



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Easter

St. John 16:23b-33

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The Gospel lessons for these last three Sundays of the East Season are all taken from John 16—from Jesus' farewell address to his disciples when they were gathered in the Upper Room. These Sundays take us from the Easter joy of the Resurrection and the excitement of the disciples when Jesus appeared to them, and turn us toward the continuing reality of the risen life Jesus brings. They were excited to have Jesus with them, but as he's been saying in these lessons, he'll be going away soon. Real life will set in—they (and we) are going to have to start dealing with the struggles and pressure of everyday life. What happens when the excitement dissipates? What happens when Jesus is no longer with us in person? And so Jesus has a final heart-to-heart talk with his friends so that he can prepare them for everyday life as his people. And I think we can sum up the general idea of what he says here in one word: *consolation*.

I can't help but think of the time when Veronica and I were dating. A couple of months after we met the school year ended. She went home to Kelowna. I was staying in Vancouver. We didn't just leave each other and expect to pick everything up again in September. No. We consoled each other and we made sure we knew how to call and write each other. We made sure we each had the other's phone number and address. I made sure I had directions to her parents' house so I could visit. And in many ways, this is what we see happening between Jesus and the disciples. They were going to be sad when he was gone. And so he prepares them. In effect, he saying, "I'm going ahead to prepare a home for you. Then I'll come back to get you. But even while you're *here* and I'm *there*, we won't be completely separated. There are ties that will continue to bind us together." And as he talks to them, the first tie that Jesus refers to is his sanctifying grace. That was the idea behind his parable of the vine and the branches. Even when he's gone, we're still one with him—we still get our spiritual life directly from him. The second tie is the Holy Spirit—the Helper or the Comforter—who's

going to take Jesus' place with his people. That was the focus of last week's Gospel. And today's Gospel gives us the third tie: *prayer*. But not just prayer; specifically, prayer *in and through Jesus*.

In fact, five times in this passage Jesus talk about praying through him, or praying in his name. In John 14:12-14 he tells them:

**Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.**

In the parable of the vine and the branches, in John 15:7, he says:

**If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.**

A few verses later, in 15:16, he says:

**You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.**

And then in today's Gospel, in John 16:23-24, he tells them:

**Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.**

And in verses 26 to 27:

**In that day you will ask in my name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.**

Almost everything that Jesus had to say to his disciples before he left them, he eventually tied into the subject of prayer, and so we can be sure that if the subject of prayer was so important that it was the focus of his last talk with his friends, it should be important to us too. And yet maybe more than anything else that Jesus taught about, it's prayer that Christians today so often don't seem to understand. On the one hand, lots of us very much affirm our belief in prayer, but then we've got all sorts of unbiblical ideas about it, and on the other hand, I've met lots of Christians who have, after years of not seeing their prayers

answered, have become very sceptical about the whole thing. I'm convinced this is because we either forget the "in my name" part of what Jesus said, or we just plain misunderstand what he means.

In my first year in University I spent a couple of weeks praying desperate that I'd pass my Calculus final, but I still got an "F". We pray for the salvation or the welfare of our children, but we see them experiencing desperate trials and tribulations or we see them making bad choices or we see them turning their backs on God. We pray for ourselves or family members or friends who are sick and dying, and instead of getting better they get worse or they die.

And so we look at the subject of prayer and on the one hand we see that Jesus tells us that whatever we ask will be granted, and on the other hand we see all these unanswered prayers and we just don't seem to be able to reconcile these two things. Our problem—whether it's losing faith and becoming sceptical about the power of prayer or some of the crazy ideas we've got about prayer and how it works—our problem can be resolved if we look at what Jesus actually tells us. We need to focus on those words: "in my name".

What does that mean. One of the things that stands out if you read this whole passage that starts in John 13 with Jesus washing his disciples' feet and runs all the way through Chapter 17, is that Jesus focuses our attention on the fact that we are children of our heavenly Father. That's hard to grasp sometimes. I've met a lot of people who seem to have a picture of God based solely on the portions of the Old Testament that present him as a wrathful judge. For them he's unapproachable. Somehow they've missed his loving-kindness, his mercy, and his grace. Somehow they've missed that he's not just *the* Father, but *our* Father. In most cases, I think this is the difference that St. James gets at in our Epistle today when he talks about people who think they're "religious" when in fact, they aren't. Just as true religion and true piety are found in a truly changed life—a life changed by union with the Son through the working of the Holy Spirit, our being able to see *the* Father as *our* Father comes only as we are united with Jesus through the working of the Spirit—only as we become his children and part of his family. It's this *sonship* that Jesus is getting at when he talk about praying "in his name". It's another way of expressing the fact that we have access to the Father *through* Jesus and because we are *in* Jesus.

Our ideas about prayer start to clear up when we realise that it's part of a family relationship. If God is *our* Father, not just someone else's father, then we can go to him freely and openly with our requests. Think of your own family and your own children. I'm glad that my daughter can come to me any time and say anything or ask for anything. *But* the fact that she can ask me for anything, doesn't necessarily mean that I'm going to give her whatever she asks. As parents you know that part of the responsibility of being a parent means looking out for your child's best interest. A good parent isn't going to give his son or daughter something that would harm them. And the fact is that if we raise our children well, they eventually outgrow the "asking for anything" phase. The more they mature the more they understand what's good for them, and so they don't ask for silly things anymore. And the more mature they get, the better they understand and trust your judgement as a parent, trusting you when you tell them "No".

Our relationship with God is very similar. We're God's beloved children and we're the brothers and sisters of Jesus. Just as we want what's best for our children, God wants what's best for us. And that knowledge needs to shape our prayers. We need to understand our fallen state. Adam and Eve fell out of their state of grace because they decided to take God's role on themselves. God didn't create human beings with the ability to fully know what's best for us. To know that we'd have to be all-powerful and all-knowing as God is. No. God created us to be reliant on him for that knowledge and reliant on him to provide what's good for us. The Fall happened when we turned everything upside-down and tried to take God's role on ourselves, and that's what we've been doing ever since. That's why we sin—we reject the good that God wants for us and try to find it on our own and on our own power. And so even when we pray, we often try to usurp God's role—we ask for things thinking that they're what's best and we forget that God often knows better and has better plans for us.

One of my favourite movies is *A Christmas Story*. The main plotline of the story follows a little boy, Ralphie, in his attempts to convince his parents that they should get him a Red Rider BB Gun for Christmas. He asks his mom, and she tells him, "Oh Ralphie, you'll shoot your eye out." He writes on essay for school hoping that maybe he can convince his teacher who will then convince his mother, and when he gets the paper back the teacher's written on it, "You'll shoot

your eye out." He goes to the department store to visit Santa and tells him, and Santa tells him, "You'll shoot your eye out, kid." In the end, his father breaks down and buys him the BB gun. Ralphie excitedly takes it outside, aims at an old metal sign, and promptly has his glasses broken by the ricocheting BB. He almost shot his eye out!

Brothers and sisters, because of our limited understanding, we're often just like Ralphie, begging for a BB gun. We don't get it and we get frustrated with God or we lose faith, when all the time God knows that if he gave it to us, we'd shoot our eyes out. Too often in our prayers, we're going back to Eden and following right along in Adam's footsteps as we try to take on a role that God never created us for—as we try to determine what's good for us and what's not when we don't have the ability, the knowledge, or the foresight to make those judgements. God created us to trust him—and that's something we need to understand as people who pray effectually. We need to acknowledge that there are things we ask for, sometimes foolishly and sometimes in good faith and with good intentions, but that God denies us because he knows better and because he really is a kind and loving Father.

Jesus reminds us that as God's children, we need to be fully resigned to his holy will. We need to be conscious of the fact that every step we take in life is taken under his all-seeing eyes and that everything that happens in our lives happens at his hand. If something we think is "bad" happens to us, we need to remember that it was sent by God, and that regardless of how it may seem to us, it's something good for us in the long run—and maybe even in the short run. When we experience suffering, we do so because it's God's will for us. And we should know this. Jesus promised that we would face suffering and persecution for his sake, but that suffering and persecution grow us and mature us into his likeness. And friends, if we'd remember this we'd be far better equipped to deal with the problems that come up in life, because we'd know that everything comes from God and that he sends us everything for the best. If we'd remember that God knows better than we do, we wouldn't be disappointed or we wouldn't lose faith when God doesn't give us the things we've asked for. We should pray with childlike confidence, but if God doesn't answer the way we want, the response of faith is to say, "God doesn't want this and for that reason, I don't want it either. I'm God's child and I want nothing that might be opposed to his will." And the more we pray and see God answer—whether it's positively

or negatively—the better we come to know his will for us; and the better we know his will, the better we learn to submit to him and experience the good things he has for us.

We also need to remember that God's timing is not our timing. I think we've all experienced this, and yet it's a lesson we're prone to forget. Yes, we may be asking for some *thing* in harmony with God's will, but our *timing* may not be in harmony with his will. Sometimes it may just be an issue of God teaching us to be persistent—a situation in which he wants to expand our faith, but it usually seems that there's more to it than that. Think of St. Monica. She spent years and years praying that her good-for-nothing son, Augustine, would come to Christ. She saw him wasting his life. If it was worldly and sinful, you can bet Augustine tried it. And all that time his mother wept and prayed for him, and all that time, instead of answering her prayer, God let her son go from bad to worse. And yet, if God had answered her prayer right away, how would Augustine have turned out? We can only speculate, but I bet he'd have been a pretty mediocre Christian and Monica might have spent those years focusing her attention on worldly things. But because she spent those years weeping and praying for her son, she drew close to God, and because of his experience as a great sinner and because of his experience with worldly philosophy, Augustine saw Christ as a great Saviour. He became one of the greatest lights in Church history—one of the greatest theologians the Church has ever known, and not just an academic, but a man with a passion for proclaiming the Gospel to a world of people who were deceived and hurting just like he had been. In taking *his* time to answer Monica's prayer, God answered it in a way that in the end was better than anything she envisioned with her limited perspective. So if God doesn't answer your prayers that you're certain are in line with his will, don't lose faith and don't stop praying, just realise that your timing may not be God's timing and that he may have better things in mind than you realise.

And that brings me to the third point: God's plans are perfect and usually so much higher than ours. Monica just wanted her son to be a Christian. God wanted him to be a great pastor, teacher, and defender of the faith. I've known Christian who don't get what they want, so they quit going to church or they cut off their financial support. It's sort of a spiritual temper tantrum. "Fine God, if you aren't going to give me what I want, then I won't give you what you want!" But brothers and sisters, that's being like Adam

and Eve again—it's trying to take God's role on ourselves. Somehow we've got this backward idea that we know better than God. Somehow we think that we're the sovereigns, not him. I don't think we give this enough thought, because I hear people all the time talking about their prayers. Maybe it's because we've been influenced by the "Name-it-and-claim-it" teachers, who teach that if we only have enough faith, we can demand *whatever* we want from God and he's *obligated* to give it to us. And of course, when prayers like that aren't answered, no one considers that it might be because the prayer wasn't according to God's will, because in their economy, God's will doesn't really matter—man is sovereign, not God. It's just that the pray-er didn't have enough faith. It's Adam all over again.

Instead we need to remember that it's God who is sovereign, not us. It's God's will that is perfect, not ours. As long as we forget this basic fact, our prayer lives will be backward. We approach God as if he'd forgotten something when he made his plans, as if we pray and God, sitting up in heaven thinks, "Oh man! I'm sure glad Bill prayed about such-and-such. I hadn't even considered that when I made my plans. I'd better change them!"

Or we think that if we pester God long enough he'll give in to our demands. There's an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Bart and Lisa decide they want a pool in the backyard. They ask Homer for a pool, but they warn him: "Now before you respond, you must understand that your refusal would result in months and months of... 'Can we have a pool, Dad? Can we have a pool, Dad? Can we have a pool, Dad? Can we have a pool, Dad?'" They repeat the question in unison who know how many times. Homer finally stops them to negotiate a truce and they get their pool—which promptly turns into a disaster. God isn't Homer Simpson, and yet, again, I hear people talk about their prayers and that's exactly how they're treating him—if they pester him long enough, they'll get what they want. And yet to pray that way is to treat God as if he's fallible, as if his knowledge isn't complete, and as if his goodness isn't perfect—it's expecting that God will somehow cave into our pressure to give us what's second best, to change his perfect plans, instead of loving us perfectly and giving us the best.

There are times when we see those seemingly unanswered prayers eventually answered—times when God's grants us the

privilege of seeing just how much better his plans are, letting us see why he delayed or why he didn't answer the way we asked or expected. And yet I'm certain that when we get to heaven, we'll be able to see God's bigger plans and only then we'll be able to see how all those times we got angry or frustrated because we didn't get what we wanted were actually God giving us something better.

So again, back to those words "in Jesus' name". When I listen to people pray I get the impression that we sometimes take it as something like a magic formula. If we attach the name of Jesus to a prayer, God has to answer it. But I hope you can see that's not it. We pray through Jesus—we pray in his name—because he is the Son of the Father and, more specifically, because *through* the redeeming work of Jesus, through his mediatorship as our Great High Priest, we are sons of our heavenly Father. Through him we have access to the Father. *That's* why we pray in his name—we pray *through* him, because every time we approach the Father, it's through Jesus. We sinners can never enter the heavenly throne room on our own merits—we always have to do so solely on the merits of Jesus. If we understand that, does it then make sense that we would, through Jesus, ask our Father for things that Jesus would never ask for? Does it make sense that we would have faith in Jesus as our mediator, but not have faith in his Father?

We affirm all these things each Sunday as we gather around the Lord's Table and pray the liturgy—as we experience the foretaste of the good things to come. We're reminded each week that we come to the Father not on our own merits, but through his Son. We're reminded that we can come only through the cross. And we're reminded that God our Father has promised good things for us through his Son. "We do not presume to come to your Table, merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies..." "We ask of your fatherly goodness mercifully to accept this our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, and to grant that by the merits and death of your Son Jesus Christ, and through faith in his blood, we and your whole Church may receive forgiveness of our sins and all other benefits of his passion." "[We] thank you that you graciously feed us...with the spiritual food of the most precious body and blood of your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ, and assure us thereby of your favour and goodness towards us." As we come to the Table, we're reminded every Sunday that Jesus has not left us powerless and he has

not left us alone. *We are truly in him and he in us.* The secret to prayer is to let that reality permeate our prayer life—to let our prayers be truly through him and in his name, not as some formulaic or superstitious incantation, but as an expression of the life he gives us as sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.

Please pray with me: Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have made us your sons and daughters through faith in your Son and we praise you for having promised that you will always give us good things. As we come to you in our prayers, remind us of our sonship through Jesus and remind us of your perfect goodness that we might always approach you confidently through the merits of your Son, our Great High Priest, and ask for those good things, trusting in your perfect will. Amen.