

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

In the last several years we have begun the school year at LSUS with a focus on prayer. Of course, we learn the Lord's Prayer from the catechism — this past week we discussed the sixth petition: "And lead us not into temptation"— but we teach about prayer more generally, too. I told the students this week: I like this beginning. It starts the year right, encouraging us in prayer, showing that prayer is an important part of our LSUS culture. You can't do it in public school, but at a Lutheran school, prayer is not only allowed; it's encouraged: prayers for ourselves in time of need, prayers for others, prayers of thanksgiving and praise.

Prayer is part of what Christians do. It is our duty — obeying Jesus' command to "ask" (Matt. 7:7) and again to "*Watch and pray*" (Matt. 26:41). We acknowledged in our Collect of the day that Jesus has commanded us to pray. Martin Luther says: "it is our duty and obligation to pray, if we would be Christians" (*Concordia*, Large Catechism, III:8).

But the collect acknowledged more — there is more than a law motivation for our prayers; there is a Gospel motivation, a Gospel reason for God's tender invitation for us to come to Him in prayer. Indeed there is, for God also promises that He will hear our prayer and answer them, as the psalmist sings: "*When [the believer] calls to me, I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble; I will rescue him and honor him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation*" (Ps. 91:15-16).

Yet, when Jesus on the night of His betrayal exhorted the sleepy disciples to pray, He acknowledged their weakness. "*The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak*" (Matt. 26:41). Even with a willing spirit, Jesus says, too often our weak flesh prevails. Of course, it's easy to ask when the answers seem to come right away and when the answers are what we're hoping for. But you know that's often not the way things go. Often, it seems as if prayers go unheard or unanswered. Often the answer to our prayer is not what we were hoping for. When that happens, praying seems so much harder to sustain.

How easy it would have been, for example, for the Christian community to give up on God with regard to life. We had prayed for nearly 50 years: "*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). For nearly 50 years it seemed as if our prayers went unheeded.

With David, we prayed: "*How long, O LORD?*" "*Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?*" (Ps. 13:1). David wrestled within himself and with God, yet did not give up. He did not lose heart. He kept on praying!

And now *Roe* has been overturned; those prayers have been answered, but we pray still that hearts may be turned, that the slaughter of innocents may cease.

Similarly in our Old Testament lesson, Jacob wrestled within himself and with God. Why? You recall that Jacob was estranged from his brother Esau, for Jacob had stolen Esau's blessing from their father Isaac. After that, Esau hated Jacob and sought to kill him, and Jacob had to flee from the wrath of his brother (Gen. 27-28).

Jacob prospered in his exile where he married his wives Leah and Rachel who gave him children. After some time, however, the Lord commanded Jacob to return to his father's land (Gen. 31:3), to meet his brother. Jacob was afraid. So Jacob prayed, "*O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O LORD ... 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*" (Gen. 32:12). 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.

Which brings us to the Gospel. Here the evangelist Luke tells us the reason Jesus told the parable ... 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 for her — he "*neither feared God nor respected man*"; rather, it was so that he might not have to be pestered by her, that he might not be wearied by her incessant pleas for justice.

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? I say, he does, but by way of contrast.

For this is Jesus' point: if this unrighteous judge will 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! If the unrighteous judge, who had no regard for man, answered the widow's pleas for justice, how much more can we depend on answers from the God who regards us in love, enough to send His own

Son unto cross and death, showing Himself to be a God who is just and who justifies (Rom. 3:26)! How much more can the elect count not just on justice but on 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 (LSB756:1)! How much more shall we hope in the midst of trials that “we may finally overcome them and win the victory” (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, 6<sup>th</sup> Petition)! How eagerly shall we await with faith that great and glorious day when the Lord gives “us a blessed end, and graciously take[s] us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven” (SC, LP, 7<sup>th</sup> petition)!

Therefore, let us be about prayer! But don’t misunderstand. God does not need our prayer to act. “The good and gracious will of God is done even without our prayer” (SC, LP, 3<sup>rd</sup> Petition). God doesn’t have to be cajoled or coaxed into being gracious to us. As it was in the beginning, when “[o]f his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18), so it was that of His own will and love that Christ did His redemptive work on our behalf, and so it is now that God’s will is done among us. And God’s gracious will toward us is clear. His will is for our salvation (1 Tim. 2:3-4). His will is to give us what we need for both body and soul — “[e]very good gift and every perfect gift” (James 1:17). His will is to “give justice to [His elect] speedily.”

What a wonderful privilege is prayer — that we may approach our gracious God with our supplications, adorations, and intercessions. Let us ask in faith (James 1:6), remembering that by faith we are righteous, remembering the promise that the “*prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working*” (James 5:16). Let us continue to pray and not lose heart, so that when “*the Son of Man comes,*” He will indeed “*find faith on earth.*”

We pray: Lord, be with us in all of our wrestlings. Strengthen our weak flesh; grant that we may not lose heart, but ever look to You, O righteous Judge, and cry out to You, O loving Father. Grant that we may cling in faith to Jesus Christ, the crucified, that we may be blessed both now and for eternity.

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