

13 May 2009
Easter 5 Midweek

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Pray!”

Text: John 16:23-33 (Numbers 21:4-9; 1 Timothy 2:1-6)

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Alleluia!

God commands us to pray. It is part of the Second Commandment - God has given us His name to use rightly; and one of the ways we use it rightly is when we use it to call on God in prayer.

But why? Why does God want us to pray? Because your prayers are delightful to Him. Our Father loves it when His children call to Him; He loves to hear your prayers, and He loves especially to give you what you ask. For He is above all else a giving - not a demanding - God. It is as Jesus said to us this evening: **Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.** And so the command to pray is not given to burden us - to be another obligation that we have to fulfill; but because God wants to bless us. That the incense of our prayers rising to heaven may be returned with showers of blessing, and so that we may be full of joy.

And so if you are not full of joy, pray. If you are grumpy, angry, worried, uncertain, or if any other joy-stealing emotion is filling your heart and mind, pray. Pray to the One greater than your sin, greater than your trouble, greater than your fear, greater than your doubts - to the One who **has overcome the world.** And He will sustain you. He will give you what you need. He will take your burdens, that you may live in joy and peace.

So why are we so stingy with our prayers? Why don't we pray more? Why, when we have been promised the ear of no president or ruler, but the King of the Universe Himself! - why are we so often no-shows in the throne room of God? Or, if we do show, make a quick appearance, and then hurry off to do something else?

Well, there are two answers to that, I think. The first is that we think there is a problem with us. My prayers aren't good enough. I'm not good enough. Or, we think we have more important things to do. I know that's one of the things that often gets in the way of my prayers - I have so much to do that I don't have time to pray! But how full of pride is that thought - as if what I can do is more important than what God can do! Busy-ness is one of the devil's best tools. The more self-absorbed and distracted he can make us, the better and easier it will be for him to rob us of our prayers and joy, and beat down our faith.

That's the first reason we don't pray more - that there's a problem with us. The second reason is like it - because we think there is a problem with God. That He doesn't want to hear our prayers, or that He won't answer our prayers so why bother. Satan wants us to think that too. And we think that way because we're often that way. *I'm busy, don't bother me. I've got to get this done. Later.* Right? And often times "later" becomes never. And perhaps it seems that way at times with God - that we're not getting answers; that our prayers are bouncing off heaven like a brick wall. And so we get frustrated and downcast, and think it futile to pray.

Both those reasons are why Jesus' teaching about prayer is so important for us today. Because Jesus answers both problems - and He answers them by pointing to Himself. He is the reason why we know our prayers will be heard, and He is the reason why we know our prayers will be answered. Apart from Him we cannot be sure and can have only doubts.

And so if I look at myself and my prayers apart from Jesus, then yes, I am not good enough, and my prayers are not good enough. But if I look at myself in Jesus, as a baptized child of God, forgiven my sins and united to Christ, then my prayers are not based on my worthiness, but on Jesus'. And the Father loves me and hears me and answers me because I am no outsider trying to get His attention - I am His dearly loved child. And He desires nothing more than to have me crawl up on His lap and talk to Him.

And in the same way, if I look at God apart from Jesus, then yes, I will not see Him as a good, kind, gracious, and giving God, but as a God far away; a God who I cannot really know; a God who I really don't know what He thinks of me. But when I look at God on the cross, there is no doubt! He is not a God far away, but One who has drawn near to us. On the cross He shows us that there is nothing He would withhold from us - for He has given us His Son. There we see His love for us, and the lengths to which God will go to help us in our need.

And so whatever problems we have with prayer are answered at the cross, in the crucified One. To pray "in the name of Jesus," therefore, is to squeeze all our prayers through the cross to our Father, and to look for the shower of His blessing to flow through the cross to us. That is the picture we received in the first reading tonight also, from Moses in the book of Numbers. The prayers of the people were answered how? By directing their eyes to the bronze serpent on the pole, and the promise of God attached to it. As they did, they were healed and they were blessed. Though the serpents continued to slither around them, the cross and promise of God overcame and gave life.

And so it is with us. Jesus said: ***"In the world you will have tribulation."*** We too

have serpents slithering all around - the serpents of sin, and the serpent who seeks our life. And in the midst of trouble, what shall we do? Pray. Our Father sometimes sends trouble to drive us back to Him in prayer! That He may bless us. And so in the midst of trouble, we pray. And how? By turning our eyes to the Lamb on the pole of the cross, and trusting the promises of God attached to Him. As we do, our prayers are answered. We are healed, we are blessed, we are sustained. The serpents may remain - as they did with the people in the wilderness! - but the cross and promise of God overcome and give life. And this we know, for in His resurrection, **Jesus has overcome**, and all things have been put under His feet.

And not only for ourselves do we pray, we now also have the privilege of praying for others. St. Paul told us that today, in his letter to Timothy. So that our Father in heaven may bless them. They may not pray for themselves, so we pray for them. And when we forget to pray for ourselves, or get too busy - how good to know that others are praying for us! That we may be blessed.

It is easy to be overcome by all the troubles of this world and life, and think there is nothing you can do. But there is always something you can do: pray. Pray to the One who has overcome your sin and gives you His forgiveness. Pray to the One who has overcome the world and all the troubles of this world and life. Pray to the One who has promised to hear and answer your prayers. **Ask, and you will receive, and your joy will be full.**

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