

For some years now, I have preached the word of God from the communion table during the seasons of Advent and Christmas, as a tangible expression of the way in which we particularly remember the coming near of God in Jesus Christ during these seasons.

In addition, during many of the Advent seasons we've spent together, I've preached short sermon series that are more theological rather than expositional in nature.

For example, one advent, I preached on the Lord's Supper. One advent, I preached on Union with Christ. One advent I preached on the Four Great Last things - death, judgment, hell and heaven. One advent I preached on the incarnate flesh of Jesus in his birth, death, resurrection and ascension to God's right hand.

This year, as we move through advent together, my subject will be a series of theological sermons on prayer.

Today, we will consider the foundation of all Christian prayer, which is the continual intercession made by Jesus for us at the right hand of God, and how our union with him has made us into a royal priesthood, joining our prayers with his.

In other words, we will consider how it is impossible to talk about Christian prayer without speaking of Jesus as the one who leads us in prayer to the Father, who is always praying for us, and who invites us to pray with him.

And over the next three weeks, we will consider three of the primary challenges in our prayers, and how Jesus perfects our imperfect prayers and offers them perfectly to his Father through his own eternal priesthood.

Next Sunday, we will consider the infrequency of our prayers, and how Jesus teaches us to pray always, living a life of constant prayer.

The following Sunday, we will consider the smallness of our prayers, and how Jesus teaches us to ask for remarkable things in his name.

And the last Sunday of Advent, December 18, we will consider our impatience in prayer, and how Jesus teaches us to pray without giving up.

But today, we want to start at the absolute foundation of Christian prayer.

And that is that we must understand that prayer is not something we stir up in ourselves, or something we do through on our own.

No, Christian prayer is the gift of sharing and participating, by grace, and through the Holy Spirit, in the Son's eternal communion with the Father.

We've heard already this morning from Exodus 33, where we heard of how the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to a friend - while all Israel stood outside the tent, forbidden to enter in.

And we've heard from Romans 8, where Paul teaches us that the Spirit has been poured into our hearts that we might cry with Jesus, "Abba, Father!," joining in with God's Son as he intercedes for us at his Father's right hand.

And we've heard from the teaching of Jesus himself, as he teaches his disciples to pray to his Father in his name, and promises them that when they pray to the Father through him, he will give them all things, so that their joy will be made like unto the joy of the Son of God.

And now, finally, we hear from the epistle to the Hebrews, chapter 7, verses 23-28.

Here the apostle proclaims to us that Jesus saves [that is, he is always saving] to the uttermost all those who draw near to God through, because he lives forever to make intercession for them as their eternal high priest, dwelling always in the presence of God.

Listen now once more to God's holy and inerrant word.

*23 The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, 24 but he holds his priesthood permanently, because he continues forever. 25 Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*

*26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. 27 He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.*

*28 For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you. Prayer...

I think it's probably fair to say that many of us have a complicated relationship with prayer.

We know that prayer is both a duty and a privilege for the Christian, but many of us are haunted by the sense that we pray far less frequently than we should.

Or we might have a sense that our prayer lives are a little dull.

It's hard to pray for the overwhelming things that seem impossible for God to fix about our own lives, or the world around us, and so we often stick with small prayers, prayers that seem reasonable and seem to us more likely to be acceptable to God.

Or we might just be weary of prayer. We pray for a week or a month for some specific need or desire, and nothing changes and we give up.

And in response to these challenges, it's often tempting to look for new techniques of prayer, or embrace new internal commitments to prayer and think that somehow these techniques or habits or internal commitments of the will are going to transform our experience of prayer.

But I'm convinced that much of the tension we experience with prayer is not because of some practical deficiency on our part, but rather is theological in nature.

Often we struggle to pray because we fail to consider the fundamentally trinitarian nature of Christian prayer and so seek to pray in our own strength rather than receiving prayer as a gracious gift that our Triune God provides for us.

In other words, instead of seeing prayer in Trinitarian terms, we functionally pray as Unitarians.

Under this construct, prayer is about me and God.

I pray and God listens. Or I don't pray, and if I'm not praying, then prayer doesn't happen.

Interestingly, our own Westminster Larger Catechism defines prayer in fundamentally Trinitarian terms.

You can see this in the quote that is printed on the back of your order of worship. In question 178, the catechism asks, "What is prayer?"



And it answers in this way: *“Prayer is an offering up of our desires unto God, in the name of Christ, by the help of his Spirit.”*

Now, that’s a catechism answer worth memorizing.

Do you see the way that the catechism defines prayer for us in trinitarian terms. Each of the persons of the Trinity are present in that answer.

We offer up our desires to God the Father, but we do not do so on our own, according to the catechism — we do so in the name of Christ, and by the help of the Holy Spirit.

Prayer is not an action that we initiate and maintain between us and some far off deity.

No, understood in Trinitarian terms, prayer is entering into a conversation that already taking place, prayer is entering into the communion that the Son and the Father eternally share with one another by means of the Spirit.

This communion between the Father and the Son in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit has always been true of God, of course — even before creation.

As John 1 teaches us, *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.”*

Or as Genesis 1 teaches us: Then God said, *“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”*

The Son always knew perfect communion with the Father, from before the very beginning of time. But his communion with the Father continues even after his incarnation, even after he unites himself to a human nature and human flesh.

At his baptism, the Father pours out the Holy Spirit on the Son and delights in him, calling him his beloved.

And all through his life, the Son delights in the Father. *“I and the Father are one,”* he tells the Jews in John 10.

And in John 11, at the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus says to the Father, *“Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I know that always hear me.”*

And in John 17, he prays, saying, *“Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”*

And then, at the cross, the Son gives himself to the Father, saying as he dies, *“Father, into your hands, I commit my Spirit!”*

And as it turns out, not even death can prevent the eternal communion between the Father and the Son.

In fact, the Son rises from the dead that he might return to the bosom of the Father — as he tells Mary Magdalene on the day of his resurrection: *“I am ascending to my Father.”*

But something new has happened in the incarnation of the Son of God. The Son returns to the Father, but he does so taking all of redeemed humanity with him.

As Jesus tells Mary in the full quotation from John 20: *“I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”*

In his ascension to the Father’s right hand, as the writer to the Hebrews will explain, Jesus is going into God’s presence as our new, great High priest.

And this will change prayer forever.

Interestingly, the Old Testament contains very little explicit teaching about prayer.

There are many examples of prayer, of course, but little to know teaching on what prayer is, or how it works.

But Jesus' ministry is *full* of teachings about prayer, teachings that we will examine in detail in the weeks to come.

Jesus tells parables about prayer. He explicitly teaches his disciples how to pray in the Lord's Prayer, and gives them all sorts of practical advice about prayer.

And intriguingly, Jesus' teaching about prayer shows progression in his ministry.

Early in his ministry, Jesus' main focus is teaching his disciples to address God as "Father" when they pray. This is an earth shattering shift in terms of redemptive history. There is nothing like it in the Old Testament.

When you pray, Jesus says, pray like this: "*Our Father...*"

Jesus is inviting his disciples to pray to God as their Father, trusting that their Father loves them and will give them good things.

But in the upper room discourse in John, on Jesus' last recorded extended teaching with his disciples before his death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus introduces a new revelation in his teaching to his disciples regarding prayer.

He teaches them that the way in which they come to the Father will be through him.

I am the way, the truth and the life, Jesus says in John 14. And no one comes to the Father except through me.

And six times in those four chapters, he teaches his disciples to pray to the Father in his name.

As we heard already, he told them in John 16, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.”*

Can you see what Jesus is laying the groundwork for here in his teaching on prayer?

Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray to his Father as he prays to his Father.

Jesus is teaching his disciples to depend on him in their prayers to the Father.

Jesus is teaching his disciples to pray with him as he prays to the Father.

And then, after ascending to his Father and beginning his eternal priesthood on their behalf, do you know what Jesus does for his disciples and for us?

He pours out the Holy Spirit on them at the day of Pentecost.

The same Spirit that the Father poured out on him on the day of his baptism, Jesus now pours out on those who belong to him, so that the Spirit will lift them into heaven and grant them, through him, the communion that enjoys with the Father.

This, beloved, is what the Apostle means when he says, *“Consequently, [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.”*



The apostle means that even now, Jesus is alive, and the only communion you have with the Father is fundamentally dependent on his communion with the Father — in fact, your prayers are not just your prayers — they are offered by the help of the Spirit and in the name of Christ, so that your prayers are taken up by Jesus and offered to the Father through him.

Beloved, know this. This is what prayer is.

Prayer is the gift of sharing and participating, by grace, through the Holy Spirit, in the Son's eternal communion with the Father.

It's not something you stir up in yourself. It's not something you will yourself to participate in. No, it's a gift that is given to you.

Christ has made himself your brother so that you might have God for your Father.

And he has poured out his Spirit upon you so that you might share in his eternal life at his Father's right hand.

The church father Ambrose, whose preaching God used to bring about the conversion of Augustine, understood this well.

He summarized the relationship between Jesus' eternal intercession and our prayers with these words. Listen to them well.

Ambrose says: "The Ascended Christ is our mouth, through which we speak to the Father; the Ascended Christ is our eye, through which we see the Father; the Ascended Christ is our right hand, through which we offer ourselves to the Father. Unless he intercedes, there is no intercourse with God either for us, or for all the saints."

Or, as Calvin puts it: “Now, Christ plays the priestly role, not only to render the Father favorable and propitious toward us by an eternal law of reconciliation, but also to receive us as his companions in this great office.

For we who are defiled in ourselves, yet are priests in him, offer ourselves and our all to God, and freely enter the heavenly sanctuary that the sacrifices of prayers and praise that we bring may be acceptable and sweet-smelling before God.”

Or as that great 19th century theologian of prayer, Andrew Murray puts it:

"It is in the intercession of Christ that the continued efficacy and application of His redemption is maintained. And it is through the Holy Spirit descending from Christ to us that we are drawn up into the great stream of His ever-ascending prayers.

The Spirit takes us up into the wonderful flow of the life of the Trine God. Through the Spirit, Christ's prayers become ours, and ours are made His: we ask what we will, and it is given to us. We then understand from experience, what Christ meant when he said: Hitherto you have not asked in my Name. At that day you shall ask in my Name."

So what is the pay off for all this?

So often we think of prayer fundamentally as a burden, as a duty, as an obligation.

But beloved, prayer is far more than that.

Prayer is the gift of participating, through the Holy Spirit, in what Christ has done and in what he is continuing to do, as he draws us into his communion with the Father.

And so beloved, as we consider prayer this Advent season, I want to encourage you — instead of seeking to stir up prayer inside of yourself, what I want to encourage you to do is to enter into the prayers of Jesus that are always taking place.

And make no mistake — prayer is all gift.

Prayer is all grace.

We can't do it on our own. We could never do it on our own. It is foolish to try.

For the Son of God has made himself flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and he has died and risen again to live as our brother in heaven that he might save to uttermost all those who draw near to God through him, for he lives forever to make intercession for them.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.