

**The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**Luke 11:1-13**  
**July 27-28, 2013**

*“Signs of the Church: Prayer”*

Our area here in metro Washington, D.C. always ranks as a top contender for having the worst traffic in the nation. We all know this, and many of you deal with this day in, day out. We measure driving not in terms of distance, but in terms of time. With this in mind, here’s a very sobering statistic: the average American worker spends 38 hours annually stuck in traffic. That’s almost a whole work week! But wait, it gets even better. For commuters in the D.C. area – people like many of you – that number is almost doubled. On average, commuters in this area spend a whopping 67 hours annually stuck in traffic – the highest in the nation; higher than Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Chicago. Yep, that honor goes to us (<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/02/the-american-commuter-spends-38-hours-a-year-stuck-in-traffic/272905/>). So, in the midst of all this traffic you really have to watch the signs – road construction, merging traffic, accidents, etc. There are road signs all around us every day. There are also signs of Christ around us every day in his Church, but do we see them? Over the summer, we are focusing on “Signs of the Church,” and so far we’ve looked at signs within the Body of Christ like witness – pointing others to Jesus, compassion – God’s mercy toward us in Christ Jesus that moves us to show compassion to our neighbor, hospitality – extending Christ-like warmth and welcome to others. In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus’ disciples asked him to teach them to pray, and he did, giving them a model for prayer – that prayer of all prayers – in what we have come to call the Lord’s Prayer. Prayer most certainly is a sign of the Church, and this becomes the theme for the message today. May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

When we look at Luke’s account of Jesus’ teaching the disciples to pray, and compare this over against Matthew’s account (Matthew 6:9-13), we note some differences. Luke’s version is more lean and sparse, with only five petitions whereas Matthew’s version contains seven petitions. Nevertheless, the core is the same and the ordering remains the same. The first petitions focus on the holiness of God, as well his reign and rule in the lives of his people here on earth: **“Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come”** (Luke 11:2). It is no accident that these petitions in the Lord’s Prayer are first and foremost, as are those first three Commandments – the first Table of the Law – that are concerned with the vertical dimension of our faith, calling us to **“have no other gods... not take the name of the Lord your God in vain... remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy”** (Exodus 20:3-11; Deuteronomy 5:7-15). Jesus’ model prayer then urges us to lift up to the Lord needs that are on the horizontal dimension of our faith: **“Give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us. And lead us not into temptation”** (Luke 11:3-4). Again, Jesus’ teaching on prayer mirrors and reflects what God revealed in the second Table of the Law, Commandments 4-10, that call us to honor our father and mother, honor and uphold life, not to commit adultery, steal, bear false witness against, or covet anything that is our neighbor’s (Exodus 20:12-17; Deuteronomy 5:16-21). Jesus’ model prayer here becomes for us a general pattern for prayer: God’s concerns first and our own concerns second.

How often we reverse that order when we pray! So often, it is not God’s concerns – the holiness of his Name, the coming of his kingdom among us – that are first in our prayer life. All too easily we put our own concerns first, launching into a litany of our own needs and wants. Certainly the Lord God wants us to bring all of these things to him in prayer – absolutely! But let us not forget how Jesus instructs us to pray, and what is of first priority. Prayer is not a means to manipulate God and get what we want. Prayer is not some sort of point system where we try to rack up through good behavior and virtuous deeds bargaining chips to hold up before God. No, at its heart prayer is all about the relationship as Luther writes: “If anyone wants to call upon God, he must believe in his heart that God is appeased, is kind and

gracious toward him, and wants to hear him... You will never call upon God the Father, the Creator, who has made you, who feeds you with bread, and who frees you from all evils, unless you believe and are sure that He is a gracious God to you" (*What Luther Says, II, 3441*). And how do we know that God is kind and gracious? How do we know that God is at all interested in our puny little lives? How do we know that our prayers even come before God? Today's Epistle lesson (Colossians 2:6-15) reminds us: **"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands, nailing it to the cross"** (Colossians 2:13-15). This is how we know that God is indeed gracious and merciful, and that He wants us to come to him in prayer, praise and thanksgiving: that He gave up the life of his only Son for us on the cross. In this restored and right relationship through the cleansing blood of Jesus, we can come before our heavenly Father freely, with all boldness and confidence, "as dear children ask their dear father" (*Introduction to the Lord's Prayer in Luther's Small Catechism*). This understanding and use of prayer is a sign of Christ among us; it is a sign of his Church.

Abraham's interceding with the Lord in today's Old Testament lesson (Genesis 18:17-33) is a vivid example of how boldly and confidently God's children can come before him in prayer. Standing in a restored and right relationship with God our Maker and Redeemer, we acknowledge that like Abraham we are **"but dust and ashes"** (Genesis 18:27). Nevertheless, we too can plead for mercy, not only for ourselves but for whole communities; indeed for the world itself. And as we do so, we give thanks for the Holy Spirit who **"intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words"** (Romans 8:26). The Lord's teaching on prayer closes with a parable that encourages us to be not only bold but patiently persistent in prayer. Different translations for this passage use different words for that friend at midnight: impudence, shamelessness, persistence. He won't take no for an answer! The individual who needs food for his guest knows that even though it's inconvenient, his friend will help him – and he does. The point here is not to commend shamelessness, but that persistent prayer is not in vain. Jesus does not teach that every prayer will be answered in the way we want. That, too, is a blessing from the Lord, for He knows what we truly need versus what we think we need or want.

Our Lord Jesus Christ encourages us to ask and seek and knock in prayer, knowing that we have a gracious and loving Father who is always more ready to listen than we are to pray. If human parents – even evil ones – give their children good things, won't our heavenly Father do this and more? In answering the prayers of his beloved children, God does not give what is useless (a stone) or harmful (a snake or scorpion), but only what is good according to his good and perfect will. To this we can only say "Amen."