

A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday After Easter (Easter 6)
John 16:23–30
by Peter Bockoven

The Text

23 ... Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. **24** Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full. **25** "I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures of speech but will tell you plainly about the Father. **26** 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; **27** for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God. **28** I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father." **29** His disciples said, "Ah, now you are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! **30** Now we know that you know all things and do not need anyone to question you; this is why we believe that you came from God."

The Prayer

O God, we thank you for the gift of prayer. In Jesus Christ, your Son, we are given the great honor, to call you Father, and to call ourselves your children. Because of Christ's obedience for us, we are confident that you love us, that you care for us, and graciously hear all our prayers. Hear our prayer now, O Father, and comfort us by your Holy Word; so that we might grow in faith in Jesus Christ our Savior; and so that our joy may be full in him. Amen.

The Sermon

"Ask the Father!"

- I. Not in your own name
- II. But in Jesus' name

- I. Dear brothers and sisters: one of the best descriptions I've heard of prayer is this: prayer is the breath of the soul. Whoever said that, is both a master poet and theologian. Prayer, like breath, is an amazing thing. And our Gospel lesson describes for us just what amazing thing it is.
- II. Our Gospel takes place on Maundy Thursday before Jesus was crucified. Here he's comforting his disciples, as part of a long conversation, by explaining to them how wonderfully their lives would change following his resurrection from the dead. He tells that that they're going to have true spiritual breath again. They're going to pray in a new, bold, and powerful way. They're going to be able to ask the Father, in Jesus' name, for whatever they need. And the Father will hear them, and grant what they ask for.
- III. Here we see what an amazing thing prayer is. When we pray, we are speaking to God the Father himself. And not only that: but the Father hears us! He listens to us, though we are so small and insignificant in ourself. And not only does he hear, but he will give us whatever we ask of him.

IV. Now that might sound too good to be true. God hears us? How? And why?

V. He hears us because we pray “in Jesus’ name.” Now this isn’t some magic phrase that Christ gave us to add at the end of every prayer to make it effective. No, prayer “in Jesus’ name” is prayer made by the authority of Jesus. Jesus has given his people the authority and the power to pray.

VI. Christ truly has this power and authority to give. Because he’s the one that was sent by the Father, in a way far greater than any of the prophets. He’s the greater Moses, described in Deuteronomy 18. The one who has the Father’s words in his mouth. The one who speaks authoritatively in his name, since he’s the eternal Son of God. He’s the one who willingly laid down his life to save humanity, and rose to life again in total victory, conquering sin, death, and the devil. So St. Paul says of Christ, Philippians 2: “Christ humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death ... Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.”

VII. But how does Christ give us his authority? How do we obtain his power to pray to the Father?

VIII. We obtain this power, when Christ joins us to himself by faith. When we are joined to Christ by faith, something incredible happens. We become a member of the church. And when God looks at each member of the church, when he looks at you, he looks at you differently. He doesn’t see you and your weakness; he sees Christ, his own dear Son, and his perfection.

IX. It was St. Paul who so powerfully showed this to be true. He learned this from his own experience, when he was brought to faith in Christ. On his way to Damascus, to persecute believers, Jesus appears to Saul in bright glory. He calls out to him: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Look at that! Saul is persecuting Christians. But Jesus says he’s persecuting Jesus himself! He identifies his believers, with his own self! So Paul, having learned this truth well, later wrote in his letter to the Ephesians: “The husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, *his body*, and is himself its savior ...” Here Paul teaches *why* Jesus identifies with his believers. His believers, his church, are his own body. This is the amazing union that takes place between each individual believer and Christ. So Paul continues: “No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.”

X. That’s how God hears us. Because we pray in Jesus’ name, that is, by his authority, which we have, since we are members of his body. That’s what Christ was speaking about in verse 27 of the Gospel, where he says: “The Father loves you, because you have loved me and have believed.” Now loving and believing in Christ are not such good works that earn God’s love. They’re simply signs, or fruits, of being members of the church! So it’s as if Jesus is saying, “The Father loves you, because you are my church; you are my own body.”

XI. Brothers and sisters, we naturally do not pray well, to say the least. We are prone not to ask God in Jesus’ name, but in our own name. That means, at the end of the day, self-reliance of some sort. At some times that means we make our requests to God, and doubt whether or not

he hears or cares. “Why would he hear me?” we might ask. “I’m a poor, rotten sinner. I’m nothing. In the whole universe, I’m just a tiny speck of dust. Why would God listen?” But at other times that self-reliance means we think God should listen to us. “I’m a good person, God! Why aren’t you doing what I ask you to? Why aren’t you listening?”

XII. But brothers and sisters, take heart! The one who has given you his name to use in prayer, is the same one who perfectly relied on his Father in your place. To the point that he willingly laid down his life on the cross, in payment for your sins, and handed his soul into the hands of his Father. For his sake, on account of his obedience, and by your union with him by faith, you have the power to pray to the Father.

XIII. So, God hears your prayers. But onto the next question. Will God really give us whatever we ask him? For anything at all? Can I ask God to create a rock so heavy, that even he can’t move it?

XIV. Hold on a bit. Look at how Jesus’ describes the purpose of our asking. Verse 24: we ask the Father, “that our joy might be full.” The things we have the power to pray for, and have the assurance that we will receive them, are those things that lead to our ultimate and true joy.

XV. Here we see that God won’t necessarily give us riches, or power, or honor. Because none of those things are able to give us any lasting joy. True, they may give a temporary kind of joy. But in the end, we’ll have to part with them. The joy they give, and other similar things, will one day cease. But how sad the case would be, if Christ wanted to give us joy only for this life! As St. Paul says, if we have hope for Christ only in this present life, we are the most pitiable of men.

XVI. No, Christ has a different kind of joy to share with you. A joy that will never end, but last forever. The things that will lead to our ultimate joy, are all summarized in the Lord’s Prayer. Because petitions contain everything that we need for the eternal life of both our soul and our body. God wants us to live forever, body and soul, with him.

XVII. And what’s more, brothers and sisters, we are so prone to ask God for those things that do not necessarily lead to our ultimate joy or happiness. Now it is not wrong, of course, to ask for particular earthly things, that God hasn’t necessarily guaranteed us. “Cast all your anxieties on the Lord,” St. Peter says. That includes all your requests for whatever need you feel in your heart. But if these things are all that we ask for, if they are all that we hope for, we will be disappointed. Because we might not obtain those particular things that we ask for. And if we do obtain it, we know from experience, that our heart quickly shifts to some other desire. Remember that fable from Aesop. The dog, walking out the market with a piece of meat in his mouth. He walks over a bridge, looks into a river and sees his reflection. He sees another dog with a tasty looking piece of meat. He opens his mouth to take it—and drops his own meat into the river, losing it.

XVIII. But my brothers and sisters, be of good cheer. You do not pray alone. Your prayers, yes, they are, to say the least, imperfect. But when God hears you, he hears his Son. When he sees you, he sees his Son. You’ve put on Christ in Holy Baptism, as Paul says. You are covered with his righteousness and with his blood. He does not ignore you, since you are a

sinner. And he doesn't have to listen to you, as if you deserved anything from him. But he freely chooses to listen to you, out of his great love for you, in Jesus Christ, his Son.

XIX. And be of good cheer still, when you do not obtain particular, earthly things from God. If God hasn't given you something, then you can know, beyond a doubt, that it wasn't going to lead to your eternal joy. What you have now, and what God will give you in the future, are far greater than anything else imaginable. Here and now, you can ask for God's name to be hallowed; for his kingdom to come to you; for his will to be done in your life; for your daily bread; for the forgiveness of your sins. For help against temptation. And God will give them to you! He has already, in his Word and in his sacraments. And when you lie on your deathbed, you can die peacefully, and ask the Father: "Deliver me, Father, from evil!" And he will. No doubt. Guaranteed. Because his Son died for you. Because his Son gave up all he had to save you. And so the Father will take you to be with him. There you'll be in unimaginable bliss and happiness, as you wait for the resurrection of your body. And then, on that last day, you'll wake up again. Body and soul reunited, in perfect health and happiness and peace, for eternity.

XX. Everything you need for your eternal happiness is guaranteed to you. Ask the Father for them, in Jesus' name, and he will give them to you. Thanks be to our Lord Jesus. Amen.