

24 July 2016
Pentecost 10

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

Jesu Juva

“Learning to Pray, Learning of Christ”

Text: Genesis 18:17-33; Luke 11:1-13; Colossians 2:6-15

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

Abraham’s life had just changed. As we heard last week, God came to him and had just told him that by this time next year, he and Sarah would have a son. The son that God had promised to give them. The son from whom the Savior of the world would descend. Abraham had waited almost 25 years for this day. And many, or most, or perhaps all of those days, he prayed for this day.

Now, right after he had received this news - this joyous news! - he would pray again. But this time, a very different prayer. A prayer for Sodom and Gomorrah. For that day, God told Abraham not just what He was about to do for him, but also what He was about to do against Sodom and Gomorrah. For their sin was *very grave*.

Now you know what sin that was. The names Sodom and Gomorrah have become synonymous with homosexuality, which is one of the ways sinful human beings take God’s good gift of sexuality and twist it into something it was never meant to be. And the word for this practice, sodomy, even came from the name of this city. And I have no doubt that were God to come today and state that He was going to exercise His judgment against people living like that today, that *sadly*, sadly there would be great joy and celebration among many Christians.

But not Abraham. He didn’t rejoice at this news. *He prayed*. His joy over the announcement of the birth of his son, quickly turned to concern. Partly, I’m sure, because his nephew Lot lived there. But notice: he isn’t just praying for Lot. He doesn’t ask God to rescue Lot and his family. He could have. He could have prayed: *Wait for Lot to leave, O Lord. Or: Let me first go get Lot, and then . . .* But he doesn’t pray that. **He prays for the cities and all in them.** Not just for God to spare the righteous, but for God to spare the wicked for the sake of the righteous.

You see, Abraham knew what we often forget: that the real enemy and who we are fighting against are not the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, not flesh and blood. The battle is against satan and his minions, who are seeking to undermine and overthrow the church in any way and at all times. That is why the weapon to use in this battle is prayer. Otherwise, what a useless weapon that would be. How foolish it would be to pray. Maybe

that's why we falter in our prayers. Many are criticizing our president these days for not naming the enemy and as a result not fighting in the right way. Yet perhaps we have done the same thing.

So Lord, teach us to pray.

That's not just our prayer, it's what the disciples also asked Jesus. But what are they asking? Not just how to pray, the mechanics of it - but how to think; how to look at things rightly and see them rightly and so know how to pray. In the Epistle today, St. Paul said: *See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ.* Let no one take you captive by wrong thinking, worldly thinking.

So Lord, teach us to pray. Help us see as You see, think as You think, do as You do.

Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.

That's what the disciples asked Jesus. Now we have no record of how John did this, but this we know: John preached repentance and forgiveness of sins. So it seems to make sense that he would teach his disciples: *that's* how you pray. In repentance, and for the forgiveness of sins. That is prayer against the true enemy - the sin within and the sin without.

And Luther thought that also is what the Lord's Prayer, the prayer Jesus gave and taught His disciples to pray, was all about. Luther said:

In the Lord's Prayer . . . we pray, "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us," and so on. In fact, the entire Lord's Prayer is nothing else than such a confession. For what are our petitions other than a confession that we neither have nor do what we ought, as well as a plea for grace and a cheerful conscience? Confession of this sort should and must continue without letup as long as we live. For the Christian life essentially consists in acknowledging ourselves to be sinners and in praying for grace.

Acknowledging ourselves to be sinners and praying for grace. Grace for you, me, and the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord's Prayer is filled with plural pronouns: we, us, our - not I, me, my. We're praying for grace and forgiveness, for ourselves, and for others too.

But that's not all Jesus teaches His disciples about prayer. He says a lot more, in fact. For He also teaches them that when you have a need, when God brings into your life someone in need, go to the One who can help. For why did the man go to his friend in the middle of the night? He knew that he could help. So too in our fight against the real

enemy, we have the One who not only *can* help, but who *wants* to help, has promised to help, and who wants us to come to Him at *all* times - for *He neither slumbers nor sleeps* (Psalm 121). ***Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you***, Jesus says. He will not deny our prayers. As His baptized sons and daughters, He will not give you *a snake or scorpion* in return for your prayer - He gives *good gifts*. Always. Though we may not always see them that way.

But remember? That's why part of asking ***teach us to pray*** is asking that we may see right, and think right, and believe. Perhaps an example here would be the difference between a corn snake and a coral snake. You see it - which is it? They look quite similar. But the coral snake is poisonous, the corn snake helpful to have around. Sometimes we don't see what God provides rightly and think it a coral snake rather than a corn snake; a harmful thing instead of a helpful thing. But Jesus assures us: Your Father does not give harmful snakes and scorpions. ***If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!***

He will give the Holy Spirit. Why the Holy Spirit? To see rightly. To know the real enemy. To strengthen us in the true fight. To teach us to pray. To strengthen us in faith toward God and love toward one another. And especially to point us to Christ and see that in Him the victory has already been won. That's what St. Paul was talking about today in the Epistle: Christ's victory, given us in baptism. Christ's victory through His death and resurrection.

But again, it's hard to see that sometimes, isn't it? Hard to see the victory when Christians here and all around the world are being persecuted for their belief, fired for not violating their conscience, and even beheaded. ***Lord, teach us to pray!*** Teach us to believe that they can kill us, but they can't take our life. That the victory has already been won. That our sin is forgiven, and death has been disarmed. That life isn't just about the things here and now. In fact, if we are clinging to the things of here and now, we are clinging to false gods. And so God is helping us by prying our fingers off these false gods! He is helping, though it may seem like hurting. Though it may seem like a coral snake, not a corn snake. Teach us these things. ***Teach us to pray.***

And Abraham needed to learn too. As great and as bold as his prayer was, as much an example as he is for us, he still had more to learn. *For he didn't go low enough*. He *underestimated* the mercy of God. 50, 45, 40, 30, 20, 10. But God wants no one to perish, but for all to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). So, in fact, God would not destroy *the world* for the sake of even ONE. And that one is His Son. His Son, the only righteous one. His Son who prays for us. His Son who took our place under the wrath of God against our sin, so that we who are not righteous would not be swept away, but made righteous in Him. That was true of Abraham, in fact. Abraham who was an idolater before God called him (Joshua 24:2). And Abraham believed God's promised of a Savior,

and it was counted to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6).

So God did give Abraham the son He had promised. And God has given us, too, the son that He has promised. *His* Son. Who was born for us, died for us, and whose Body and Blood are here given to us, that Jesus' righteousness be credited to us too. By grace, through faith. *For whoever believes these words has exactly what they say: forgiveness of sins* (Small Catechism: The Sacrament of the Altar).

And after being given the righteousness of God and then being given a son, Abraham prayed. And so do we. Just as Abraham interceded for the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and just as Jesus intercedes for us, so now we can intercede for others.

Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us to do that. Teach us how, to see the enemy aright. Teach us to see, and think, and do. Teach us Your mercy. Teach us Jesus. Given to us, given *for all*.

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.