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Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Joy of Prayer”
Text: John 16:23-33

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

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

When you read through the Gospels, one of the things that stands out is how often Jesus prays. Before significant events, we find Jesus praying. We are often told that early in the morning, before the sun comes up, Jesus goes off by Himself to pray. Before He performs miracles, He often lifts His eyes to heaven and prays. Praying, for Jesus, is like eating, sleeping, and breathing. Something that is not just important to Him, but is part of the fabric of His life; which He cannot live without.

Clearly, this shows us that the relationship between Jesus and His Father is a close and intimate one. And not simply because Jesus is *God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God* (Nicene Creed) - but also for Jesus according to His human nature. Jesus, as a man without sin, has that fellowship with God that we lost when Adam fell into sin. He has that fellowship with the Father that the Father wants to have with us; that the Father, in love, created us to have with Him.

The good news for us today is that in the Holy Gospel, Jesus is teaching us that that close, intimate fellowship He has with the Father *is now again ours*. What sin had rent asunder, Jesus has joined together again. For He says, **“In that day . . . whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. . . . 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. . . . I have overcome the world.”**

That day that Jesus is talking about there, when all this would happen, is the day of resurrection. The day when Jesus overcame the world - and its prince and its sin and its death - through His death on the cross and His rising to life again. Before, in the time of the Old Testament, the tabernacle and the temple, the priests and the sacrifices were needed as mediators to approach God. But now things will be completely different. Now, in Jesus, we can approach the Father. For Jesus is not just our mediator, who stands between us and God - that we pray to Jesus and ask Him to take our requests to the Father. No, He says; **“I do not say to you that I will**

ask the Father on your behalf. . . . You ask the Father in my name, [and] he will give it to you. Or as Jesus taught before, “When you pray, say, *Our Father . . .*” (Matt 6:9). He will hear you, He will answer you, He will give to you.

He will, for when you were baptized, Jesus’ Father became your Father. We are not sons of God by right, but by gift.

For when you were baptized, Jesus grabbed hold of you and took you with Himself through His death and resurrection, so that with Him, you now live *in that day* Jesus was speaking of - the day of resurrection; the day of new life. That means that when you were baptized, your separation from God was washed away in the forgiveness of your sins, and you were given that life. The life God created you to have. A life and intimacy like Adam and Eve in the Garden before sin. A life and intimacy like Jesus.

You have that life, even now. You may not realize it, or be living it, but you have it. For that’s what forgiveness does. Forgiveness is not getting away with your sins - like the criminal who gets away with his crime because of a technicality; forgiveness is much more than that. It restores you. It releases you from the yoke of slavery to sin, and gives you the freedom of the Gospel. A freedom not *to* sin, but a freedom *from* sin and its devastating effects. That you may live a new life.

For the word of forgiveness that you heard again this morning is no mere word, spoken by a mere man, but words backed by the full faith and credit of your Saviour Jesus Christ and His blood that atoned for all your sin. His word which *speaks a better word than the blood of Abel*, which cried for vengeance (Heb 12:24); for Jesus’ blood cries for pardon. And Jesus then commanded these words of pardon be spoken to you, that you may know, that you may be confident, that you may live, ***that your joy may be full.***

And part of that joy is the joy of prayer. We may not always think of prayer as joy, but that’s the thinking of the Old Adam in us; the old, sinful, separated Adam. But as sons of God, with the new life of Jesus given to us, not only have we been resurrected to a new life, *but so have our prayers*. That we may live and pray as Jesus. That prayer become for us like eating, sleeping, and breathing. Something that is part of the fabric of our life; which we cannot live without. Something that gives us joy.

Now, to be sure, many of the *things* that we pray for do not give us joy. Jesus was often grieved at what He saw His creation going through - the trials and tribulations and travails of sin. But how wonderful to know that we can bring these needs right to the ear of our Father in heaven. Prayer is not like a letter or a phone call; it’s not even like a text or an e-mail. Prayer is like the child whispering right into her

parent's ear - or, maybe on this Mother's Day, I should say right into her mother's ear! - knowing that she is heard and not ignored; knowing that there is no place else for those words to go than into the ear and heart of her parent; knowing that she can whisper anything, and it will not be rejected. The *answer* may not always be yes, but the prayer is always heard and answered.

And even if your earthly father and mother were not like that, but you yearned for them to be, your Father in heaven has promised you this. That is what Jesus is teaching us today. Baptism has made us children of God, put us on our Father's lap, and opened His ears and heart to us. There is nothing we cannot ask. He will hear, He will answer, He will give.

And so we now have the joy of prayer, to pray for all people in all sorts of need. For how often do you wish there was something you could do - when you see a disaster on the news, when you're sitting at the side of a hospital bed, when your neighbor loses his job, when a family is torn apart, when you see a homeless person sleeping on the street, when you see a person stuck in sin. You have the joy of bringing that person to your almighty and merciful Father in prayer, to whisper them into His ear, and know that He, in His goodness, will do what is good.

They may not be able to pray. They may not know their Father in heaven, or Jesus as their Saviour. But you do, and you can pray for them. Just as Jesus prays for us in our need, so you have that joy and privilege now as well. And if you don't know what to say or what to pray, Jesus has given you those words as well. *Our Father, who art in heaven . . .*

And do not think your prayers are not needed. Scripture tells us that "*The prayer of a righteous person has great power*" (James 5:16). And you are righteous, because you are of Christ, because you are forgiven, because you are a baptized child of God.

But do not think it will ever be easy. Though prayer be a joy, it is hard work. I mentioned before that like Jesus, prayer is for us like eating, sleeping, and breathing - but by that I did not mean to imply easy or automatic, but rather something that we need to live. Something that we were created to do. So it is with prayer. We were created to have this fellowship with God, but how much in this world and life hinders our prayers! Our Old Adam telling us there are more important things to do, that you're too busy to pray. The old, evil foe whispering in your ear that your prayers really don't matter. The world telling you that rather than pray, you should get up off your knees and do something.

Well, while there *is* a time to get off your knees and do something, there is also a time to be on your knees. And the reason why the devil tries to convince us that our

prayers really don't matter is because they *do* matter. And our we really too busy to pray? Is what we do really more important than what our Father in heaven can do?

And so our Lord has commanded us to pray, like mothers tell their children to brush their teeth - not just to do something good, but because He knows we need it. And our Lord has not just commanded us to pray, but has added these promises to His command, that we might pray all the more, and confidently: knowing that He will hear, that He will answer, that He will give.

And as you come to the altar today to receive the body and blood of Your Saviour, Your Lord renews those promises to you, as the forgiveness and life of Jesus are given to you. That **resting** here in God's house and being served by Him, **breathing** in His Word, and **eating** His very body and blood, you grow and be formed into the image of Christ - the image lost in sin, but restored in Him. That image which is not a possession, but a life. A life of close, intimate fellowship with your Father in heaven - a life which is given at the font, lives through the altar, and reaches its goal in heaven.

You have that life. Yes, you do! So pray, children of God. Pray. Pray boldly. Pray confidently. Pray joyously. For you have the ear of your Father in heaven who loves you. For Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

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.