

Sermon for Easter 6 – John 16:23-30

In the Name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

Prayer serves many purposes in the religion of the world. In fact, every known religion has prayer as a component to its belief. Muslims, Buddhists, and others have prayer as a central and foundational activity. But what is prayer and what is its purpose for us as Christians?

First, it will be helpful to define what prayer is not. Prayer is not a magical incantation. Prayer is not an enchanted spell that by saying the words properly or correctly you will get whatever you want. Neither is it because you said it wrongly do you not receive what you ask. Also, prayer has no power of its own. The One Triune God has the power and true prayer rests solely on Him. Nor is prayer a psychological self-message, like a projection of our own power onto an imaginary screen. We're not conversing with the "true me," the superior self that lives inside of us. Prayer is not a gossip session with God. He does not find out new and surprising information from us.

So with that out of the way, what is prayer? Prayer could be called our original language. After all, who did man speak with before anyone else? In Eden, by nature we conversed with God gladly and joyfully, walking and talking with Him in the cool of the evening. But then our doubt of His Word has caused us to be speechless. Our doubt deceived us into thinking that God is deaf ... as if He didn't hear the whole conversation with the snake. So now it has become unnatural for us to pray. We run from Him and avoid Him because we have come to believe the lie that He ignores the prayers of sinners who deserve His wrath. How could I dare to approach God, with Him knowing all I've done?

...But God doesn't believe that lie. He comes to heal our ears, our mouths, and our minds. He takes away what makes us afraid and frees us to speak to Him once again. God takes the initiative and puts into our mouths the very words we are to use. The Bible's classic prayers of the Psalms and the Our Father direct and guide us out of our own narrow world and into the larger world of the whole body of believers. He urges us to pray and assures us that not only will He not chase us away, but He'll listen to us.

God promises that He will not let our prayers be frustrated or lost. He encourages us with His promise. He says, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify Me." But how good we are, how frequently we pray, how fervently, how many of us pray does not win God's hearing us. Instead, our prayers reach His ear because the Word of God is the source, fount, origin, and language of prayer, and God never denies His Word. He is present everywhere, therefore He hears us wherever we might pray to Him. He is merciful and gladly will help us. He's almighty, He will find and provide help for every need. He knows all, therefore He will find a way even when we know of none. He is faithful and will be faithful to hearing our prayer. We pray on the basis of His promise, which is trustworthy beyond all doubt. God's Word is the certain understanding of our prayer.

Another way of understanding prayer is as our expression of faith that God truly is our Father. It is our response to trust His claim that He is our God. We approach Him boldly and confidently as beloved children approach their dear father. Prayer is our response to His creating us, redeeming us, and making us innocent with a childlike spirit of dependence and reliance on Him. He will not close His heart to us. He will have mercy as a father does for his child. This Father-child relationship in prayer reminds us that we are members of God's family and that we can turn to Him in every need. But there's a danger to ourselves to pray in this way. How? Prayer expresses our dependence. We are not in fact autonomous, self-reliant people. That's the answer to the ultimate mystery of our

existence as human beings. To pray as a sinner means that we must leave behind living on our own and living for ourselves in order to be brought into a new relationship as God's child.

Yet prayer is more than dangerous. It's also a joy. God is our Father and we are His children. Fathers and children delight in small talk and even the most casual of conversations. God's love for us created us to be people who love Him above all else and that makes conversation too.

Prayer exercises our faith in God our Father. So it also will not be contained to just words with God but will spill over into our whole life. When we pray, we are not only seeking God's commitment to our plans; we are committing ourselves to His plans in our relationship with Him and with others. Our living faith prays. In this light, the Lord's Prayer becomes our agenda for living. The dialogue between our sinful self and God finally ends in forgiveness which frees us from the defensiveness that our sin imposes upon us. Talking with God gives us that peace which liberates us to live as He created us to live in Eden. So real prayer teaches us not to despair over our sin, but to ask God for His mercy so that we live out our true humanity in His peace.

The Israelites became impatient with God when they complained about water and food in the desert. God answered their complaints with snakes that bit and killed some. But when they prayed, God gave them through Moses a fiery snake on a pole, which by faith healed them. This would come to be a sign of the Crucified Christ who would save the entire world. When we are afraid and sad, God wants us to place our needs and desires before Him. Not because He doesn't know them, but because He wants to wake us up to greater requests that we may open up for even greater blessings.

God knows our complaints, our displeasure, and our anger over the way the world goes. We can't hide them from Him, even when they are directed at Him for what we or others have suffered under in this evil world. Something is wrong with our perception when we are angry with God, but that does not change the fact that we will be angry with Him, even as Christians. Still, those concerns about God which have angered us need to be laid at His feet, even as we are blaming Him for them.

What's the difference between saying, "I am angry with God" and saying, "God, I am angry with You"? The first disregards the presence of God and does not regard Him as Father. But the second is the prayer of faith. Like earthly parents, God prefers his angry children to be in dialogue with Him; to speak with Him, even if it's hard to hear. Through speaking with God, we can receive the soothing words of peace which He alone can give to quench our anger.

All our hurts, frustrations, and struggles lie in God's hands as does all our life. This sets the agenda for our prayer. Find your prayers in every corner of your life and in the lives of all your relationships. Pray for others' needs, not just your own, but for your family, governing officials, neighbors, your boss, your employees, your co-workers and their struggles. Remind God that He has promised to answer your prayer. We are unworthy to be sure—but we ask Him to look not at us, but to His Son. Don't look at my sins—look at the wounds of Your Son for me. In Christ, God forgets our sins, but He will never forget His blessing us with His promises. If God gave the greatest gift of His beloved Son, will He not then give us all we need? We can't help but express ourselves in prayer to the Lord, in whom our entire lives rest and should find rest.

It will always be hard to pray. Satan always tries to disturb that rest, and he does so in part by distracting our prayer, by causing us to turn away from God with our problems. He wants us to keep our problems to ourselves. But it's in prayer that we can fight against both the enemies of the Gospel and the devil, because God has triumphed over them all for us. Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠