

Sixth Sunday after Easter

John 16:23-33

May 26, 2019

Our gospel reading today provides us with another of those topics that, if we're not careful, will leave us scandalized, without hope, and very confused. But if we rightly read and take to heart Jesus' words, it will give us a sure hope and confidence in Christ our redeemer.

Now, most gods are distant, uninterested things. And in fact, for most gods, to get their attention, the worshipers must dance around fire pits, sacrifice pigs and do all sorts of brazen stuff in the distant hope that their god will recognize them and grant them their request.

For all man-made, invented 'gods', worship is shaped like an "m": we gotta reach up, reach out, do our sacrifice or make our offering, and then the 'god' will reach down and grant us our requests. Human-made gods are always upside-down, like the letter "m".

But not with the one True God – not with He who sits on the throne in heaven and rules the sea and sky.

For our God, it's not about the dance or the roast pig. His attentiveness to our needs and wants of body and soul is limitless, and it is only a prayer away. And in fact, with our God, the only TRUE God, worship is a capital "W"! That's right.

Worship begins with God coming to us, coming into our presence in Word and Sacrament, offering His good and gracious gifts with no strings attached. He gives freely just as He gave His only son for us without strings attached. But beyond Word and Sacrament, our Lord gives to us in another way...

Prayer. We can talk to God and we can be confident that He hears. And not just on the big stuff, the big, life-changing decisions or the prayers cried out from pain or loss, but the little things, the daily things, the mundane things – God loves to hear us pray.

And notice how Jesus gives us prayer: He doesn't create the 11th Commandment and say "thou shall pray" but he offers this gift of prayer to each of us and even tells us the consequences OF prayer – that "the Father will give you whatever you ask" in Jesus' name.

Now here is where the scandalization happens if we're not careful to read the Word of Christ as He desires. Some have taken this text to mean that "we can ask for anything and we'll get it, period, and it doesn't matter what it is." So, if you want a million dollars, just ask for it and it's yours. If you want a fancy new car, boom it's yours if you just pray for it, and if you don't get your millions or your fancy cars, it's because you're really not faithful enough – not really the type of believer God responds to.

Further, the idea, the gift of prayer has been scandalized into anything BUT the intent Jesus offers. Be careful whenever you hear some preacher or self-proclaimed evangelist say, "I have a secret way of getting at this or making God do that." There is only one way to God, and it is through Jesus. And this is also why context is so important.

The "enthusiasts" (the Pentecostals and the evangelicals) have come up with this clever way of turning prayer into a human work. And here's how they do it:

They look at the Bible and they say, "well in Matthew 18 it says that if a few of us agree on anything on earth, that it will be done by God in heaven, therefore if we have a 'prayer of agreement', then we will get what we want."

See they take two texts which have nothing to do with one another and they weld them together, turning God into the wish master and the Bible into a book of untapped secrets. And it's always secretive; that preacher or that evangelist – he's the first one to figure out the code, unlock the secret – ever. That's how they sell it. And we love secrets, don't we?

But as I've said to you and to others many times – and to myself – we need to be careful when reading the Scripture that we don't read ourselves into the text – do not go beyond what is written, as St. Paul writes, for to do so is to make a mockery of God and to scandalize the Christian faith.

There is no such thing as a “prayer of agreement”; it doesn't exist. Matthew 18 is about the “office of the keys” or the authority to forgive the sins of others or to bind the consciences of others, and not a secret way to get a million dollars from God, as if He's some machine where, if we just push the right buttons we get what we want.

Jesus says, “whatever you ask of the Father IN MY NAME.” What does this mean? Well, we're reading from the book of John and John tells us.

First, Jesus is the Word become flesh. So, when you pray in Jesus' name, you pray according to the Word, you can't separate the two. And God gives us all sorts of promises in His Word: forgiveness, salvation, healing, deliverance from temptation and evil – just read the Lord's Prayer and what do you see? All of the promises of God wrapped up in a simple, easy to remember prayer which the Lord Himself taught us and bid us to pray.

But there is something else we can say about praying in Jesus' name. And this is where prayer sort of enters the realm of demand. It is

praying with so much confidence and assurance that God will do what He says, that we pray “for Jesus’ sake”.

Again, this is not a ticket for us to pray “for Jesus’ sake, give me my new speed boat” – this isn’t the point of any prayer. But, “for Jesus’ sake, give me confidence and hope and assurance and comfort in the fact that, because He died and rose again, I am covered in His righteousness and I will be saved.” For Jesus’ sake, “give me what you’ve promised.”

The gift of prayer is the greatest gift God has given us, next to Christ’s death and resurrection itself. That we can talk to and with God – no other religion offers this because every other religion in the world began in the mind of sinful humans and that sin builds-in a barrier between what is eternal and what is temporal...but not with God.

Our God, the only God, He broke that barrier by sending His only Son to die on the cross, and this opened the way to heaven for us so that we can pray to Him, learn from Him, trust in Him, and follow Him.

But of such a gift of joy – with such a lifeline to heaven available to us 24/7 – why do we have such a difficult time praying? Why are we so bad at it?

Well, because of sin. We have our sinful nature, we have the world and its temptations and distractions, and we have the devil himself all working 24/7 to keep us away from God, to keep us away from the faith, to keep us away from Jesus and His Word.

Do you think that the devil wants us praying to our Father in the way Christ our Lord has taught us? Is it Jesus who tells us to skip church, to stay home, sleep in, or put everything else ahead of our prayers and our worship and our fellowship? Absolutely not! But the devil works tirelessly through what we see on TV, through misconceptions or

misinterpretations of Scripture so that we might run from God and listen to the wicked serpent instead. Same old tricks, different era.

And we have a world filled with distractions and temptations – things which lure us in and promise us health, wealth, and success if we just pop a pill or purchase a book – which, in the end, leaves us broken, broke, and in more despair than when we started.

And we have our own sinful nature telling us that God doesn't care, God doesn't listen, God is too busy for us, let's not bother Him today. We have a nature within us that is hostile to God. And of course, the sinful nature works hand-in-hand with the devil as he twists the Word of the Lord to mean something that it doesn't. I already mentioned the self-proclaimed evangelists telling us to have "prayers of agreement" and who say there's a secret "prayer language" and all sorts of other rubbish. But shut all that stuff off, stop listening to it, and guess what? Even our mind is working hard to convince us and to leave us in despair.

To "pray in Jesus' name" isn't some magic mantra that makes things happen, as long as we end every prayer in this way. To pray "in Jesus' name" means that we pray according to His Word and we pray for the things that His Word promises us.

We can pray for peace and love and hope. We can offer prayers of thanksgiving for all that God has done for us in Christ. We can petition our Lord for help in our needs of body and soul. We can pray for others and their comfort and healing, for such are the prayers with which our Lord delights.

Our daily bread may be simply, daily bread. Or it may be something more. Remember, it's not about what we think we need or what we think we deserve, but it is always about what God KNOWS we need, and not ever what we deserve. And sometimes this means that life

doesn't go the way we plan, or we want. And that's okay. God knows our lives better than we do, and He knows what's best for us.

And here's something very wonderful about all of this...

When we go for a job interview, to buy a big-ticket item, maybe we're dating and want to marry the person we're in love with, what is the natural way in which we do it? Well, we try really hard to sell ourselves, right? At the job interview we say things like "I have experience, I'm good with people, I know the product," etc. When we're buying a house or a car we work hard to make sure that the realtor or the salesman knows only the good financial decisions we've made and what our net worth is, but we work hard to hide the flaws and the scars of our past. And when we're dating, we put on a mask or a not-so-honest identity so that our significant other doesn't see everything, at least not right away.

And for whatever reason we think that we must do the same when it comes to God. But again – here's the wonderful thing...we don't. God knows every one of our deepest secrets, our flaws, our sins. He knows them all, and yet He still encourages us and invites us to pray. You don't need to work with God in the same way you work with the world. The Lord isn't interested in your resume or your accomplishments or your bank account or your good decisions. You don't need to sell yourself to Jesus!

God simply wants to hear you and He wants to teach you to trust Him and lean on Him in times of trouble and joy.

God gives us this great gift of prayer so that our faith be more than just some individual, disconnected thing that we personally believe, but that THE faith be apart of us universally, beyond time and space, that we become a part of the Great Kingdom of God where angels and

archangels forever sing praises, and the saints of past time forever serve God at His throne.

God has opened heaven to us, given us access to the splendor of the city of gold. And prayer is one of the sure ways by which we have access.

Of course, we have the very Word of the Lord spoken from His lips and given to us as Scripture which we can trust and hold fast to. We have the Sacraments: Holy Baptism, the sure promise of salvation and eternal life, drowning away the old man so that the new man, Christ Jesus reign in us. We have the Lord's Supper assuring us of forgiveness of sins and filling our bellies, both our bellies of faith and our bellies of body with Jesus' very own flesh and blood. We have the comforting and assuring words of the Absolution where, from the lips of a sinful man, God's absolute promise of forgiveness is proclaimed.

And if all this wasn't enough, we also have the gift of prayer, where we can speak to our Heavenly Father with whatever request or need we have, and we don't have to hide or disguise ourselves, because we are already hidden under the robe of Christ the crucified and risen's righteousness.

And so, we pray with confidence. We pray with hope. We pray with faith. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.