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Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Praying as Children of God”
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.

Remember back to when you were little. A little child. (Some of us have longer ago to think than others!) But when you were little, when you needed something, you asked your parents. You didn't worry about whether you were going to get it or not - you just asked. Candy, toys, a ride in the arms, whatever it was. You just asked. Because you had a father and mother who loved you, who provided for you. All that you had, all that you needed, came from their hands. So if you had any need, or anything you wanted at all, you just asked.

As time went on, however, you changed, didn't you? You grew up, and your requests changed too. You didn't just ask for candy, toys, or a ride in the arms, but maybe bigger things; maybe more serious things. For protection from danger. For your parents to help someone in need.

And then more changes. You realized some things were too big for mom and dad. There were some things they couldn't do for you; some things they couldn't give you. And then you learned something else too - how to manipulate mom and dad. How to ask, when to ask, to increase your odds at getting what you wanted. And then if mom said no, ask dad - and vice versa.

And then after a while, you just stopped asking. Because you got old enough to do things, get things, on your own. You grew up and began to rely on your parents less and go it on your own. But still, even then, when problems arose, when you needed advice, when things got too big for you, you could still ask. You could still go to mom and dad, and know they would be there for you.

As a Christian, maybe that's where you're at. You've grown up, do things on your own, rely on God less now than you did before. Oh, He's still there for advice, or to cry out to when things get too big for you, when problems arise in your life. Maybe you even try to manipulate Him into giving you what you want. But the day-to-day stuff, the day-to-day needs, you just take care of on your own.

Well, with His words to His disciples (and to us today), Jesus is inviting us back, back to the beginning, back to being, and thinking of ourselves as children of God. Because you always are, you know. Fathers will tell their daughters: *you'll always be my little girl, even when you're all grown up*. Well, you're always a child of God, even when you're all grown up. And the disciples are too. They've grown a lot over the past three years they spent with Jesus. But even though they will soon be sent out as apostles, sent out to proclaim Jesus and all that He has done, don't stop being children, Jesus says. Ask. Be always little children asking their father.

That's what Jesus is saying in the words of the Holy Gospel today. Be that child - again and always - that asks your Father for anything and everything. All that you have, all that you need, comes from His hand. So ask - because you're His child and He is your Father.

Which is what it means to ask *in Jesus' name*. That's not a magic formula, so that by saying those words, God has to do it. Children often think that with the word *please*. They learn that's the "magic word" that will get them what they want - *I said please so you have to do it*. But to ask in Jesus' name isn't like that. It means to ask because His name is on you; because you are a baptized child of God - a child of your heavenly Father.

Which means prayer is never man-to-man, grown up to grown up. It is always child to Father. Which also means that we shouldn't over analyze our prayers, which we tend to do at times. Is this a good prayer? Can I pray for this? How do I pray this prayer? Just pray! And let your Father figure it out. That's what children do, isn't it? Ask mom, ask dad, tug on their sleeve - they'll figure the rest out; they'll do what's best. Children just ask, say what's on their mind and in their heart. That's what we can do. That's how we can be. Not worried about prayer. Just praying. Not because of our request or because of how we're asking, but because we have a Father who wants us to pray, and has promised to hear us and give us what we ask for.

And then there's also a bonus, too, Jesus said - *joy. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full*. Little children ask for what they need and then joyfully run off and play, because it's in their mom or dad's hands. It's all good. They don't have to worry about it. They don't have to worry about food, house, clothing, protection, or what they asked for - mom and dad's got it. And for us too. Ask, pray, and then live in the joy of knowing that your Father in heaven got it. He'll take care of it.

Now, maybe that seems like a tall order, something that's even impossible for us to do. Because as little children learn, mom and dad don't always, can't always, do it. They fail. They're sinners too. And so we learn to be independent and rely on ourselves. And as Christians, maybe we carry that attitude, that thinking, into our lives of faith, too. The disappointment we have experienced in this world and life that maybe makes us doubt the

word and promises of God, that He wants us to pray, that we're not a bother, that He wants to give us all that we ask for, all that we need.

That's why *when* Jesus spoke these words to His disciples is so important - it is on the night of His betrayal, arrest, and in the morning His crucifixion. In very short order, *He'll* be the son praying to His Father in the Garden of Gethsemane . . . which may seem to disprove this promise Jesus just made to His disciples, to *ask and you will receive*. But Jesus did receive. He wasn't saved from death by not dying, He was saved from death by rising from it.

And that, Jesus' resurrection, is why we can believe this promise about prayer. For here you see God's love for you. His perfect love. Love that all earthly moms and dads will fall short of. For on the cross is God giving himself for you in His Son. The cross shows the love of God for you, taking care of your greatest need: your need for life. Life in the forgiveness of your sins. Life from the death you will die. And in Jesus, you have it. In Jesus, you too will rise. And if God has done that for you already, the rest is small potatoes, isn't it? And all the rest, He wants for you too. He delights to give to His children. That you have joy. And peace.

And God does act because of your prayers, because His children come to Him and ask. Sometimes we overanalyze here too, thinking that if God knows everything and already knows what He's going to do, then why bother? Why ask? But that's not how the Scriptures speak of it. Abraham's prayer made a difference. Moses' prayers made a difference. Maybe Lydia's prayer by the riverside in Philippi is what led to Paul being there.

Especially when you pray for those who cannot pray for themselves. Unbelievers, or those who think they can't. I know that I will do things for my children that I will not do for others, because they are my children. So maybe a beggar asks for money - I may or may not give it to him. But if my child asks me to give him some money because she has compassion in her heart and wants to be compassionate, that would make a difference, wouldn't it? Don't underestimate your prayers, and don't overanalyze them. Just be a child of God and ask your Father. Let Him sort out the rest.

And trust that He will. Maybe that's the hardest part of prayer - trust. Jesus said at the end of the Gospel today: ***In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.*** But how often does it seem that the world is overcoming Christians? Is overcoming the Church? Well, it seemed that way on the cross, too. It seemed that way when your friend and Saviour was sealed in a tomb. Yet it's true, what Jesus said. His resurrection proved it. He did overcome. Everything that the world and hell could throw at Him. But our prayers in this world and life come from Gethsemane, not from glory. From tribulation, not from victory. Not yet, for us.

But that's why we pray. Because we're children who need help. Because others need help. And we have a Father who has promised to give us what we ask for. Maybe it won't be the way we think, maybe it won't be when we think, maybe it won't even be on this side of eternity. But His promise is true. As true as the empty tomb. And remember what Jesus said to Thomas the Sunday after His resurrection? *Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed* (John 20:29).

And so we pray. And then, as Luther said in his instructions after his Morning and Evening Prayers: *Then go joyfully to your work* (after the Morning Prayer) and, *go to sleep in good cheer* (after the Evening Prayer). Because your Father's got it. He'll take care of it.

So pray. And there's a lot to pray for, isn't there? John gave us a picture of heaven in the reading from Revelation today, but we're not there yet, of course. For us is still the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues. For us is still tribulation. For us is still wars and conflict, doubt and death. And it's hard. And it's sometimes frightening. And it's often too big for us.

So pray. Go to your Father, just like you used to. For He has promised to hear and give you what you ask for. Don't worry about the how and when, just pray. Let Him worry about the how and the when. He'll take care of it. Just as He baptized you, and feeds you, and forgives you, so He'll do this, too. Just ask. For He didn't leave His Son in the grave, and He won't leave your prayers there either.

Which we know for *Christ is risen!* [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] And you are a dearly loved child of God in Him.

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.