

Throwing God Out

Luke 4:16-30

The Third Sunday after the Epiphany, January 24, 2016

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Upon what basis do you believe that God answers your prayers?

The only way to tell the answer to such a question is to look at what happens to us when God answers our prayers with a resounding "No!" After all when God answers our prayers by giving to us what we want everything is fine. We ask God for things. God grants those things. We sing His praises and thank Him for the things which He has given to us.

This is not meant to sound frivolous. This is not meant to make out as if God is some kind of divine Santa Claus in the sky. He certainly is not the divine vending machine. Seriously, in the daily scheme of things when we ask God for something and He grants it, we are genuinely grateful. And it is not like the things that we request are always for ourselves. Sometimes we are praying for other people. Sometimes we are praying for the health and well being of others. We pray that some may be cured of cancer. We pray that some may not die. We pray that some who have experienced tragedy would be comforted. We pray that some that have experienced disaster would have their homes and livelihoods restored to them. It is not like we pray for selfish things all of the time. We pray for simple things at times and we pray for important things at times. When God grants them we thank God for them and everything is fine.

But what if God says, "No"? Whatever we do when God says, "No" to our prayers will reveal the real basis upon which we were praying. I suspect that is why God says, "No." If God said yes to every request that we made then we would always be asking and thanking God for all kinds of things. And if we were ever asking God for something on a basis that was not right, it would never be revealed. If God constantly said yes to every request that we made the thing upon which we were relying would never be revealed. So on occasion God will say, "no." He will say "no" in order to find out upon what basis you were in fact praying. Because when God says, "No," to your prayers, you will throw whatever it is upon which you are relying in His face as a reason why He should give it to you.

Let me give you a simple example. There was a Lutheran once who attended the Divine Service sporadically. He came more than just Christmas and Easter. He by no means came every Sunday. Maybe once every other month he attended the Divine Service. Then as he got older his father became ill with cancer. An operation was necessary to save his father. The doctors made it clear to the whole family that this man's father's chances of surviving the surgery were about fifty fifty. The man went into the hospital chapel to pray for his father. He told God that if He would heal his father and bring him safely through surgery that he would begin going to church every Sunday. It was a bold statement. One wonders why God would be interested in having him attend the Divine Service every Sunday as a cause for Him to save his father. Shouldn't he be there anyway?

In this particular example God said yes. The man's father came safely through surgery and his cancer was removed. The man who had prayed for his father got the answer that he wanted. Then he had to keep the promised that he had made. He started attending the Divine Service every Sunday. I often wonder, what would have happened had God said no? What would have happened had his father died on the operating table? What would have the man who prayed for his father done then?

Let us face it. We are not Israelites by birth. None of us claims to be blood descendents of Abraham. None of us claims anything before God on this basis like the people of the time of our Lord

did. But make no mistake we still claim privilege before God. What privilege do you claim before God? Whatever it is, you will throw it in His face when He answers one of your prayers with a no.

And the basis upon which we pray may be a good one! Oh to be sure many of us pray on the basis that we are so good that God should just answer our prayers as a reward for our goodness. Some of us have already attended the Divine Service most of our lives and therefore feel that God should answer our prayers because we have attended the Divine Service, as if God somehow owes us something because we went to church so much. Some of us do point out to God how much we have volunteered for the local congregation and how many hours we have put in on the various projects going on at church and we expect God to answer our prayers. To be sure some of us are arrogant enough to believe that God should answer our prayers because we are Lutheran.

But then some of us expect God to answer our prayers for reasons that God Himself has given to us. Some of us expect God to answer our prayers because we are baptized. Some of us expect God to answer our prayers because we believe in Him. And while these things are good, right, and salutary, what do you do when God says no? What do you do when He places His blessing elsewhere?

After all in the Old Testament God instituted Israel. He was the One who chose Abraham and said that His descendents would be blessed and that all of the other nations of the earth would be blessed because of His descendents. If an ancient Israelite prayed to God and expected his prayers to be answered because he was a descendent of Abraham, one could hardly blame him.

But what happens if you live in a time in Israel's history when there are many people starving to death because of a famine and God gives bread to none of them, but to a widow outside of Israel in Zarephath? What happens if you live in a time in Israel's history when there are many lepers and none of them are purified except Naaman, a Syrian?

Whatever you throw in God's face will be evil even if He Himself instituted it.

Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead? Do you believe that the dead will rise at the end of time and those who have believed in Jesus will at that time receive the righteousness that was already theirs by faith and live forever in the new creation that is coming? Because if you do, then no matter how God answers your prayers now in this life does not matter, you will not be throwing anything in His face.

Our Lord promises that He has come to give sight to the blind and release for the captives. He says that the Spirit of the Lord is upon Him. The Spirit of the Lord is certainly upon Him. He received the Spirit when He was baptized. Jesus is therefore the One who will give sight to the blind. He will release the captives and those who are oppressed. He will preach the year of the Lord's favor.

Now, that being the case, do you believe in the resurrection of the dead? Because if you do then you will continue to believe in Jesus and you will continue to pray to Him even if He says no to your most precious prayers. Even if he lets your father or mother die in spite of your prayers, you will still pray to Him. Even if He lets your husband or your wife or your child die, you will still pray. Even if in this life, He denies you your most precious requests, if you believe in the resurrection, you will still pray to Him. You won't stop. Nothing will stop you from coming to the Divine Service to receive His gifts either. You will not give up on Him at all. You won't because you know that all of His promises will be fulfilled when He raises the dead and ushers in the new creation.

But if you don't believe in the resurrection, then everything must happen now in this life. If you don't believe that Jesus will usher in a new creation without sin and death and raise the dead unto eternal life, then everything you pray has to be answered now and if it is not answered now then it is not going to be answered at all. And when we are angry at God for denying us the things for which we pray in this life, then we are admitting that we believe only in this life. When we shake our fist at God and threaten

God because He has not given to us what we requested from Him, then we reveal that we only believe in the here and the now and that the life everlasting is a fantasy to us.

And when we are angry with God we threaten Him with all kinds of things. We quit the Divine Service as if that hurts God. We quit praying as if that hurts God. We quit giving to the congregation as if that hurts God. We oppose God in our hearts. We speak against Him with our lips. We try to take God out to the brow of a cliff and throw Him over it. But God will slip through your fingers and He will go out on His way.

And even if you never avail yourself of God's blessings and are cursed, He is still the one who gives sight to the blind. He is still the one who releases the captives. He is still the One who brings about the year of His favor.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.