

5.1.2016 Rogation Sunday (John 16:23-24)

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you. Hitherto have ye asked nothing in My name: ask, and ye shall receive, that your joy may be full.”(John 16:23-24)

These words sound like a blank check from God. Whatever we ask in the name of Jesus, God will give it. Like a prayer request vending machine, just insert His Holy Name into the coin slot, make your selection, and whatever you’ve requested will fall into your hand. Pluck this verse out of context, attach it to the prosperity gospel, and it’s all that simple – we ask, God gives. We quickly find in our lives however, that God does not always give exactly what we ask. The prayer request vending machine operates just like the one at work that keeps stealing our quarters. No matter how hard we hit it, rock it, or even beat it half to death – sometimes we just don’t get what we want.

If God was as impersonal and unreliable as a vending machine this wouldn’t be a problem, but He is not. God is a person in Jesus Christ, He is always reliable, He is ever faithful – so how are we to understand this promise? How do we deal with the fact that God doesn’t always give us what we ask? Some people lead us to believe that the problem is ours. They encourage us to believe that we were not obedient enough, so God didn’t reward us with an answer to our prayer, but we should realize that we are never obedient enough to deserve to anything. All that God gives is from His divine goodness and mercy, without any merit or worthiness in us. The same people would have us think that our faith wasn’t strong enough, otherwise we surely would have received our request, but even if the tiny, weak faith of a mustard seed is what led us to pray, we have the faith necessary to move mountains. (Matthew 17:20)

The problem may not be our obedience or our faith, yet the problem remains, because even when we petition God for good things like peace, healing, to ease suffering, or to free a loved one from the chains of addiction – still we do not receive each and every thing for which we pray. Now, if we are going to call ourselves Christians we must believe

that Jesus always keeps His promises, regardless of how it may seem to us. If we see a contradiction in His words the error must be on our part, either in understanding His promise or in seeing its fulfillment. So this morning, as His disciples, let's try to understand this promise as He meant it.

When Jesus spoke these words He was talking to His disciples immediately before His crucifixion. He was speaking to His closest followers, those whose lives had centered completely on Jesus from the moment He met them. He taught them, He protected them, He fed them, and He loved them. When they needed anything, they asked Him. Ran out of wine at the wedding... Go get Jesus. Five thousand hungry people and Hometown Buffet won't be open for another two thousand years... Just ask Jesus. Caught in a raging storm and your boat is sinking... Wake up Jesus. Your brother Lazarus is dead... Cry out to Jesus.

With just a few quick examples it's easy to see how we can be led to think His first disciples received anything and everything for which they asked or prayed, but that's not the truth. These miracles have the ability to grab our attention, but we need to recognize the fact that even when the first disciples of Jesus stood in front of Him and asked Him, sometimes the answer was no. They heard the promise "*ask, and ye shall receive*" directly from His mouth, but still took no for an answer and didn't lose faith in the truth of His words. Maybe there is more to this promise than meets the eye, because sometimes Jesus says, "No."

The first examples that come to mind when we think of Jesus denying a request probably center around selfish petitions, such as when James and John asked for the two places of highest honor in Christ's kingdom when they said, "Grant unto us that we may sit, one on thy right hand, and the other on thy left hand, in thy glory." (Mark 10:37) We may also think of the moment Peter moved forward boldly in his own direction by drawing his sword, and Jesus said no by commanding him to put it away. (John 18:11)

There are also times that Jesus says no to requests that appear, at least on the outside, to be more genuine, such as when He refuses to return to

Capernaum. Jesus had been in Capernaum healing the sick and many more people that were suffering had gathered and were looking for Him, but He took His disciples and moved on to the next town. (Mark 1:34-38) Another example is found the day after He fed the 5,000. The crowd had again grown hungry, but this time Jesus refuses to feed these hungry people with the food that perishes, and instead calls them to faith. (John 6:22-27)

We recognize in these examples that Jesus' promise "*ask, and ye shall receive*" is not meant to be a blank check. There are limits to this promise. These examples of Jesus saying "*No*" are in this sermon because it's important to recognize this promise has boundaries, but these examples are not meant to be taken too far. These limits can't be seen like a type of fine print that makes it a miracle Jesus ever answers any prayer. This is not a meaningless phrase we were meant to ignore. Jesus gave this promise specifically to encourage and strengthen His disciples just before His crucifixion, not to burden them or deceive them. He intended this to be comforting, not confusing. It was designed to give them courage to spread His gospel to the whole world in the face of great opposition and His Church stands today as a testimony to the truth of His words.

It is in that context that we can begin to understand His promise. His intent was to encourage, strengthen, and comfort His disciples the same way He had while He was there with them – through a personal relationship with them. They had an intimate relationship with Creator of the Universe! He taught them, He protected them, He fed them, and He loved them. When they needed anything, they asked Him. Now Jesus says that we "ask the Father," and emphasizes the point that we "are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus," (Galatians 3:26) by using the word Father seven times in the ten verses of our Gospel reading.

As children of God we are meant to be in unity with Him. For too long sin separated the world from God our Father, but at our baptism we "put on Christ," (Galatians 3:27) and now we are daily renewed by the work of His Holy Spirit in us. As true sons and daughters of God we set our

“affections on things above.” (Colossians 3:1-2) We set our affection on those things which are good and true, lasting and beneficial, and in accordance with His will. In doing so, we realize that sometimes even our good prayers are not the best. Our Father knows best. God spoke to that point when He said, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways... For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Our thoughts and ways are finite and limited, but the thoughts and ways of the Lord are infinite and boundless. We must confess that our Father knows better than we do, and we have to trust Him to fulfill the desires and petitions of His children “as may be most expedient for them.” At the end of the day, it really all comes down to faith. Like we heard Jesus say this morning, “Do ye now believe?” (John 16:31) Any promise that is made to us boils down to whether or not we believe, whether or not we trust the person who made the promise. In this case, it’s whether or not we trust God.

Jesus’ first disciples heard this promise and believed. They believed Him because they knew Him, and they knew Him because they spent time with Him every day. He taught them, He protected them, He fed them, and He loved them. When they needed anything, they asked Him. He said to His disciples, “Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in My name, He will give it you.” To ask in His Holy Name is to pray like He prayed, with patience and submission to the will of God – leaving the time and manner of God’s response to His fatherly wisdom and love. As His disciples, we must spend time with Him every day. We must acknowledge He provides for our every need. We ask the Father in the name of Jesus. We put everything in God’s hands in prayer, confident that one day we will see the hand of God in everything.