

"MORE THAN WE CAN IMAGINE"

Ninth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 12)

July 25, 2021

Zion Lutheran Church
Fort Wayne, Indiana

TEXT:

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the Power at work within us, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Ephesians 3:20, 21 (ESV)

My personal prayer life was at its peak when I was only eighteen years old--hardly an age at which you would expect a young man to be so fervently engaged in prayer. From the middle of November of 1972 until the end of January of 1973 I prayed more often and more fervently than I ever had before or ever have since. You see, during that time my Dad was extremely ill in the hospital. I prayed often and with great fervor for him to be restored to health. After all, Dad was only sixty years old--and besides that, I was about to embark on a journey that he was pretty excited about: That fall I would become the first in my family to go to college, and I was going there to study for the ministry. My prayers were sincere and they were offered in the name of Jesus--the only "name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). But despite all of my prayers and my faith, on January 29, 1973 my father died. I had no problem accepting that as God's will. Even though I certainly didn't understand it, I assumed that the Lord had His reasons for not answering my prayers at that particular time.

It wasn't until a few years later that it dawned on me that God did indeed answer my prayers in a way far beyond what I had desired or imagined. I asked God to make Dad better and God answered my prayers by making Dad perfect--bringing to completion the work of sanctification that the Holy Spirit had begun in him when he was baptized in the name of the Triune God. What I experienced forty-eight and a half years ago is really no different than what all Christians experience every day. You could probably tell a similar story from your own life--a situation in which you prayed for something but ended up getting something altogether different than what you asked for. Perhaps this illustrates the truth of the old adage: Be careful what you pray for because you just might get it--and may, in fact, get a lot more than what you asked for. As we examine this morning these words of the apostle Paul, let's bear in mind that in prayer, as in everything else in our spiritual life, it's not about us; it's about God's grace in Jesus Christ.

It's not about us, first of all, because we are very limited in what we ask. Because we are by nature self-centered, our prayers are often self-centered. Looking back on my

experience that I just shared with you, if I'm going to be honest with myself and you, I'll have to admit that I was praying so fervently when my father was dying not because I wanted what was best for him or for the Lord's glory; I wanted what I thought was best for me. James warns us: "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (James 4:3). How much of our praying has to do with the Lord's glory or with the good of others and how much of it has to do with what we want for ourselves? The things that we so often ask for in prayer (I affectionately call these our "gimme" prayers) are nothing compared to what God really has to offer us in the Gospel of His Son. What is our prosperity, our temporal happiness, our health, or even our temporal life itself compared to the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation that Christ has purchased for us with His own blood and gives to us in His means of grace?

Our prayers are not about us also because we are very limited in our thinking. Again, it all boils down to ego. Because we think that it's all about us, we find it difficult to pray about things that don't impact us personally. When was the last time that you prayed about something that most likely would not make any significant difference in your life? And even when we pray about things that do impact us personally, we cannot envision an outcome that exceeds our earthbound experience. I said earlier that my prayer life was at its peak when I was eighteen, but I strongly suspect that it will reach an even greater peak when I have to face my own death--or, God forbid, the death of my wife or my son. What we are capable of imagining--be it good or bad--is limited by our limited experience in this world.

In our prayers and in our spiritual life, if it's not about us, it's about the grace of God in Jesus Christ. As surprising as it may seem to us, God doesn't have to wait for us to ask before He blesses us with His gifts of grace in His Son. The idea that we have to give God permission to bless us with His gifts (especially the gift of salvation in Christ) by inviting Him into our hearts or asking Him to save us is a false one. The Word of God tells us that "God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8) and Jesus Himself bluntly told His disciples: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit" (John 15:16). The truth of the matter is that without the Holy Spirit living within us we are not capable of asking for anything worthwhile or even believing that the Lord will hear and answer our prayers.

God's grace in Jesus Christ far exceeds even our wildest dreams. What He gives us is not necessarily what we want but what He, in His infinite wisdom, knows that we need. That's why we call Him "Father." Jesus, in speaking about prayer and in giving His disciples what we have come to know as the Lord's Prayer, explained it in very simple terms when He said: "Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him" (Matthew 6:8). When we don't receive precisely what we ask for and receive it right away, we all too often conclude that God didn't hear or answer our prayer, but the reality is that God always hears and answers sincere prayer offered by His children in the name of Jesus and the answer that He gives us is often so far beyond our comprehension that we simply don't get it. In saying this I'm not by any means trying to explain away senseless tragedies or disparage real human suffering and grief; I'm simply saying that we

don't see all that there is. The Spirit of God is constantly at work in our lives and the finished product will not be revealed to us fully until we are no longer confined to the limitations that we have in this fallen and broken world.

We give God "glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever" precisely because of His mercy and grace, which can give us not just what we want but everything good that He desires for us and gives to us out of His divine love for us. We desire long life and health but He gives us everlasting life and promises to restore us to the perfection with which He created us in the beginning. We desire prosperity but He gives us all the riches of His grace, which are priceless, bought for us "not with gold or silver, but with [the] holy, precious blood [of Christ] and with His innocent suffering and death" (Small Catechism, explanation of the Second Article of the Creed). Because of the redeeming grace of God in Jesus Christ, all of our needs and wants will, in the end, be perfectly satisfied in God's own time and in His own way according to His good and gracious will.

Amen.

May the Lord bless your hearing of His Word, using it to accomplish in you those things for which He gave it. May you be enriched and strengthened in faith that you may leave here today to go out into our world armed with the whole armor of God, prepared to be able ambassadors of your Savior Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it. Amen.