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Easter 6

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Our Promising, Prayer-Answering God”

Text: John 16:23-33; Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21:9-14, 21-27

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*] **Alleluia!**

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

Wouldn't it be great to have *a man of Macedonia* all your own? A vision from God to tell you what to do! When you're faced with a difficult decision and you don't know what to do. Should I take this job or quit this job? What school should I go to? What am I going to do with my life? Should I marry this person? What if you had a man of Macedonia and a message from God to tell you what to do! Or if you were going in the wrong direction and doing the wrong things, to correct you, to turn you back. Wouldn't that be great?

Maybe. But what makes you think you would listen anyway? Paul did, but . . . *would you?* I ask because God has already told us lots of things to do in His Word, and we don't do them. Things like love your neighbor. *All* of them. Not just the ones you like. Forgive others. Even when it's hard. Do good to those who hurt you. Not revenge. And lots more. What makes you think this would be any different? Oh, if God's man of Macedonia agreed with you and what you want, then yes, of course, you'd follow! Gladly! But what if he didn't? You *really* wanted *this*, but God told you *that*. Which way would you go? Really? Our track record on that is not good. That's why we begin every Divine Service confessing our sin - we didn't do what God told us to do . . . what He told us through His prophets and apostles and now in these last days through His Son.

Well one of those things God has told us to do is pray. The ancient name for this Sunday in the Church Year is *rogate* - pray. It is prayer Sunday. But not only has God commanded us to pray, Jesus added great and precious promises to our prayers, like the one we heard today: *whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.* That's pretty sweet. And you'd think . . . you'd think that with a promise like that, we'd be praying constantly, asking for everything and then some! And I know you pray . . . but how much? How often? Enough? Or do you give up? Because, well, frankly, you've tried. But it seems that your prayers aren't heard, aren't answered, don't matter. That this promise we heard today from Jesus is an empty one. Lots of things we ask God for we don't get; they don't happen. So why bother?

The key to this promise is to know what it means to pray in Jesus' name. As children of God, we sometimes think of that in a childish way. Parents teach their children to say please when they ask for something, and if they forget . . . *What's the magic word?* Pleeese! And they get it. So as long as they say please, their request has to be granted. And if it's not . . . *But I said please!* You have to do it! So as children of God, of our heavenly Father, do we think that way? That as long as I say *in Jesus' name* at the end of my prayer, this promise is invoked and God has to do it! Lots of pop-religious fads and bad books say that, or something like it. Just pray the right prayer in the right way with enough faith and it will be yours.

But that makes prayer into a gimmick and something that you use to manipulate God. And think that you *have to* manipulate God in order for your prayer to be heard. But that's not how it is with your heavenly Father. You are a baptized child of God in Jesus. You are dearly loved. You are washed clean of your sins. You have a Father in heaven who loves you more than anyone on earth and wants to do for you and give to you. You have a Saviour who died for you. You don't have to manipulate Him into doing favors for you, or be good enough to have your wishes be granted. You can't anyway. But you don't need to. He's forgiven your sins, so you are good. You have His fatherly love. You have His promise.

So to pray in Jesus' name isn't some magic formula - it is, rather, to pray as Jesus would pray; as He did pray. With faith in His sonship, and of your sonship in Him.

Now God doesn't want spoiled brats who get everything they want and love Him only because of what He gives. But He also doesn't want children who doubt His love and care. **He wants sons and daughters who know Him and trust Him.** Who come to Him with any and every need, want, desire, and request, asking Him freely, boldly, and confidently! But also knowing that He will always and only do what is best and good for them. And so who don't get upset when the answer is different than we thought it would be, should be. Who trust, even if we do not understand.

Our model for prayer like this, for prayer in Jesus name, to pray as He did, is the Garden of Gethsemane. As you probably remember, that night in the Garden Jesus was in great anguish, with sweat like great drops of blood, and He prayed three times that that cup He was about to drink, the cup of wrath and suffering and woe against the sin of the world, be taken from Him. Three times the answer was no. And then Jesus leaves the Garden bound and under arrest. But He leaves trusting, strengthened. Not because He got what He prayed for, but because He left it all in His Father's good and gracious hands. Whatever happened would be good and for good. Even the cross.

So Jesus confidently asserts, as we heard today: ***I have overcome the world.*** It didn't look that way when He bowed His head and died. Be He had. His resurrection proved it.

He overcame sin and the world and death and the grave and satan and hell. All of it! He overcame it for you. And all because His Father said **no** to His prayer. It had to be this way. And what didn't look good or feel good or seem good, God used for good.

And so it is with your prayers, too. Jesus has overcome the world, but we are still living in it, in our own Gethsemanes, our own struggles, our own agonies. The disciples would **be scattered**, Jesus said. And they were. **They would have tribulation**, Jesus knew. And they did. They would endure the attacks and assaults of all who want nothing to do with Christ and His Word and truth. Enemies both seen and unseen. And not just the disciples then. But all since then. You, too. If not now then you have in the past or you will in the future.

So we turn to our Father. As Jesus did. As Jesus told us to do. Not to saints or His mother or any who died and went before us. You don't need to do that. Ask the Father, Jesus said. Our Father. So we do. We pray. For all kinds of things. In agony or joy. Scared or secure. For ourselves and for others. And your Father loves it. He never tires of hearing your prayer, for you are His baptized children! And when you do, even when He says no, like He did to Jesus in the Garden, you are strengthened, for you are trusting your Father to give and do what is best and right. You don't need a man of Macedonia. You live by faith. And that is better. For that doesn't depend on you and your faithfulness, but on your Father and Saviour and His faithfulness, on His words and promises, which will not let you down. For we know that if Jesus' prayer and then cross led to the empty tomb, to resurrection and life, so will the prayers we pray and crosses we bear in this world and life. They are not to hurt us, but to lead us to resurrection and life. The glorious life described in the reading from Revelation. When Gethsemane is no more, and there is only resurrection and life.

So how do we do it? How do we pray in Jesus' name? How does His prayer become our prayer? First we breathe in Jesus' Word, the Scriptures, and then we breathe them out in prayer. You breathe in the Word of Jesus and it works in you and forms you; it shapes your heart and desires and thinking. So we pray for the things we need and want in this world, yes. Nothing wrong with that. *Give us this day our daily bread*, Jesus taught us to pray. But we also know that this world and the things of this are passing away, so if we don't get it, we live by faith. And who's to say what God's answer is anyway? We think we know. We think we know a lot of things. But perhaps our Father is working in ways we cannot see and do not know. And that one day we will be wonderfully surprised . . .

There is a great verse in Romans (8:27) that says that *the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God*. Because we don't know what to pray for as we ought (8:26). So the Holy Spirit helps us. He intercedes for us, like a translator, according to the will of God. So maybe someone hurts you. And when that happens, maybe you pray for God to hurt them back! To hurt the one who hurt you! That's what the old sinner-man in us wants. Pay back! Hurt for hurt. But the Spirit knows that's not what the new saint-man in

us wants. So He intercedes. God, help her forgive. Give her life. That's what she meant. That's what she needs. Help her forgive the one who hurt her. And turn that other person to You in repentance for forgiveness, too.

So that night Jesus spoke these words, the disciples did indeed scatter and leave Him alone, as He said they would. But as Jesus said, He was not alone. The Father was with Him in the Spirit. Even in His agony. And you are not alone either. Whatever you are going through. You stand before the Father in the Spirit through the Son, baptized and holy. And you pray. Not to a God who is far, far away, but to your God, your Father, who is near to you and here for you. And your Father is pleased with you and your prayer. And you receive peace and joy. For even in this tough world, you are not alone, not forgotten, not on your own.

But we do not only pray alone, we pray together, here. That's important, too. Not only do we pray for one another we pray with one another. And as our Father has brought us together here, we receive His gifts together as He speaks to us, forgives us, and feeds us with the Body and Blood of His Son. And so we can boldly and confidently pray. Just like Jesus and in His name. And whatever the answer, we trust, we are strengthened, and we rejoice, for the Father will answer our prayer and give us what we really asked for but didn't know how. And it will be good.

So a man of Macedonia? To tell us what to do? Nah. The Lord has set you free to live. He's given you His Spirit to lead and guide you, to intercede for you and pray for you, to care for you and be with you, to forgive you and keep you. Enjoy the gifts He gives, the opportunities He lays before you, and pray. He'll answer. He'll see to it. He already has, and He won't stop now.

For **Christ is risen!** [*He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*]

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.