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Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Praying in Jesus’ Name”

Text: John 16:23-33; Revelation 21:9-14, 21-27

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

During this Easter season, we have again been reminded that eternal life is not something simply tacked onto the end of this life that we now have, but that this life that we now have is really the prelude to eternal life. For the Son of God did not come into this world, take our human nature, live, die, rise, and return to the Father simply to make our life in this world better for a time, but to give us that life that is true life. Life that will never end.

And so what awaits us in the future is greater than what we have now. Greater in every way. It is the glory of the life described for us again in the reading from Revelation – the life God always intended for us. Of a paradise we have trouble even imagining. Life free from the trials of this world. Life free from those old enemies of sin, death, and the devil. Life, body and soul, filled only with the joy of perfect peace in the presence of our God and Saviour.

And so what is most real is not the life that we have now, but the life that the death and resurrection of Jesus has won for us. We sometimes get deceived into thinking that what happens “out there” is the real world, and what happens “in here”, in Church, is an *escape* from the real world. But that is simply not the way it is. The life of God is greater than that. Even those saints of the Old Testament who lived over 900 years on this earth lived but a tiny fraction of their life here. They live on, and so will we, because Christ is risen and gives us life.

Now I bring all of that up to serve as a helpful background to the Holy Gospel that

we heard today, that we might understand it rightly. For there we heard this wonderful promise of Jesus: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.”* Many people get excited when they hear those words, and rightly so. But they are so frequently misunderstood. *For what do these words mean?* Do they really mean that I can pray for whatever I want, and as long as I tack on the words “in Jesus’ name” at the end, then I’ll get it? The new car, the nice house, the job, or friend, or relationship I wish for? *You know that doesn’t work.* Tacking the phrase “in Jesus’ name” onto the end of our prayers is not a magical formula like *abracadabra*, or “Open Sesame.” It is not like an unlimited gift card we can use with God. For our heavenly Father would *never* give us what is not good for us, no matter how we prayed for it.

And then, what happens when God receives competing and opposite prayers, both prayed “in Jesus name”? The farmer who prays *in Jesus’ name* for rain for his crops, and the family who prays *in Jesus’ name* for sun for their picnic? One will be disappointed. So how does God decide? Is it for the ones who pray with more faith? Is it for the ones who live a better life and are therefore more deserving? You’ll hear some make that claim, to the end that people begin to despair of praying, doubt God’s love for them, wonder if they will *ever* be good *enough*, and give up on God.

But when Jesus spoke the words of this promise – on the night when He was betrayed, the night before Jesus would lay down His life on the cross for the life of the world – Jesus wasn’t promising His disciples the riches and wealth of this earth! (If only they asked in the right way.) He had been teaching them all along that His kingdom was not of this world – would He now, at such a time, direct their hearts and desires to the things of this world? Of course not! . . . And it seems to me that such prayers are not prayed in Jesus’ name – *no matter what words you use at the end of your prayer!* But are rather prayed in *my own name*, for these are *my* wants, *my* desires, *my* plans, not Jesus’.

So what does it mean to pray in Jesus’ name? Well first and foremost, it is not a formula! Someone once pointed out to me that the Lord’s Prayer doesn’t have “in Jesus’ name” at the end. Neither do Luther’s morning and evening prayers, or the common table prayer. Have we been praying all those in vain all these years? No!

So what does it mean to pray in Jesus’ name? It is to pray by faith *in the divine name*

that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all share.

It is to pray with prayers based and grounded in the Word of God, for His speaking to us teaches us how to speak to Him. And so it is to pray not with the mind of man, shaped by the world, but with the mind of God, shaped by His Word.

It is to pray with our hearts set on things above, not clinging to the things of this world. And so it is to pray knowing that Jesus has not only *overcome the world out there*, but has also overcome the world (and all its desires!) in my heart.

It is to pray in the reality of my baptism, that I have been born again from above, a child not of this world, but a child of God. And so it is to pray knowing that this world is not all there is; that this life that we now have is the prelude to eternal life, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

And so to pray in Jesus' name is to pray in the name and the reality given to us by our Saviour, and not in the name and the reality and agenda that the world sets for us. And so it is much more than mere words tacked onto the end of a prayer – it is the faith which connects us to Jesus and joins us to Him.

But that also means that when we pray, although we pray as *individuals*, we never pray *alone*. Our prayers join with the prayers of all the people of God, united by faith in Christ Jesus, of all times and places. Yes, even with those Old Testament saints who lived so long and so long ago, who didn't use the words "in Jesus' name", but nevertheless prayed in this way too; as they "*called on the name of the Lord.*" (Gen 4:26b) For prayers in Jesus' name are always bigger than us. They are the prayers of the Church.

For the Church is the reality gathered and formed *in Jesus' name*. We are called and gathered *in His name* in the Invocation. Here we are baptized *in His name*, and then absolved *in His name*. Here we eat and drink the body and blood of the One who *bears the name*. And then we are blessed *with His name* and sent out *with His name*. Here we are *immersed* in His name! For *in His name* we receive all the blessings and gifts of life and salvation that He has for us, that He won for us. And again, not just us, here, now, in this place, but the whole Church, the angels, archangels, and all the company of Heaven who are gathered *in the name*, around the Lamb of God who

takes away the sin of the world.

And thus gathered by our Saviour and receiving His gifts, we respond in prayer. Our prayers in songs of thanksgiving and praise. Our prayers on behalf of ourselves and the world. Our prayers formed in His name, His gifts, His promises, His life.

And then we take these gifts and prayers out with us into the world. We live our lives *out there* as an extension of the life given us *in here*. For prayer that starts here doesn't end here or stay here, but goes out into all the places we have been put. To bring the blessings here received to others. Praying individually, but never alone. For we pray and we live *in the name* given to us here – the name of adoption, of forgiveness, of holiness, of life. To the end – what did Jesus say? – *that our joy may be full*. The joy of life so many have lost and are looking for! The joy of faith. The joy of forgiveness. The joy of unity *in Jesus' name*.

Now having said all that, that doesn't mean that God doesn't want us to ask Him for the things that we need in this life, and even things that we want. Don't feel guilty about that! As Luther said, if God is our Father (which He is as we live in Christ Jesus!), then we can ask Him as dear children ask their dear Father. For anything. For everything. . . . But the reality of eternal life does put our lives and prayers here in the proper perspective, and shapes what we *want* to ask for. And while God wants us to enjoy this life and the things of this life, even more does He want us to enjoy eternal life with Him. And while cars and boats and money are nice, there is more. Much more prepared for us.

And so to pray *in Jesus' name* is to pray in *that* mind; in one mind with Christ our Lord. The One who came down from Heaven and joined Himself to us for eternity.

And that means that when we pray *in Jesus' name*, we pray not alone, and not only with the Church on earth and in Heaven, but we have this confidence also – **that we are also and really praying with Jesus**. For in the end, to pray *in His name* means that He makes our prayers His own.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.