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Genesis 18:20-32
Pentecost 7

GOD'S GRACIOUS "YES"

I love written prayers for a number of reasons. But I'll get back to that in a little bit.

If this sermon is about the blessing of prayer, to me it makes sense simultaneously to equip you with some tangible prayer tools. Some of you are long-time, prayer veterans. You already have your well-worn array of prayer go-tos. Others may not have as many miles on their prayer-odometer, and may welcome a few ideas.

To begin with, I'd like in particular to enlist our retired folks. As a congregation, for the next two years or so, we will be engaging in Covid-recovery. We'll be prioritizing the pastors' energies and be implementing deliberate strategies to address the spiritual health of our congregation. A way you can help is this. (Hold up directory.) This is a membership directory. Our office staff typically puts an updated stack of these on the back counter each month. You could take one home and each day pray through one page. Pray that God would bless each person on that page. "God bless Joe Smith. God bless Sally Jones. God bless Sally's children, Kaleigh and Braden." Of course, if you know the individuals, you are encouraged to add more... "Lord, Joe is worried about his surgery coming up. Please grant him a successful surgery. Lord, I haven't seen Sally at church in a while. Please put it in her heart to come." Just one page a day. Of course, any of us can do this, but I'm suggesting our retired folks because you have a little more flexibility schedule-wise. In so doing, you will bless our congregation in a big way.

Next, I invite you all to pull out a blue hymnal and turn to page 290. This is from Luther's Small Catechism. Please look at the bottom of the page, where it says, "The Doxology." It says, *For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen. What does this mean? We can be sure that these petitions are acceptable to our Father in heaven and are heard by him, for he himself has commanded us to pray in this way and has promised to hear us. Therefore we say, "Amen. Yes, it shall be so."*

Notice in that explanation of the Doxology, two reasons are given why we can be confident God hears our prayers: It says 1) God himself has commanded us to pray, and 2) God has promised to hear us. Think about that for a second. God has commanded us to pray and has promised to hear us. If those two things are true, isn't prayer a sure win? (You can close your hymnals now.)

God has commanded us to pray – so you know He wants this. He has promised to hear us – so you know it'll never be wasted words. This helps us in those moments when we want to pray but we just feel cold – we don't feel any special presence of God or anything like that – it just feels like your words are dissipating into empty space. But they are not disappearing into empty space. God commanded you to pray and He has promised to hear you. It doesn't matter what you are feeling.

This brings us to an important point I want to draw to your attention in the reading from Genesis chapter 18 today. We could point out that Abraham's prayer was humble and yet bold. We could say it was persistent and selfless. But we'd still be missing the most important thing. Did you notice that each time Abraham made his request, God's answer was, "Yes?" Abraham seems to be dickering with God – "How about if only 50 believers are found in Sodom? How about if just 40? How about if 30, 20, 10?" And each time, God answers, "Yes." The final outcome for Sodom was likely different from what Abraham had in mind, but with regard to Lot and his family Abraham's prayers surely made a profound difference.

And don't get muddled in the muck of unnecessary questions... if God already knows what He's going to do and He already knows what I'm going to pray, then why does He want us to pray and will it really affect

anything... blah, blah, blah!!! All you need to know is that you have God's gracious yes. Trust that God is saying yes to all your prayers. It's called faith!

It makes me think of a Bible passage in the New Testament from 2 Corinthians chapter one. It says, *No matter how many promises God has made, they are "yes" in Christ.*

Whenever we pray, God's yes-response is because of Christ. Or we could say it this way: Whenever we pray, God's response is Christ. God says, "Here is Christ. I give Him to you in Word and Sacrament." Just prior to today's reading from Genesis chapter 18, the Lord had assured Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son. We heard this account last Sunday. The promise of a son to them was equivalent to the promise of a Savior since their son would be an ancestor to the Savior. This gave Abraham confidence that he had God's goodwill as he prayed for Sodom.

By His death on the cross Jesus has atoned for all our sins and won for us God's forgiveness, grace, mercy and peace. Therefore, each time we hear a sermon or Scripture readings, whenever we confess our sins and receive the absolution, whenever the name of the triune God is spoken over us or we claim our child-of-God status in Baptism, whenever we receive Christ's body and blood in the Sacrament or the pastor speaks the blessing, we are receiving God's "yes" to all our prayers. God says, "I am giving you Christ, and if I am giving you Christ, I am giving you all things – everything I have ever promised you."

That being the case, isn't it a little curious for a Christian to say, "I'm not much of a praying man?" Isn't that a little like saying, "I'm a fish, but I'm just not much of a water-breather?" Now, without self-condemnation, I'd like to encourage you to search your own heart and ask yourself, "Why is that? Why don't I pray? Is it because I don't trust God will give me a good answer? Or that it'll do any good? Is it because I don't feel worthy?" Christ solves that. Your prayers are not worthy because of you, but because of Him. Maybe it's as simple as, "I just don't know how to go about it. It just feels awkward."

Understood. But this is why I like written prayers. You don't have to try to shake something out of your sleeve and throw around religious lingo. Use a written prayer. I love written prayers because they help me not to forget things that I might forget to pray about. Written prayers put together thoughts way better than I could have. Written prayers help me to have a routine, or dare I say it – a ritual!

There's something I think WELS Lutherans over the years have been far too afraid of – establishing routine or ritual. I suppose our fear has always been that it might become mindlessly rote or even a work-righteous exercise. But maybe we've gone too far with that here and have robbed ourselves of having a rich prayer-life. Ritual can really be a helpful tool for us.

So here's my advice – especially dads and parents – you are the front line of defense for your family – so if you're not praying for them, who else will? Start with the best written prayer of all: The Lord's Prayer. You know that one by heart. Say it with your children in the morning before you all leave the house or say it with them right before they go to bed. Since Jesus himself composed that prayer, you can't go wrong with that. And saying something familiar like the Lord's Prayer at home, which you know so well, kind of breaks the ice. Now it won't be so weird to utter spiritual things in your home. Maybe you can graduate to having each person in your family say one extra little prayer... "God, please help me in my baseball game today; God, please help grandpa get out of the hospital soon."

Personal, written prayers can also be found in our red and our blue hymnals. You can find written prayers in our Meditations devotional booklets or from books in our church library. You can take home and use a prayer from a Sunday bulletin. You can purchase what's called "the Lutheran Book of Prayer." Me personally, I usually like to pray out loud. It just helps me stay focused. It helps to have a couple of favorites and say them at the same time every day. Maybe it would help you even to have a special place to do it.

God had this account about Abraham in Genesis chapter 18 written down for us not only so that we could know about this very important component of salvation history, but also as an encouragement to pray. Abraham kept coming back. Abraham kept asking for more. Abraham ventured to try God's patience. Only God could know and understand the big picture. But God's answer each time was, "Yes." Dear Christian, be encouraged that because of Christ you always have God's gracious yes.