

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

We began our year in the catechism at Lutheran South teaching about prayer, specifically the Lord's Prayer, but teaching about prayer generally, too. Prayer is something Christians do, and I think most of us would agree that our prayer life is a barometer of our faith.

Jesus' disciples were men of prayer. They observed Jesus at prayer, and they asked Him to teach them to pray. And so Jesus did. He taught them what we call the Lord's Prayer. Jesus taught them to pray it. "*When you pray, say: ...*" (Luke 11:2).

And so we pray it often. We're encouraged to pray it when we get up and when we go to bed. We're encouraged to pray it when we sit down to eat. We pray the Lord's Prayer at every setting of the Divine Service, at Matins and Morning Prayer, at Vespers and Evening Prayer, at Compline. We pray it at all of the daily prayers for individuals and families in the hymnal: morning, noon, early evening, and at the close of the day. We pray it when I visit the sick, the shut-in, the dying.

Luther teaches us that the Introduction to the Lord's Prayer, "Our Father who art in heaven," is not only the opening address to this prayer, but it is also our invitation to believe and pray. "With these words God tenderly invites us to believe that He is our true Father and that we are His true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask Him as dear children ask their dear father" (Small Catechism, Lord's Prayer, Introduction).

But more than the Lord's tender invitation to pray, there is a "must" and a "should" to prayer. Luther teaches in the Large Catechism that "nothing is more NECESSARY [there's the must] than that we SHOULD continually turn towards God's ear, call upon Him, and pray to Him" (*Concordia*, Large Catechism, Part III:2). Luther reminds us: the Lord "requires this [prayer] of us and has not left it to our choice. But it is our duty and obligation to pray, if we would be Christians" (LC, III:8). Indeed, we are commanded to use the Lord's name rightly in prayer (Ex. 20:7); Jesus commands us to "*ask*" (Matt. 7:7); and St. Paul instructs us to "*pray without ceasing*" (1 Thess. 5:17).

Now, it's easy to pray when the answers seem to come right away...and when the answer is what we're hoping for. I told the LSUS students this story last Thursday, because Thursday morning was for me a day of answered prayers. You see, I was scheduled for chapel at Lutheran South last Thursday. But I had some issues crop up that looked like they were going to prevent me from being able to get there. Late Wednesday, I made some phone calls to make arrangements, but I mostly got voice mail. I probably wouldn't be able to come, I told Mrs. Reynolds.

But the prayers were answered, and I was able to leave the house to head for school for chapel—but with little time to spare. In fact, I needed more help to get down to school on time. “Lord, it’s up to you. I need to hit some green lights on the way.” One could simply chalk it up to coincidence, but I don’t. The Lord heard my prayers, and I made it down to school in record time, green lights helping to speed me there — including a couple of yellows thrown in there to keep me praying.

On the other hand, when prayers seem to go unheard, praying seems so much harder ... or when the answers are not what you hoped for. How easy it would be for the Christian community to give up on God with regard to life. We have been praying for 46 years, 8 months, and 29 days. “*Arise, O God, defend your cause*”; “*how the enemy scoffs*” at You, O Lord, “*and a foolish people reviles your name*”; “give justice to these innocent children”; “*do not forget the life of your poor forever*” (Ps. 74:22, 18-19). And yet, our prayers seem to have gone unheeded.

Yet, we have not lost heart; our prayers have not faltered. I’m thankful for those who braved the cold to pray last Thursday afternoon and evening at the Planned Parenthood facility as part of the 40 Days for Life prayers. I took my turn that afternoon. I was certainly cold by the time DaVanna and David relieved me. DaVanna had her hoodie tied up so that all you could see was a little oval of her face. She chided me, “Well, Pastor, you didn’t dress appropriately.” “Thank you very much for that consolation, DaVanna.”

Yes, we continue to pray. The Lord does not want us to lose heart; He doesn’t want our prayers to falter. It’s a common refrain in the Psalms, “*How long, O LORD?*” “*Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*” (Ps. 13:1) These Psalmists wrestled within themselves and with God, and yet, they kept on praying!

So also Jacob in our Old Testament lesson. We heard of Jacob’s wrestling, but why? You recall that Jacob was estranged from his brother Esau, for Jacob had stolen Esau’s blessing from their father Isaac. After this, Esau hated Jacob and sought to kill him. Jacob had to flee from the wrath of his brother.

Now Jacob had prospered in his exile. But now Jacob was coming back to his father’s land, to meet his brother, and Jacob was afraid. So Jacob prayed, “*O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, that I may do you good,’ I am not worthy of the least of all the deeds of steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant ... Please deliver me from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I fear him, that he may come and attack me ...*” (Gen. 32:9-11).

Jacob wrestled within himself. Would the Lord answer his prayer, he wondered; and yet, he remembered the Lord’s promise: “*I will surely do you good,*

and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude.” That same night, he wrestled also with God. And like an earthly father might do with his child, God let Jacob prevail over Him, so that He might bless him. Jacob’s refusal to let go until the Lord blessed him was really his fervent prayer to the Lord—and the Lord answered him and blessed him.

Similarly, the evangelist Luke tells us that’s why Jesus told the parable in our Gospel lesson, that we might learn that we *“ought always to pray and not lose heart.”*

Now this parable is interesting and perhaps distressing, because of the cast of characters: a widow seeking justice and an unrighteous judge. The widow was a persistent petitioner of this judge, but the judge didn’t pay any attention to her—for a while anyway. But after a while, he heard her petition and granted it, but not because he was seeking justice; rather, so that he might not have to be pestered by her, and that his reputation might not be beaten down by his lack of concern for this widow.

It’s clear whom the widow represents—the widow represents believers at prayer; but the unrighteous judge presents a bit of a difficulty. Can he represent God? He does, but by way of contrast.

And Jesus’ point is this: if this unrighteous judge *“who neither feared God nor respected man”* would answer the petitions of this needy widow, how much more can we needy believers rely on a God who IS righteous to answer our fervent prayers! How much more can we depend on the God who loved us enough to send His own Son unto cross and death! How much more can the elect count on not just justice but grace to sinners and forgiveness when we fail! How much more can we trust that the Righteous Judge will answer our prayers, not because He tires of hearing them, but because He wants what is best for us! How much more can we be consoled when cross and trial are grieving us that Christ is near with His cheer, that He will never leave us or forsake us! How much more shall we hope that *“when our last hour comes, [He will] give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven”* (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, 6th Petition)! How eagerly shall we await with faith that great and glorious day!

You see, the question of prayer is not really about God’s gracious will toward us. We know that. *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above”* (James 1:17), from God who is righteous, both *“just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus”* (Rom. 3:26). He wants our prayers. He wants our best! He wants our salvation! *“I tell you, [God] will give justice to [His elect] speedily.”*

The question of prayer is about us? Will we continue to pray when the answers to our prayers don’t go as hoped, or will we lose heart? *“When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?”* Lord, keep us steadfast in Your Word and faith, that our prayers, offered in the faith that accounts us righteous, might avail

much. Lord, grant that we might be like Jacob of old in all of our wrestlings with You; grant that we might be like the widow in Jesus' parable, that we may never lose heart, that we may never let go of Christ or His cross, but that we may cling to them unto the end and be eternally blessed.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.