

29 July 2007
Pentecost 9

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Lord, Teach Us to Pray”

Text: Luke 11:1-13; Genesis 18:17-33

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

Prayer is a gift from God. There is nothing in us fallen and sinful people that makes us worthy to approach the throne of God in prayer, and there is no reason why God should lend us His ear and listen to us. And yet He bids us come and has promised to hear us. What else is this than pure grace, pure gift?

Prayer is a gift from God, but do we regard it as such? Or do we disregard it? Not praying as we should, putting it off, doubting its good, or even being bored with it? Do we *really* have more important things to do? When gifts that we give are received with such little appreciation, we stop giving them. But still God bids us come and has promised to hear us! What else is this than pure grace, pure gift?

Yes, **prayer is a gift from God**, but *how* do we pray? For prayer is not natural for fallen and sinful man. It does not just rise up spontaneously from the heart. The sin in our hearts makes us want to be independent, not dependent. To help ourselves, not ask for help. And so we must learn to pray. That is why books on prayer and books of prayer are consistently among the best selling Christian books. We need to pray, but we don't know how to pray. For haven't you found yourself (at one time or another) wondering: *if prayer is supposed to be so easy, then why is it so hard?*

So *Lord, teach us to pray.* Thus the apostles asked Jesus. And how sweet those words must have sounded to Jesus! His disciples were learning – they were learning how much they didn't know. How much they needed to be taught. How great their need. And so Jesus eagerly teaches them, giving them the two things they need to pray: (#1) **the Word of God** and (#2) **the promise of God**. Jesus does not direct His apostles (or us!) to our hearts as the basis for our prayer, for He knows the struggles

that are going on in our hearts! The struggles of doubts and fears and sin and death. The very things that keep us from prayer! Instead Jesus gives us what we need: *the gift of prayer*. He gives us the words, and He gives us the promise that our prayers will be both heard and answered by *our Father in heaven*.

And by so doing, Jesus teaches us something very important about the Christian life and the life of prayer: **that Christians walk into the future by walking backwards**. We see what lies ahead by looking back. For looking back into the Word of God and the history of His people, we see the faithfulness and goodness of God. We see His work and forgiveness, His leading and guiding, His judgment and restoration. We see His strength and love, His promises kept, and His abundant patience and mercy. We see His constant care and protection to His people of every generation. And so looking back we walk forward by faith born of God's Word, knowing that what we see in the past is what awaits us in our future. For our God does not change.

And here we have the example of Abraham. He prays in faith. *Walking into the future by looking to the past*, He knows that God is merciful and gracious. For the God who spared eight righteous persons in the ark and did not destroy them with the wicked in the flood will not now destroy the righteous with the wicked in Sodom and Gomorrah. And the God who just promised Abraham a son within a year and that He would make him the father of many nations, would not now turn a deaf ear to him. And so Abraham is bold to pray. For his prayer is not based in himself or his heart, but in the faithfulness and goodness of God. And God does not tire of hearing such prayers, but graciously listens; not chiding him or rebuking Abraham for his "bartering," but rejoicing in his faith. For God never tires of the prayers of His children.

Yet here, perhaps, is where we fail, and why we struggle with our prayers, for rather than walking into the future by looking to the past, *we turn around* and try to walk by sight instead of by faith. And then two things happen: first, we take our eyes off of the faithfulness and goodness of God, and thus off the source of our faith and its strength; and second, we put our eyes instead on a future that we cannot really see, and which is uncertain and unsure at best. And often downright scary! For we see how miserable and perilous life in this world is! Or as Luther described it (using the petitions of the Lord's Prayer): it is a world of "*nothing but blasphemy of God's name*,

disobedience to His will, rejection of His kingdom, a hungry land without bread, an existence full of sin, a precarious sojourn, and an abounding in every evil.” (Luther’s Works, Vol. 42, p 26)

And facing and looking at such a future, should we be surprised that our prayers fail, our fears increase, and our hearts tremble, filled with doubt? Should we be surprised that we wonder where God is, what He is doing, and whether He loves us or not? Should we be surprised that so many are confused?

But turning around and looking backward, what do we see? *We see the very same things!* But we see also the faithfulness and goodness of God in the midst of those very things. The presence of God with His people. The promises of God made and kept. And thus looking back, our faith is not weakened, but strengthened, and our prayers emboldened, for they are firmly grounded in the Word and promise of God.

And here (perhaps) we have an advantage over Abraham. For while Abraham was bold to pray that God would save those cities for the sake of *even 10 righteous (!)*, in Jesus we see the true grace of God – that does that, and one better! For in Jesus we see the grace of God that saves **the world** for the sake of **one** righteous person: His Son. For into this world of sin and death and unrighteousness, the righteous Son of God came to save all of us from sin and death. To take the fire and brimstone of Sodom and Gomorrah upon Himself on the cross, that we might be spared the destruction we deserved, and then to rise to life again, that we too might have life in Him. Life, and a future. A future secure in the Word and promises of God.

That Word and promise of God was given to you in Holy Baptism and made you a child of God in the forgiveness of your sins. And so every time we pray “Our Father” we do so *looking back in faith* to that day when God became *our Father*, and the promises of God given to us in those waters, which enable us to walk into the future strong in Him.

And every time we approach this altar to eat and drink the body and blood of Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, we so do *looking back in faith* to the cross upon which this body and blood hung. And the forgiveness, life, and salvation won by Jesus on the cross is given to us here, and enables us to walk into the future strong in Him.

And thus forgiven and strengthened, we can pray with confidence and faith for yes, our Lord knows what He’s doing. For the deadly poison of the hellish serpent and

scorpion has been taken by Jesus, who now gives us His food and drink and all that we need. And while walking into the future walking backwards may look stupid, part of being a Christian is looking stupid. You cannot look tough on your knees or turning the other cheek. You will not be considered intellectual if you believe and insist that the bread and wine are truly Jesus' body and blood. You will not be considered smart if you continue to believe that God cares about you, and hears and answers your prayers when you do not get any results. The world will say there is no power in prayer, *and they are right*. **The power is in God.** Prayer is our response to that power, our confession that we trust in that power. And that we do not live by sight, experience, reason, or feelings, but by faith. Faith born from every Word and promise that comes from the mouth of God.

So when my life is full and I don't have time: *Lord, teach me to pray*. When the demands of life have left my heart empty and dried up: *Lord, teach me to pray*. When I am filled with grief and pain: *Lord, teach me to pray*. When I am confused, in doubt, lost, and uncertain: *Lord, teach me to pray*. Teach me to pray: "*Our Father, who art in heaven . . .*" Teach me to turn around and know my Father hears. For He keeps His Word, always. He will provide. He will forgive. He will deliver. I am His.

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.

(Thanks to Rev. David Peterson for some of the thoughts and words used in this sermon.)