

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the Gospel of Luke, prayer plays a large part in the life of Jesus. Up to this point in this Gospel, if we were to read Luke's Gospel from the beginning to where we find ourselves this morning, we would find several significant occasions where we would have experienced Jesus praying, at times before and after the different but significant occasions. I guess it's no wonder that we have a disciple of Jesus approaching him and wanting to be taught *how* to pray. The disciple like any of us I suppose, wants to be diligent with prayer, so he approaches Jesus in order to be taught how to pray. I think it's safe to say that the disciple, like any of us, want to be conscientious in our prayers, and in order to do so, we want to know what to pray for and how to pray. I guess we too, if given this opportunity to be in the very presence of the Son of God, perhaps we too would want to sharpen our technique of prayer and want to be taught to pray.

I think the bigger question when understanding prayer is to wonder *why* we pray? But when asking why we pray, we quickly look out our windows at the darkness of hatred and divisiveness within the world and the culture we live in, and we instantly conclude our reasoning for prayer. There is so much more to the question of why we pray. There is one thing about prayer that Jesus is teaching us today in this Gospel lesson, and that is this, my prayer will not isolate nor protect me from all that is out there...rather prayer makes me part of it. From the very first verse of the Gospel, our lesson on prayer begins.

Jesus was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1)

From the Greek it clearly indicates that one disciple approaches Jesus, but this disciple's question involves more than himself. From the Greek we hear that *the disciple himself* said to Jesus, teach *US* to pray. Notice the stress on the disciple himself, as an individual approaches Jesus. Notice also, that he does not say, teach *me* to pray. Prayer is not just about me, my desires, or my will. We learn quickly in this opening verse that there is a much broader perspective of prayer and why we as Christians and as a church pray.

Søren Kierkegaard, an existential philosopher and Lutheran pastor reminds us that "The function of prayer is not to influence God, but rather to change the nature of the one who prays." ...to change the nature of one who prays. In this document I am quoting, Kierkegaard writes about the individual, in that he explains that God has created us as individuals and has called us to follow him as individuals. As individual Christians, we are judged and we are saved as individuals. The church is not judged as a whole but we function in community as one body called the church.

Nonetheless, I believe we earnestly pray for the good of others and for the goodness of God to guide all that we do but when we pray as individuals, we are no longer an individual because of our prayer...in prayer we are the church and this is what changes us. Kierkegaard also says this:

But to will only one thing, genuinely to will the Good, as an individual, to will to hold fast to God, which things each person without exception is capable of doing, this is what unites. And if you sat in a lonely prison far off from all (people), or if you were placed out upon a

desert island with only animals for company, if you genuinely will the Good, if you hold fast to God, then you are in unity with all (People).¹

What I am simply getting at is this, prayer is a very individual and very intimate conversation with God, but it is what unites us all together as one mode of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And when I refer to a mode of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, I mean that we are part of the promise of Jesus Christ in that we are connected to, or united with those we pray for and we make that promise of Jesus Christ known through the grace and mercy we become a part of through our prayers amidst the darkness of hatred and divisiveness within the world and the culture, we live in.

We as the church are a “cell of messengers” as the theologian Robert Jenson would refer to the church. We are a cell of messengers that advocates in the world on behalf of the world.² While through our prayers we are the messengers of God’s grace, and by messengers I mean that we are not just those who tell of God’s promise of grace and mercy in Jesus Christ, we are also messengers in that, we personify that grace in the world...keep in mind that prayer’s starting place is not the human but rather God—God has spoken, in both command and promise, and has invited, encouraged, and shaped our response.³

Listen again to what Jesus says today to us:

"When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. ³ Give us each day our daily bread. ⁴ And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. (Luke 11:2-4)

Prayers starting place is with God and not ourselves. We begin with God and everything else comes from God, not to *ME* but to *US*. And as we pray that as our trespasses or our sins are forgiven, so may we then become that grace and mercy as we forgive the trespasses or the sins of others...individuals praying for all and then acting in concert with others through the grace we ourselves as individuals have received from God through Jesus Christ. And not only do we begin with God in this prayer, we begin with a very intimate reference to God as Father.

Nonetheless, there are those times when the darkness and hatred of the world and our culture leave us downhearted and just simply beat-down and abandoned by God. We are not alone nor is it anything new, the psalmist reminds us of this in Psalm 10:

¹ Why do you stand so far off, O LORD,
and hide yourself in time of trouble?

² The wicked arrogantly persecute the poor,
but they are trapped in the schemes
they have devised.

³ The wicked boast of their heart's desire;
the covetous curse and revile the LORD.

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *An Occasional Discourse: On the Occasion of a Confession: Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*, which is part of *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*. (p. 144f.) <https://sorenkierkegaard.org/upbuilding-discourses-in-various-spirits.html> as well as, *The Essential Kierkegaard*. Edited by, Howard V. Hong and Enda H. Hong. Princeton University Press: Princeton, New Jersey, 2000, pages 269-276.

² Jenson, Robert W. *Story and Promise, A Brief Theology of the Gospel About Jesus*. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1973, page 178.

³ Haemig, Mary Jane, “Practical Advice on Prayer from Martin Luther” Copyright © 2015 by Word & World, Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. Page 22

God has spoken to us through the Law of the commandments...and God continues to speak to us through the promise of Jesus Christ. In our understanding of the Second Commandment...we know that we are not to misuse the name of your God...we know what we are NOT supposed to do...we know that we are NOT to curse, swear, practice magic, lie, or deceive using God's name. But we forget quickly what we *are* supposed *TO DO*. In this commandment we are to fear and love God and use the very name of God the Father in every time of need, to call on, pray to, praise, and give thanks to God.⁴ And now today, in this Gospel, we are being taught how to fulfill this command because God is giving us the very Words to pray...and to speak directly to God.

As we fuss about how and what we pray for and who we pray for, the Good News for us today in all of this, is that we are given the pure blessing *TO* pray and the promise that God listens to our prayer! And in this prayer, we know as the Lord's Prayer, may we remember that as we pray as a congregation or by ourselves, we are brought together in community with all people through not just this prayer but all our prayers.

Luther, like each of us, has come to experience prayer that comes from the darkness of not just the hours of the night, but the darkness of our despair. Luther reminds us in his commentary on Psalm 118, verse 5:

⁵ I called to the Lord in my distress; the Lord answered and set me free,
Luther wrote that prayer in the times of darkness and distress is a critical and absolute exercise of our faith. Luther also wrote:

You must never doubt that God is aware of our distress and hears our prayer.⁵

Even Jesus reminds us today that God hears us when he says to us:

...Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. ¹⁰ For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10)

And in that distress, the very presence of Good News teaches us today that God hears, and what God hears are the very Words God has taught us...the prayer that Luther considered to be the best of all prayers, when he wrote:

Since our Lord is the author of this prayer, it is without a doubt the most sublime, the loftiest, and the most excellent. If he, the good and faithful Teacher, had known a better one, he would surely have taught us that too.⁶

So as we think about this exercise of faith through our prayers, may the Holy Spirit move us to consider Abraham as he is questioning God's promise. And in Abraham's struggle, God commanded him to look at the stars in the night sky, may we too look at this shining prayer amidst the darkness or our despair, in the darkness of the divisiveness and hatred of our world and our culture, may we know that God is ever present and wanting to hear our cries.

⁴ Kolb, Robert; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. *The Small Catechism, The Ten Commandments*, "The Second [Commandment]", page 352, par 3-4.

⁵ Jaroslav Pelikan, Editor, Daniel E. Poellot Assistant Editor. *Luther's Works Volume 14, Selected Psalms III*. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1958. Page 61.

⁶ Martin O. Dietrich, Editor, Helmut T. Lehmann General Editor, *Luther's Works Volume 42, Devotional Writings*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, "An Exposition of the Lord's Prayer for Simple Laymen" page 21.

“[T]here is no nobler prayer to be found on earth, (than this Lord’s Prayer) for it has the powerful testimony (and the Good News for us today) that God loves to hear it...(and to heart it from each one of us).”⁷

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Kolb, Robert; Wengert, Timothy J. ; Arand, Charles P.: *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000. *The Large Catechism*, Third Part: The Lord’s Prayer, page 443, par 23. The parenthetical words added to Luther’s words are this author’s words added to close the premise of this sermon.