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24 July 2022

St. Thomas Evangelical Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Through Christ, We Know Who God Is

Colossians 2:6-19

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ. For in Christ the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily, and you have come to fullness in Christ, who is the head of every ruler and authority. In Christ also you were circumcised with a spiritual circumcision, by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of

Christ; when you were buried with Christ in baptism, you were also raised with him through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead. And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with Christ, having forgiven us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. God set this aside, nailing it to the cross. God disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.

Therefore do not let anyone condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons, or sabbaths. These are only a shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ. Do not let anyone disqualify you, insisting on self-abasement and worship of angels, dwelling on visions, puffed up without cause by a human way of thinking, and not holding fast to the head, from whom the whole body, nourished and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows with a growth that is from God.

Luke 11:1-13 NRSV, emended

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of the disciples said, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." Jesus replied, "When you pray, say:

Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come.

Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins,
for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.

And do not bring us to the time of trial."

Then Jesus said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, to whom you go at midnight and say, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to put on the table.' And the answer comes from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though the person will not get up and answer the

request out of friendship, at least because of the other's persistence the friend will get up and give whatever is asked.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask!"

I never like to admit it when it happens, but I really struggled with what to preach this week.

I can hear you thinking - but Pastor Lecia, what's so hard about the Lord's Prayer? There must be something good there if we pray it together in worship every single week.

And there is. We could examine how it was common for a teacher's disciples to spend all their time with their teacher so that they can pattern their lives after them - not just what they believed and taught, but also where they went, how they observed the law, what they ate and drank, who they ate and drank with and also how to pray. Jesus' disciples wanted to be able to pattern their whole lives after him, praying in the same way that gave Jesus so much strength and courage, the ability to speak truth and to heal. And in the Gospel according to Luke, we too are given a glimpse of the same things, so that we too can pattern our lives after Jesus.

Or we could think about what it means to pray "Your kingdom come" when living under Roman occupation. While we have spiritualized God's kingdom, we have to remember that this is a political statement, that God's kingdom stood in opposition to the kingdom of Caesar. We could wonder together about what kingdoms we are captive to and what it means for God's kingdom to come to us and to our world.

But where I get hung up is at the end, when we read "Ask and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you."

I imagine that anyone who has tried to live the Christian life for long has also run into questions about the same verse, asking the same question - What do we do when our prayers go unanswered?

I'm sure there had been unanswered prayers before - things like wanting a snow day so school would be canceled and I wouldn't have to take a test or that I might not have to start over again at a new school - but I remember the first big one clearly.

I was twenty-two years old, a college student and engaged to be married. My fiancé's father had a stroke and while he was recovering from that, doctors discovered late stage lung cancer. He had only months to live. I prayed and prayed that he would be healed. By no means was he a perfect person, but he was the only person left in my fiancé's immediate family. My prayers for his health were constant, like breathing. I asked

everyone I knew to pray for him also. And yet, only a couple months after his diagnosis, he died. My prayers went unanswered.

These verses, which had always been a source of comfort and promise, seemed to mock me.

As I wrestled with what this meant, there were several answers suggested to me by well-meaning classmates.

Perhaps I was praying for the wrong thing - maybe I should have been praying that he would accept Jesus into heart and not have been so worried about physical healing.

Or perhaps God's answer to my prayer was just No - that even though it made no sense to me, it was not God's will that he would be healed because, you know, everything happens for a reason.

Or perhaps I was praying in the wrong way, that I didn't spend enough time in prayer or wasn't confident enough that God would do it.

Or perhaps there was something wrong with me - maybe there was something about how I was living, that if I got my life in order and eradicated any sin, whatever it may be, then maybe God would have listened to my prayers.

In retrospect, my classmates sound a lot like Job's friends who were anything but a comfort to him.

Or take this story about Abraham we heard today. Three men had just visited with Abraham and Sarah under the Oaks of Mamre. They had accepted their hospitality and promised Sarah that when they returned in due season, she would have a son. After Sarah laughed, they went on their way and the Lord hung back to speak with Abraham. You see, the Lord was contemplating destroying Sodom because of their sin. Through the years, many Christians have interpreted that sin as homosexuality, but that does not seem to be what the story actually says. The prophet Ezekiel said they "had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy." (16:49) Their lack of hospitality and care for others, even when they had plenty, was the root of their wickedness.

Abraham's nephew Lot lived in Sodom, so he wanted to bargain for him - and any other righteous people who lived there. Abraham negotiated with God about these plans to destroy Sodom. Starting at finding fifty righteous people, Abraham got God to agree to save the city if only there are ten righteous ones. Did he think that was sufficient, that there were surely more people who were righteous than just Lot and his family?

However it happened, once the Lord went on to Sodom to investigate the city, it turned out that Lot and his family - whether they counted as one man or four people - were not enough. The rest of the city showed up and surrounded Lot's house, asking for these strangers to be brought out so they could show them who was in charge.

There weren't enough - and they acted out against God's investigators - so God destroyed the city.

After talking to God, seemingly with the right blend of confidence and humility, in the end, it was not enough.

So where does that leave us?

I am sure that we have not seen the end of the war in Ukraine because there have not been enough prayers. The same goes for ending homelessness and addiction and racism and homophobia and gun violence and climate change and more. It's not for a lack of prayers that these evils persist in our world.

In the world God created, we have to bear the consequences of actions in this world - whether the consequences of our own actions, of natural processes or of others'. Do we give up on praying because there could be someone praying for the opposite thing and just cancel out our prayers?

As Deacon Cory Driver, ELCA missionary and professor writes, "God isn't a cosmic vending machine where we can simply insert a prayer and out comes what we want."

Instead, God is inviting us into relationship. God wants us to come as we would to a parent - to share our requests and to be comforted, to make known our hopes and dreams. God will walk with us no matter what happens in our lives, whether we know what to pray or not.

As the author of Colossians reminds us, through Christ, we know who God is - one who heals, one who teaches, one who liberates and one who loves and that Christ is enough. We don't need a fancy philosophy or perfectly correct doctrine, we don't need rituals or the right words, but Christ is all we need.

In baptism, we are united to Christ in death and new life. All our sin - everything that separates us from God - is nailed to the cross so that it can be redeemed. Through Christ, we come before God to make our requests as beloved children.

And so we pray, Your kingdom come.

We pray for the time when God's reign will extend over all creation, when every tear will be dried, when death is swallowed up. We pray for the time when we will gather on the holy mountain where there will be a feast for all people, when all of creation will be restored. We pray that all people will know who God is. And we trust that God's kingdom will come on its own, even without our prayers, but we ask that it may also come to us.

We pray for that future and, freed by Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit, we work for justice and peace so that all people may experience the kingdom of God, so that, just maybe, we may be the answer to someone's prayer.

Amen.

Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 138; Colossians 2:6-15 [16-19]; Luke 11:1-13