession of our sins, and pray seeking God's forgiveness. Again, knowing that He commands that prayer, and promises to hear it.

Then we see our other lesson. In the reading from First Timothy, we see this call to pray in supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings. So we ask for things, humbly, we come before God speaking the desires we have, speaking His glories, we ask for things for other people—good things for them especially—and we give thanks for the manifold and infinite blessings we have in Christ. Then we also pray—what does Paul say? For “all people.” We pray for all, even our enemies. And we pray for rulers and those in authority. We pray that we would be given a quiet and peaceable life. We pray this, because God desires this peace, desires the salvation of all men. And we pray this in view of the mediator between us and God, the man Christ Jesus, the Man who is God in the flesh, who intercedes for us and gives us the mercy and love of God.

So that gives us insight to our prayers. But, as I say that, something we have to come back to is seemingly unanswered prayer. God tells us to pray, and promises to hear it, so why then did I pray for that certain thing and it didn't come true? Why did I pray for my loved one to get better, and instead they died? Why did I pray that the cancer test would come back negative and it came back positive? Why did I pray for millions of dollars, and I lost my job?

Sometimes, when we have patience we see that, as Luther is attributed to have said, we ask for silver and God gives us gold. For example, I prayed for millions of dollars, but maybe God gave me something better. Perhaps, He gave me a family who would care for me and the blessings that come from that. Or perhaps He knew that if I was independently wealthy I would serve my passions in a life filled with ennui, that I would pursue all manner of earthly pleasures and comforts, rather than remain faithful to Him. He would prefer I have the gold of the eternal riches of Christ than the dreck of temporal pleasures and comforts. Or perhaps, the heart of my request for material wealth was security. And so He provided me daily bread which gave me a roof over my head and food on my table. Not with the remainder of my life in view, but on a daily basis as I had need for it. And in that, He helped me to see that He is my security, not my material wealth.

Sometimes we see these things in this life. Of course other times we don't. But I've heard it said, and I think wisely, God gives three answers to our prayer: Yes, because I love you; not yet, because I love you; and no, because I love you.

But of course, it's when we're in the midst of our trials that the common phrase of those three answers comes into question, isn't it? For example, right now. "God, I'm pleading with you to take away this coronavirus so that we can get back to normal lives, why are you not providing that way out?" And as we see the suffering that comes in such circumstances, the love of God really can come into question, can't it?

And that's where those words of Jesus are so comforting in the last verse of our reading: **"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."** In other words, as you look around and see the brokenness of this world, don't use that as justification not to believe, or pray. As you look around asking for things to improve, when they don't, don't assume that God is unloving. Don't assume that He doesn't or hasn't loved you, don't assume that He refuses to hear your prayers. Instead, trust that all things prayed in this access to God that we have in Jesus, that all things are answered in Christ. Why? Because in the love God has for us, He sent Jesus into this world. In the love that Jesus has for us, He bore our sin, He bore our death, and He has been raised to show forth His victory.

So when you pray, if you don't see your prayers answered, don't use that as an occasion for doubt to take hold. Instead, understand that by it you are being driven further into the arms of the One who cares for you. As you experience these trials, you are being driven to trust this One who does love, to trust in Him and to pray to Him even when everything around you would tell you that it doesn't make sense to do so. No pray, in the knowledge of this victory.

And to come back to where we started, pray knowing that in that victory, God Himself has made you His own child. Pray knowing that as you have been baptized into Christ, you have been remade in the image of Christ. You have been born again a new creation, not remaining in the sinfulness of your earthly Father, but born anew in the righteousness of Jesus. And in that righteousness, your Heavenly Father has made you His own child. And just as a trusting earthly child receives from their father in confidence and boldness, so also you receive from your Heavenly Father in your open empty hands. Hands that He loves to fill because He loves to hear your voice and He loves to grant you your greatest needs. And we know that He has filled the greatest of every want we have or could have, and the greatest need of all in eternal life in Christ. Amen.