

April 5, 2017 – Psalm 141 & Matthew 6:5-15

Christianity is full of paradoxes. A paradox, if you're not familiar with the term, is when two things are both true even though they completely contradict each other. Even though they couldn't possibly both be true, they are. And our faith is full of them.

The Trinity. God is both one and three. It's a paradox. And if you emphasize that God is either one or three too much, you'll end up in heresy. But if you believe them both at the same time, it's completely irrational. The incarnation is the same way. Jesus is both fully God and fully man. Impossible. And yet also true and absolutely essential.

There's another paradox that many of us haven't considered, though, I think. The paradox of prayer. Because prayer really doesn't make sense, when you think about it.

On the one hand, we worship a God who is all powerful and all knowing. A God who made me and all creations. Who gave me my eyes, ears, and all my members, my reason and all my senses, as Luther says. He is from everlasting to everlasting and nothing is hidden from his sight. And who, as Jesus himself says in our Gospel lesson, "Knows what you need before you ask him."

And yet, he tells us to pray. He commands us to pray. It's not optional. Prayer is fundamental to being his disciple. His child. Part of his kingdom.

And it always has been. Just about every single man or woman of faith in the entire Bible prays. Moses prays. David prays. The prophets pray. The apostles pray. Jesus prays. Everyone prays.

Even though God knows every word that we're going to pray before we pray it. Even though he knows every hair on our head and cares for every creature down to the lilies of the valley and the birds of the air. Even though he has every day of our life counted and the hour of Christ's return planned in advance. We are still called to pray. Why?

Well, I think there are lots of answers to that question. Starting with, we just don't know. We don't understand the Trinity. We don't understand the incarnation. We won't ever understand everything there is to know about prayer. And that's OK. It's enough to be told that it's true.

Because God does listen to our prayers. And God does, somehow, change his mind and give us what we ask. Even in all his sovereignty. So I don't want you to think that I'm completely ignoring that aspect of prayer.

But I think there's another important facet of prayer to remember. And that's that God never commands us to do something for his own benefit. God doesn't need anything from us. Our prayers included. He commands us to do things for our benefit. So if he's told us to pray, there must be a blessing that comes from the act of prayer.

And there is. There are many blessings that come from prayer. But they can all really be boiled down to two categories: blessings of the Law and blessings of the Gospel.

From a Law standpoint, prayer reminds us that we need God. He doesn't need us, but we definitely need him. Just look at the Lord's Prayer. Look at all of the petitions we make there. Could we provide any of those on our own?

Can we make God's name holy? No. We're sinners. We have no holiness in us. Can we make God's kingdom come? No. We were born as enemies of God's kingdom. Can we fulfill God's will? No. God's will is his Law. And we have all broken his Law. Can we provide for our daily bread? No. God gives us food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, animals, and all that we have. Can we forgive sins? No. Only Christ could do that on the cross. Can we resist temptation? No. We are constantly doing the things we do not want to do. Can we deliver ourselves from evil? No. For apart from the Holy Spirit, nothing good lives within us.

The Lord's Prayer is a grocery list of everything we need from God. Everything we are lacking apart from him. It is a humbling reminder that we are beggars of his grace and goodness. We are prodigal sons who come back to his home everyday with nothing to show for ourselves. Asking only to be treated as slaves and menial laborers. And not even deserving of that.

And yet we are received back as sons. Which is the Gospel side of this coin. For even though we are sinners and beggars and the humblest of the humble, we are welcomed into the riches of God's grace. And not just allowed to pray. We are commanded to pray.

It's as if God says, "You're not allowed to despair of my provision and mercy. You're not allowed to think yourself too sinful to come to me in prayer. I won't let you give up on my love. It's too important for you."

And so we pray every one of those petitions knowing not only that we need them, but that God has already given them. He's already promised to provide them. He's a good heavenly Father. And he knows what you need before you ask him. So go ahead and ask. You will not be turned away. You will not be rejected. It's a guaranteed yes. That is living by faith. That is praying by faith.

And it's a good thing that God gives this gift of prayer along side of our faith. Because, having come to faith, we need prayer that much more.

Martin Luther says that the moment a person has faith in Jesus Christ is the moment they become an enemy of all that is evil. Your baptism marked you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified. But it also marked you as one who has turned their back on the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh.

And that makes you a target. Posted on the gates of hell is a sign with your face on it. And it says, "Wanted: Dead or Alive." Before the Holy Spirit came into your life, before you knew Jesus Christ and him crucified, there was no reason for Satan to go after you. You were going to walk right into hell all on your own.

But now? Now you're a rebel from the rebellion against God. Now you are citizen of heaven, not a citizen of the world. Now you are made alive and redeemed from the one who only wants to steal, kill, and destroy.

I don't know about you, but I don't really want to stand toe-to-toe against the devil. He's had a lot more practice than I have. He's been tempting God's children into sin from the beginning of the world.

But I don't have to fight him. I can pray. Because prayer is the battlecry of faith. It is standing in the battlefield of this world, surrounded by sin, death, and the forces of hell on every side and crying out, "God, I need you!" And then standing in the peace of knowing that in Christ the battle has already been won.

That you and I are children of God who turn to our heavenly Father in our every need, who did indeed know what we needed before we even asked. And so he sent his Son to fight the good fight of faith and win for us a crown of life. And when we turn to him in prayer, he's already standing there with arms open wide. Ready to receive us into his protection.

So do not forsake the gift of prayer. For it is our only refuge and defense. Do not hesitate to pray. For your prayers rise as sweet incense before the Lord. Do not doubt when you pray. For the Lord will hasten to help you when you call upon him. He will give ear to your voice when you cry out to him. For there is no prayer without faith. And, in the end, there is no faith without prayer. Amen.