

The Two Sides of Prayer
Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Easter (Rogate)
Sermon Text: John 16:23b-33



Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in My name, He will give it to you. ²⁴Until 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. ²⁶In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; ²⁷for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came from God. ²⁸I came from the Father and have come into the world, and now I am leaving the world and going to the Father.” ²⁹His disciples said, “Ah, now You are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech! ³⁰Now 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.” ³¹Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? ³²Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave Me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me. ³³I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”

If you ask someone for something, you make yourself vulnerable to the other person and run the risk of being rejected. Even when I want to ask my neighbor for a little salt, I first have to make sure that I am on good terms with my neighbor so that I don't have to put up with rude or irritating insults. And yet, a request can also be the threshold through which a deeper relationship or even a true friendship can grow. In our text today, Jesus encourages us by telling us that we can and should pray to our heavenly Father because we have a relationship with Him. This is an astonishing and incomprehensible statement from our Lord Jesus. On one side stands God the Father in all His power and might and glory, and on the other side are we, with our many questions, needs, and doubts. For us, this is an unimaginable chasm that we can't bridge. And some people ask themselves, is my relationship with God even good? Can I even dare to pray when I have so many sins? Jesus Christ places Himself directly in this chasm between God and us and unites what, in our experience, doesn't at first belong together. In Jesus, the two worlds – God and mankind – come together. In Jesus, these two very different worlds even become one so that God is actually among us and we can ask Him anything with confidence. This is especially true when everything is going haywire for us and we feel that our prayers are not being answered.

For example: whoever has seen a machine-made Persian rug knows that it has a front side and a back side that look completely different. The front side is beautiful and inspiring with its many patterns, colors, and threads that are woven together. Whereas if you look at the backside of the rug, the pattern is almost unrecognizable. The pattern is ill-defined and looks raw and dull. Apparently, this is also one of the ways in which a genuine hand-knotted rug can be distinguished from a machine-made rug because true Persian rugs look almost identical on the front side as compared to the back side.

And that's exactly how we feel about prayer. One side shows the radiant, risen Lord Jesus Christ. We stand there in His presence; we are filled with His splendor; we see Him face to face and He takes us lovingly into His strong arms and wipes away every tear from our eyes; and He promises us that one day we will be perfect with Him. Oh, isn't that a beautiful sight! But there is also another side. The other side shows our lives as Christians, with our daily challenges and our struggle in this world. We Christians live on the back side of a machine-made Persian rug, so to speak. Or in other words, on the back side of God's promises. We can certainly recognize the pattern because we know about God's promises but in each case, not in all its glory. Sometimes you can't see anything beautiful about us and we only see the suffering, sadness, and the many unanswered prayers. Jesus knows the challenges that we as the Church must endure here on earth. He is not trying to fool us by only telling us about the good side of Christianity. Yes, you can even say that the Church is similar to a machine-made Persian rug in that it must have two sides. If the Church just shows the good side, it is often similar to the machine-made Persian rugs, just a cheap copy and a fraud. Yet, we know that from the rough and unclear patterns that we can see in our lives today, a wonderful picture emerges on the front. Today, Jesus wants to give us strength! He wants us to look to Him and His clarity despite all disappointments and uncertainties. It is a comfort to know that our prayers are still connected to God even if we can't feel them. I sit there in my quiet bedroom and silently think one prayer after another. Perhaps I am praying the Lord's Prayer or a Psalm and

think to myself: How can what I think in my head affect heaven? Perhaps I then say a prayer out loud or pray out loud in the congregation and feel that my prayers don't even reach the roof of the church, let alone heaven. My prayer is too weak to reach anything. Naturally, we notice that something must happen to our prayers. If I stand alone, I have neither the authority nor the power to change anything with my prayers. But I don't stand by myself! Because Jesus placed Himself directly between us and God. I must touch again on the Persian rugs. When the sheep's wool is still wet, stinky, dirty, undyed, and still on the sheep, you can't imagine that a Persian rug will be made from it. A lot of stuff has to happen first and, above all, the threads must be woven into the Persian rug. That's how it is with our prayers. On our own, we can do nothing. But we aren't alone! Through our baptism, we become united with Jesus and can be in Him and remain there! Our prayers also look very different. Jesus' prayers are our prayers! And our prayers are His prayers! We are one with Jesus! Even if I feel nothing right now except for the impetuous thoughts of my heart, these very thoughts are connected to Jesus. And when I am weak and believe that my prayers don't help at all, Jesus' Spirit helps me up in my weakness and Jesus stands up for me and prays for me!

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. We are still far from understanding the fullness of this valuable treasure that Jesus gives us as a Church. Too often, we just keep to ourselves and don't see all that Jesus has in store for us. We remain standing on the rough back side of the rug and think that prayers can't help. Sometimes we even think that we are standing there all alone. But Jesus tells us: No! It is completely different. Just as Jesus is one with God, we also are one with Jesus. Our prayers are brought directly before God and He hears us. That's why Jesus tells us to *"Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full."*

Jesus wants us to know the power of prayer. We do that by looking at prayer from God's point of view. With the example of a machine-made Persian rug, the back of the rug doesn't give it meaning and beauty, but the front of the rug does. To discover the treasure of Christian prayer, you must look at this treasure from God's side and not from your point of view. The pattern that Jesus gives us here is Himself. Embedded in Jesus' kingdom, we seek His will and His direction. The perspective of our Lord Jesus is also the perspective of our prayers. We follow His example. What our Lord Jesus has done, let us worship and pray for. Jesus is always looking to the many who are not yet saved. He wants them to also be with Him in heaven. Our prayer therefore goes beyond our immediate needs and the problems that we alone feel, and we then look to others; our prayer is always ready to see the whole picture and be there for others.

Jesus said these words to His disciples before His Passion, Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven so that they would be strengthened in the midst of their challenges. Jesus doesn't want to cover up these challenges that we experience. *"In this world you will have tribulation."* Jesus says to us. The temptations of Satan come from outside as well as from inside us. We are constantly led to our limits and often no longer know how we should continue. *"But take heart;"* Jesus continues. *"I have overcome the world."* and Jesus wants to open His disciples' eyes at this point. In the example of the machine-made Persian carpet, we really shouldn't stick to the unsightly back of the carpet. Instead, we should look to the wonderful pattern on the other side of the rug. It is this perspective that gives us courage and strength. On that day, when Jesus spoke to His disciples, their eyes were opened and all at once they could see with complete clarity what Jesus meant to them and what it means to be a Christian. That's why they said: *Ah, now You are speaking plainly and not using figurative speech!* And that's why they could say and confess: *"this is why we believe that You came from God."* Not long after Jesus said these things, the disciples ran away again, as if these illuminating and clear words had never been spoken. Again, they were left to their own devices. You can really feel from the verses in the Bible how the disciples are constantly in tension between God's promises and the challenges of life. This is how it is today and how it will always be... we are not yet in heaven! However, the tension is resolved in that we know who we are and where we come from. Once again using the image of the machine-made Persian rug, the thread on the back of the rug is exactly the same as the beautiful pattern on the front. It is true that in all our work in the church and in mission, as well as in our private lives, we always have enough reasons to be unhappy and sad. But Jesus doesn't see us as we are now. Jesus always sees us as His children in His kingdom. This Jesus is never far away, even in our deepest need. And it's only because of this that our joy will grow more and more. Amen.