

Sermon for Pentecost XVII
September 27, 2009
James 5:13-20

It is my privilege to introduce to you Mr. and Mrs. Justin Martin. Lane Allen Fuchs, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Wilhelm Wiedenmeyer was born into the Kingdom of Glory on September 22, 2009. Three days in the life of a pastor. Three different experiences with words appropriate to the occasion. Yesterday I was at Bethel and married Justin and Megan since Pastor Jenks is in San Jose for his sister Betsy's wedding. Today, Lane was baptized into Christ. Tomorrow the family of Bill Wiedenmeyer will gather at Shepherd of the Valley to bid farewell to Bill and to celebrate his new life in heaven.

With these normal events in life come a wide range of emotions. These three events mark some of the most pivotal times in our lives. With the birth of a child comes a sense of joy and anticipation for what the Lord has in store for this child. It can also be very overwhelming with all of the new responsibilities on parents to provide for all of the needs, physical, emotional, and spiritual.

The planning of a wedding can rule the life of the bride and her mother for months prior to the wedding. Just talk to a father of the bride. While there is a great deal of joy at a wedding, there can also be disappointments. Any little circumstance can turn a day of great joy into one that didn't quite meet the couple's expectations. A family squabble or a blustery, rainy day, can sap the joy for the newlyweds and their guests.

Funerals are bitter sweet. While we rejoice with the person who no longer has to suffer the trials of life in this world, there is much pain and sorrow for those who will miss their loved one.

These are significant events in our lives. Much of the time we just want to survive the latest crisis in our lives. We become overwhelmed with all that life throws at us. Where can we go for help? James gives us some no nonsense direction. Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise. In times of celebration and in times of sorrow, we are invited to pray.

The prayer of a righteous person has great power. James has opened the door for us to talk about prayer and remind us what a tremendous privilege we have in approaching our kind and loving Lord with our cares and concerns. I don't know when you last opened Luther's Small Catechism. However, this morning I'd like to spend a few moments reviewing the questions and answers related to prayer.

What privilege and command does God give to those who believe in Jesus Christ? God commands and invites believers in Jesus Christ to pray. Yes, prayer is both a command and a privilege. It is a privilege given to those who believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We don't deserve this privilege. By nature we want nothing to do with the Lord. As sinners, we would rather live for the moment, seeking pleasure and comfort at every turn. We are the ones who deserve to have a millstone hung around our neck and be thrown into the sea. What we deserve is the unquenchable fire of hell that Jesus talked about in the Gospel reading. And yet, Jesus is the One who experienced true suffering in our behalf when He suffered and died on the cross. By His coming to life again on the third day He has won for us the privilege of having an intimate relationship with our Heavenly Father.

What is prayer? Prayer is speaking to God in words and thoughts. It is a heart to heart conversation with the Lord. We can bear our hearts to Him with full confidence that He will hear and answer our prayer.

To whom should we pray? We should pray to the true God only, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, not to idols, saints, or anything God has created.

Whose prayers are acceptable to God? Only those who believe in Jesus Christ may pray to God and expect to be heard. We are reminded that no one comes to the Father except through Christ.

What should be the content of our prayers? In our prayers we should ask for everything that tends to the glory of God and to our own and our neighbor's welfare, both spiritual and bodily blessings. We should also praise and thank God for who He is and what He has done.

How should we pray? We should pray in the name of Jesus, that is, with faith in Him as our Redeemer.

We should pray with confidence, that is with firm trust that for Jesus' sake our prayers will be answered.

We should pray according to God's revealed will. Jesus certainly set the tone for us when He prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not my will, but Yours be done." All too often we grumble and complain when the Lord doesn't seem to answer our prayers in the way that we want Him to. Perhaps we have forgotten to look for direction and insight from His Holy Word in the context of our situation. We need to remember that life in this world is not about us. It is about honoring our Lord and serving our neighbor.

Who helps us pray? God the Holy Spirit prays with us and for us. In Romans 8:26 St. Paul writes, "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." What a comfort to know that when we are hurting so deeply that we cannot even put our prayers into words, the Holy Spirit steps in and groans in our behalf.

Here is a key question. How does God answer prayer? God hears and answers the prayers of all Christians and answers them in His own way and at His own time. St. Paul writes, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But He said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me." (2 Corinthians 12:8-9) The Lord wanted to Paul to continue to find His true strength in the Lord and so the answer to his prayer was no. In our reading we heard Elijah's prayer. He prayed for it to stop raining, and it did not rain for three years and six months. Then he prayed again and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. We pray that God's will be done and trust that He will accomplish His will through us.

For whom shall we pray? We should pray for ourselves and for all other people, even for our enemies, but not for the souls of the dead. Is there someone with whom you are having animosity? Just seeing that person makes your blood boil. Everything they do or say drives you crazy. When was the last time you offered a prayer for them? What was the content of that prayer? Do you truly have their best interest in mind? They may have sinned against you. Are they aware of it? Have you gone to them personally, and in love shown them their sin in order that your relationship might be restored? The hurt that you experienced may have brought bitterness to you that caused you to sin against them. Paul reminds us again, “Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed.” (v. 16).

Finally, when and where should we pray? While the government seems to be limiting when and where we can pray, we can certainly pray silently in any place at any time. We are urged to pray regularly and frequently, especially in time of trouble. If you don’t know where to begin, pick up the new Portals of Prayer. There are daily devotions and prayers, or I’d be happy to give you other resources. Pray from the heart.

Pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus. We can pray with confidence knowing that our Lord loves us and will provide for our every need. He has proven His love for us by virtue of His suffering and death on the cross. Because Christ was forsaken by His Father on the cross as He bore the punishment for our sin, we can know and celebrate that no matter what happens in this life, He will never abandon us. The Father accepted Christ’s sacrifice and raised Him to life on the third day. He has forgiven our sins and made us heirs of heaven. Whether we are going through a tough time or are celebrating a great victory, we rejoice in the fact that we are able to approach our Lord with complete confidence that He will hear and answer all of our prayers until that day when we will see Him face to face in heaven.