Sermon | Proper 12C

TEXT: Luke 11:1-13

24 July 2016

Prayer

*In the Name of +Jesus. Amen.*

Dear saints,

A couple of Fridays ago, after the fatal shooting of five officers in Dallas Texas, Dallas Mayor Mike Rawlings tweeted the words of the Apostle Paul, from 1 Corinthians 13: “In the end, three things remain: faith, hope, and love.” We need all three today.”

It’s been a really difficult month and a traumatizing week. The horrible news from around the world, and in our country, from natural and manmade disasters—touching places like Orlando, Istanbul, West Virginia, Medina, Baghdad, Taiwan filled the news. Last Sunday, the fatal shooting of three policers in Baton Rouge, La. followed only ten days after the shooting in Dallas. It seems that our world is boiling over with resentment, hate, retribution, and even more death.

Right now, it’s hard to know what to say. It seems like we can’t say anything without being lumped into some political category. But we want to say something. Because it’s impossible not to be troubled by the world around us, as we read and we talk and we watch and we wonder, what’s going on—we’re afraid of spontaneous violence, of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. We’re afraid for our children growing up in a confused and chaotic culture. There was a pastor named Martin Franzmann who wrote already fifty years ago, “We live fear-filled lives in a fear filled world, and we grow steadily fearful of ourselves and one another.”

But to this dark, fear-filled world, as a Church, we want to say something. We want to say something, because after all, we’ve got something to say. The Dallas Mayor said his city and the world needed the message of faith, hope, and love. And that is the message we’ve got—a message of faith for a world sunk in disillusionment and despair; a message of love for a world sunk in bitterness, and hate; a message of hope for a world sunk in death. We’ve got the words of eternal life.

And they’re not our words. Their Christ’s words. And so it is to Christ, to his word, that we turn today.

And perhaps there is no better place to begin than with the words of the Gospel, which are all about prayer. Jesus says in this morning’s Gospel, “*Ask, and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall be opened to you*.” That’s an invitation to you and to me to pray. You have a Father in heaven. He sees your trouble. He knows what you’re going through. He knows that the world, and your life is in turmoil. So he wants you to tell him about it. He wants to listen to you and hear from you. And he promises to answer you, according to his holy, in his own good time. So pray, God invites us. “*Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you*.” Prayer is the voice of faith that cries out to God in every trouble, trusting that when we’re praying, God is hearing in heaven, and answering.

Not only does Jesus invite us to pray. He invites us to be bold about our prayers. He wants us to be confident about our prayers. Jesus doesn’t want us to come into God’s presence in the same way that Dorothy approached the Wizard of Oz—timid and afraid. No, Jesus invites us to be bold when we pray.

And so in the Old Testament, we get this picture of boldness in prayer with Abraham. In the Old Testament, Abraham comes before God—God who has resolved to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah because of their wickedness, unbelief, and rejection of God—Abraham comes before God, praying for all the faithful still in the city. And he says, “God, what if fifty righteous people are there. Will you destroy it then?” And God says, “No.” And then what’s amazing, Abraham starts to haggle with God, in the same way you might haggle for a piece of clothing on the street. “Okay, what if forty-five are there? What about forty? What about thirty? What about twenty? What about ten?” And God says, “I will not destroy the city if ten righteous people are there.” You see, that’s a picture of boldness in prayer.

And then in the Gospel, Jesus encourages us to be bold in our prayers when he says, *What father among you, if his son asks fora fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent;**or if he asks for an egg, will give him 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 him!”*

Beautiful words. The point here is this. Think of the best earthly father you could ever imagine. Think of an earthly father who always put the needs of his children first, who always loved their mother, who always gave good advice and did the right thing, who always gave his children exactly what they needed—not just what they wanted—but what they really needed. Think of a dad like that. Now, even that father, Jesus says, is imperfect, sinful, full of weakness. And yet, in spite of his weakness and imperfection, he still knows how to give good gifts to his children. So *how much more*—those are the three keys words—*how much more*, will your heavenly Father who is not imperfect and weak, but perfect, sinless—give you what you need when you ask? This is encouragement to be bold in our prayers.

But what’s the problem? What is it that keeps us from being bold in prayer? On the one hand, as we talked about last week, we’re all busy people. We’ve got the cares of this life, many distractions. Always tempting us from the one thing needful. The busyness of this life can rob us of the comfort of God’s Word and prayer. But still, there’s another, deeper problem. And that’s guilt. Guilt can actually prevent us from praying. And it works like this: we look at our lives, and see all the ways we’ve failed to keep God’s commandments, all the ways we’ve fallen short of his glory, and we think: “What would a holy God ever want to do with the prayers of a sinner like me?” What right do I have to pray to God?

And here’s the first big point about prayer: we haven’t earned the right to pray to God by our goodness or our works. Prayer is not a right we have earned for ourselves. As Luther says in the Catechism, “We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them.”

So we don’t earn the right to pray. We’re given the right to pray. God has given us the right to pray, because by baptism God has brought us into his family. And here, I want to look at the Epistle. St. Paul says, in Colossians chapter 2[:12], “[You have] *been buried with* [Christ] *in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the powerful working of God, who raised* [Jesus] *from the dead.* So this is what Baptism does: it joins you to Jesus. Think of Jesus going down to his death on Good Friday, coming up out of grave, alive, on Easter morning. When you were baptized, you took that same trip with Jesus. You died with him in baptism. You rose with him in baptism. Baptism joins you to Jesus. So that Jesus is now your brother, and God, Jesus’ Father, is now your Father by baptism. And in baptism, you’ve been given the full rights and privileges of son-ship, access to God in prayer. **You can pray because God has brought you into his family.** See that? So that when the disciples come to Jesus, and say, “Lord, teach us to pray,” He says, “Pray like this: Our Father.” Whose Father? Jesus’ Father, and no, by baptism, your Father. You see, you and Jesus have the same Father. Our Father.

I have a friend in the ministry who uses this great story to show how Jesus gives us access to God in prayer. And it goes like this: There was a little boy who came to the gates of Buckingham Palace. The boy wanted to enter the palace and see the king. But the guard at the gate turned him away, and said, you have no place here. The boy went away cry. And as he was walking away, he came upon a well-dressed who asked him, “Why are you crying?” The boy told him what happened. The man laughed and said, “You never mind that, you come with me.” He took the boy’s hand, together they walk to the gate. And as they approached, the boy was amazed to see the guards step aside and stand at attention. They walked into the huge doors, down the long hallway, through many doors, until finally they were standing before the throne of the king. The boy hadn’t known it, but he had taken the hand of the Prince of Wales.

And this is the picture of prayer: the access that we have to God, is not by any right of our own, but only through Jesus, who is our brother, who has granted us access to his Father by bringing us into God’s family in baptism, so that all our prayers are heard for Jesus’ sake. That’s why we can pray with boldness.

And so we’ll talk a little about the Lord’s Prayer, the Prayer that Jesus taught us to pray. And the first thing we can say about the Lord’s Prayer is that Jesus has given it to us. And that’s obvious, but it’s an important point. Because it teaches us what prayer is. When we pray, we’re not just inventing words out of thin air, coming up with the words ourselves. Prayer is always based upon God’s Word and his promises. And when we pray, we’re simply speaking back to God, the Words he’s spoken to us.

It’s kind of like this: we all know how children learn to speak, right? By imitating the speech of their parents. If you have a five year old who speaks with a twang, chances are, mom and dad speak with a twang. Children pick up, echo their parents’ dialect, phrases, vocabulary. I had a friend I was talking to at Convention. He had three kids. Said for his first two kids, their first word was “mommy.” And he was determined that the third kid’s first would be daddy. So every time he was with him, he said “daddy, daddy, daddy,” and it worked. Children learn to speak by hearing the speech of their parents.

It’s the same with prayer. We learn to pray by hearing the words of Jesus. Jesus says the words, and we speak them back to him. It’s that simple. And that’s why the Lord’s Prayer is the most perfect prayer there is because Jesus has given it to us. In the Lord’s Prayer, we learn what our true needs are. You see, if it was up to us, we wouldn’t know what to pray for. We would only be asking God for the things we thought we needed. Money, fame, power, prestige, earthly stuff. Like the old song goes: “O God won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz.” But Jesus shows us what we need above all else: “God, let your Name be holy. Let your kingdom come. Let your will be done. Give us daily bread, and forgiveness, and the strength to forgive others. Save us from temptation. Deliver us from evil.”

These are our true needs above anything else. So when we see trouble in the world around us, when we find trouble in our own homes and lives, we come to God, the God who invites us to pray, the God who encourages us to be bold with our prayers—we go to God on the basis of his Word and promises, trusting and believing that when we pray, he is hearing, answering, saving us from all our enemies, bringing us safely home. “Call upon me in the day of trouble, and I will deliver you.”

*In the Name of the Father and of the +Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*