

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church (Columbus, OH)

Rogate – May 22, 2022

John 16:23-33 – The Father Hears Me

By Vicar Peter Wagner

Christ is risen! *He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!* Amen. Our text is from the Gospel, from John chapter 16. Jesus said to his disciples, “Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” This is our text.

We just sang Martin Luther’s hymn about the Lord’s Prayer. That’s because the theme of Rogate Sunday is prayer. Rogate means, Ask! Ask because God listens. “Truly God has listened,” we quoted from Psalm 66 in the Introit, “He has attended to the voice of my prayer.” So Jesus tells us to pray. He says, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

Praying is one of the greatest good works a Christian can do. In our epistle reading James told us to be doers of the word, and not hearers only. And one of the best ways we can *do* God’s word is to take it on our lips and pray it. Pray the Psalms. Pray in the name of Jesus, according to his will. Pray for all, for loved ones, for those who hate you, for good government, for peace, for the sick and distressed, the suffering, the straying. The list goes on. Be a doer who prays, and you will be blessed in your praying. What a blessing to know that Christ has said the Father hears you!

Yet we don’t pray. Martin Luther hit home when he wrote in the Large Catechism, “Let no one think that it is all the same whether he pray or not, as vulgar people do, who grope in such delusion and ask, ‘Why should I pray? Who knows whether God heeds or will hear my prayer? If I do not pray, someone else will.’ And thus they fall into the habit of never praying, and frame a pretext, as though we taught that there is no duty or need of prayer.” Hard stuff.

Luther went on to give five reasons why Christians should pray. I’ll summarize. One: It’s our duty to pray because God has commanded it. In the Second Commandment God forbids us to misuse his name, but he also wants us call upon it in every trouble, pray, praise and give thanks. So prayer is commanded. Two: Prayer drives us to take refuge in God’s promises, promises like Psalm 50:15, “Call upon me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you,”¹ and promises like Matthew 7:7, “Ask, and it will be given to you... For everyone who asks receives.”² Three: Since God himself has taught us the words of the Lord’s Prayer, we know exactly what kind of prayers God wants to hear. We have no excuse. Four: Praying makes us realize how much we need God and rely on him. It makes us recognize that he takes care of us. It teaches us to receive his gifts with thanksgiving. So prayer humbles us. And five: Prayer arms us with the power of God himself against the devil. We should pray because Satan doesn’t want us to, because it harms him and strengthens our faith.

To repeat. Prayer is commanded. Prayer offers promises. The Lord’s Prayer is our model. Prayer humbles us. And Prayer arms us against the devil. So even though God already knows everything you need as his children, it’s absolutely worthwhile to pray. You can call on your heavenly Father with all boldness and confidence, because Christ has opened your access to the Father.

If you’re like me, you often intend to pray, but you never adequately make the time. I pray with my family at mealtimes and bedtime. After breakfast we also have family devotions, but we aren’t consistent enough. One night last week my wife and I prayed for each other, which made me realize to my shame how long it had been since I had prayed with her alone. No one is satisfied with their prayer life. As I study for the ministry, I know I need to develop good prayer habits, so I can care for the sheep God gives me. But when the Zion prayer chain emails go out, I make a note to pray, or pray once, but soon forget. I’ve learned to pause and pray immediately, because otherwise I’ll get distracted. So I find myself silently praying quick simple prayers throughout the day whenever I think of something.

You get the point. Since Jesus has restored us to the Father by his death and resurrection, we can and must pray to the Father in his name. But today’s text from John 16 is still confusing. Why did Jesus say, “In that day

¹ Psalm 50:15

² Matthew 7:7-8

you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you?” Doesn’t Jesus intercede for us to the Father? Isn’t that one reason why we conclude our prayers, “In Jesus’ name, Amen?” But here Jesus seems to be saying he will not ask the Father on our behalf.

When Jesus said this, he was actually comforting us. He wasn’t saying he would never intercede for us. Not at all! He’s our great intercessor who pleads for us to the Father to save us! But he said these things to show that that he’s more than our intercessor. He’s more than a heavenly message carrier. He’s our access. He has brought us into our Father’s house as baptized children of God. So he gives us the Holy Spirit to teach us to pray in faith. Jesus doesn’t just speak in our place. He lets us speak in his place. He gives us his own words. He sets us free to pour out our hearts to our Father in heaven.

But what about when our prayers seem to accomplish nothing? We easily want to blame God, but the Bible says we hinder our own prayers by our own unbelief. James chapter 1 teaches the man who would pray, “Let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord.”³ When we doubt that our prayers do any good, or we doubt that the Father hears us, we are praying without faith. We’re not praying in the name of Jesus, in accord with his will. We need to pray in repentance, asking for greater faith, trusting that God may not answer our prayers how we want. Not my will, but Thy will be done.

In the wilderness, the Israelites doubted God would bring them to the promised land. They doubted he would give them food and water. They didn’t pray, they only complained. So God sent fiery serpents among them. But he promised that if they only looked to the bronze serpent on the pole, they would be healed. God was giving them a chance to pray in faith. A silent prayer with the eyes. A tiny cry for help, without words. Like our quick, silent prayers as we read the prayer chain emails. And so when we pray to God for help in the name of the one who was lifted up on the cross – just as the serpent was lifted on the pole – the Holy Spirit gives us faith, faith that keeps our prayers from being hindered.

Christ is our man on the inside with the Father. But even better, he makes us insiders. Jesus gives us his words to pray. He said, “I am not alone, for the Father is with me.” The Father did not forsake the Son on the cross. He heard his prayer and raised him from the dead. And the Father does not forsake you either. You can say, “I am not alone, for the Father is with me. And he hears me.”

That’s especially good to remember now that we have become outsiders in society. We’re scorned by the world for the sake of the gospel. We’re scattered, like the disciples when Jesus was arrested. Our congregation feels like a small island in an ocean of unbelief. We don’t feel surrounded by saints. We feel isolated, like our Lord was left alone. But Jesus said, “I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have told you these things so that in me you will have peace... Take heart, because I have overcome the world.” Jesus overcame the world by his death and resurrection, so you might have peace. Peace in his word and sacrament. Access to pray in his name. And a God who does not leave you alone.

I visited one of our shut-ins this week, a widower who mourns the loss of his wife. As I was getting ready to leave, he said as he often does, “Don’t forget me.”

“I don’t want to forget you.” I said. “And your church doesn’t forget you in prayer.” That’s for us – don’t forget our shut-ins in your prayers! “But,” I said, “God never forgets you.”

“I know,” he said, almost sobbing, “But I feel so alone!”

“You’re not alone!” I said, “The Father is with you.” Jesus said, “I am not alone, for the Father is with me.” And you can say the same thing. “I am not alone. For the Father is with me. And he hears me.” Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in the risen Christ, unto life everlasting. Amen.

³ James 1:5-8