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Pentecost 22

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“The Heart of Prayer”

Text: Luke 18:1-8; Genesis 32:22-30; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have a confession to make.

You may have noticed that a few weeks ago we started a new regular feature in the bulletin called “Opportunities for Service.” If you hadn’t noticed that, it’s at the bottom of the announcements page each week. So what I did for that is that I sat down one day and wrote a list of short blurbs of things that people do in the church, or things that could be done, or things that need to be done. I sent it off to our secretary and told her to rotate through the list throughout the year.

So here’s my confession: *I forgot one*. Actually I probably forgot a bunch, but one in particular I forgot. One in particular that’s very important. **And that is to pray**. For the truth is that there is no greater service you could do than pray.

I often ask you to pray for me in the video announcements that I send out each week. Pray for help in my preaching and teaching, pray for my study of the Word, pray for safe travel, wisdom and guidance, for faith, for strength to overcome temptation. I need those prayers. For as Paul wrote to Timothy in the Epistle, words that sound so much as if they could have been written today: ***For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths.*** Pray that your pastor not be such a teacher, but boldly proclaim the truth of God’s Word, no matter what.

But not just that. To pray for your fellow Athanasians is a great service to them. Get a church directory and go through it. If you don’t have one I’ll give you one. For all of you have doubts, fears, struggles, troubles, trials, temptations, and all sorts of things going on in your life. You need help. You need *our* help. And if there’s a name in the directory you don’t know, try to find out who that person is - perhaps they especially need your prayers.

And then pray for our country and our leaders - especially now in election season, and with the cultural wars going on that threaten so many and so much, and with so much

confusion and false teaching in the world, *misleading many in false belief, despair, and other great shame and vice* (Small Catechism).

And praying is a service you can do no matter how young or old, no matter how able or disabled you are. And you can do it most anywhere. But like me, we forget. We forget how important this is, and the service it is. I talk to people who think they are too old or too weak to do anything anymore. I tell them they can pray. And the answer I get is: *Oh, well, yeah, but . . .* No! No but! Your prayers matter.

And it's not just that we're sinning if we do not pray, though that's true. The Second Commandment tells us that one of the ways we are to use God's Name properly is to pray, and so to not pray is a sin of omission. But it's not just that - it's that how *foolish* we are if we do not pray! How foolish we are if we do not ask our Father in heaven, who can do anything we ask, to help us and those for whom we pray.

Jesus gave us an example of that in the Gospel today, telling *a parable to the effect that [we] ought always to pray and not lose heart*. And the parable was of a widow who kept coming to a judge, demanding justice. A judge who didn't care about anyone but himself, and so really was of no mind to help this widow. There was nothing in it for him. But he was the one able to help this widow, and so the widow would not leave him alone until he did what she needed. Still he did it for selfish reasons, but the example here is not the judge, but the widow. She had a need and he was the one who could help, even if he really didn't want to be bothered.

Our situation is so much better than that! For it is not to a selfish, unrighteous judge that we pray, but to our Father in heaven. Our Father who isn't bothered by our prayers - for, in fact, as I said, He has *commanded* them. He wants to hear our prayers more than we want to pray. And He wants to help and give all that we need. Yet, Jesus asks at the end, in a haunting question: *when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?* Will He find those so praying, so faithful, so believing as this widow?

Because it's not easy, is it? Praying is easy . . . but it's not easy. Sometimes it's like wrestling with God, when God seems against you. You pray but nothing happens. You pray but it seems like things just get worse. You pray and wonder if God really does hear, and if He really does care after all. Like Jacob. But God wasn't against Jacob. He *wanted* to bless him. And I can't help but think that after wrestling with God all night, when finally Jacob said "*I won't let you go unless you bless me,*" that a smile came to God's lips. God wanted to be overcome. He wanted to bless. He wanted Jacob to ask.

That's a picture of Jesus, really. For just as God came down to wrestle with Jacob and be overcome by him in order to bless him, so too Jesus came to be overcome on the cross, in order to bless us. To give the blessings of forgiveness, life, and salvation. To give us a new name like He did with Jacob, that we no longer be known just as the sons and

daughters of our earthly fathers, but as sons and daughters of God. And so He puts His name on us in Holy Baptism. He adopts us into His family there. In those waters, He applies Jesus' wrestling to us - His Son who joined us in our death, so that we join Him in His resurrection. Who was overcome for us, that we might overcome with Him. On the cross, Jesus *strove with God and with men*, and prevailed. Passing through death to life again.

And just as with Jacob, God wants to bless you. And all people. Which doesn't mean He'll give us everything we ask for, because some things we ask for may not be blessings to us at all, but really curses. Things that will prove to be not good for us. But what Jesus does promise in these verses we heard today is **justice**. *Four times* that word is repeated here, and with Jesus finally saying: *Will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.*

So what does that mean, *justice*? In our world today, that word is associated with the Law - that those who do the crime do the time. They get caught and pay the price. And if the crime is really bad, a life sentence.

But in the Scriptures, the justice of God isn't just about punishment - it is how He saves sinners. The justice of God is the forgiveness of sins given to us *because* Jesus strove with God and with men and prevailed. Because Jesus, the innocent one, took the punishment and paid the price. Because Jesus gave His life to give us life. And so **the justice of God is a life sentence** - but not a sentence of life in prison, in hell (as we deserve), but a sentence of life - with Him and with our Saviour - in heaven.

And so we pray - for ourselves and for others - not for what we deserve, but for what has been promised to us on account of Jesus. **For life**. Sometimes that will mean ease and sometimes hardship, sometimes joy and sometimes sorrow. But as Jesus told this parable so that we would *always pray and not lose heart*, so Paul wrote to the Corinthians: *We do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen* (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

And that's not just a promise for the future, but - as it seems I've been saying a lot the past few weeks - knowing that the future is secure enables you to live now. Perhaps it would be like knowing that you will receive \$5,000 a week for the rest of your life. Knowing that, being confident of that, enables you to do things now. A secure future sets you free to do now what otherwise you may not have been able to do.

So is your life in Christ. Your future is secure. You have been baptized. You have been blessed. You have a life sentence. You heard again this morning that your sins are

forgiven - God does not and will not hold them against you. You are free. You will in a moment again receive the Body and Blood of Jesus - the Body and Blood given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins; that paid the price for your sins and so now gives you the life that conquers death. All that is yours. *So now what will you do?*

How about pray? You have the ear of Your Father in heaven. There are a great many people in need.

And do not lose heart. Do not lose heart if you don't see results. That's not up to you. Your righteous Father will do what is right, and He'll do it perfectly. Entrust yourself and all for whom you pray to Him.

There may be wrestling for a while, for you or for them. But if so, it's only to bless. That we rely on our Father and not on ourselves. That we trust Him and not ourselves. That when Jesus comes again there will be faith on earth. Those who cling to the Word and promises of God. Those who know their Father and are known by Him.

For He loves the prayers of His children. You simply cannot pray too much. He will give you His justice, His forgiveness, and much more. For He has much more for you. Much more than you can imagine.

So cry out to the Lord, in good times and bad. *Entrust your days and burdens* (LSB #754), as we just sang, to Him. Beat on His door and on His ears. He will hear, He will answer, and He will come. For you.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.