My sermon text this morning is from our Gospel Lesson, from St. Luke Chapter 24. As I read verse 51 aloud, please notice the gracious gesture of Jesus as he is lifted up into heaven:

51While he blessed them, he parted from them, and was carried up into heaven. (Luke 24:51, RSV)

As Jesus is departing from his disciples, he blesses them. I picture him with his arms extended and his hands facing the disciples, as he is in our rear altarpiece here at Immanuel. I love our Christ statue in that altarpiece. I love the way Jesus seems to be extending his blessing to us all. This farewell gesture of Jesus at his Ascension puts me in mind of a verse in St. John Chapter 13. That chapter begins by speaking of the unending love of Jesus.

1Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. (John 13:1, RSV)

In his Ascension Jesus is saying farewell to fickle, disappointing, and unpromising disciples—unpromising, at least, as the world measures things. But as Jesus departs from those disappointing disciples, he does not frown at them, he does not shake his fist at them, but rather he blesses them. Even as he leaves them, and will be with them no longer in the familiar way they have known so far, even as he departs from them, he blesses them. He loves them to the end! And trust this: he will love them still in heaven, when he is seated at the right hand of the Father. When all power and authority in both heaven and earth are given to him, he will still be blessing his disciples.

And you are his disciples. If you have been baptized, you have been called into friendship with Jesus. You have been called to drop your fishing nets and to follow him. You have been promised his protection and his good shepherd ing, and you have committed yourself to walking with him and in his ways. And so, you should count yourself as among the disciples Jesus blesses as he ascends into heaven. Picture yourself among that small band.
Peter to your right, and say, the former tax collector Matthew standing at your left. Picture yourself right there in that holy crowd as Jesus ascends into heaven, and be happy that he places his blessing upon you even as he ascends.

More than that, ponder this, and in the pondering of it, be happy: Not only does Jesus bless you as he ascends into heaven, but when he gets there, he prays for you. That is a great thing—the prayers of Jesus!

This is Mother’s Day. So let me first say Happy Mother’s Day to you all, and then let me speak of my mother a little bit. When I was a young man heading off to college, I went knowing that my mother would be writing to me. Those were older days. Back then we did not have email and we did not have cell phones. Instead, we wrote letters to one another. For me, college was the United States Air Force Academy near Colorado Springs, Colorado. I grew up on the Eastern shore of Maryland, which is as flat as a pancake, and I had never much left the Eastern shore. To find myself in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado was quite a change for me. Folks in town wore cowboy hats. I was stunned by it all! And so a letter from Mom felt like home for me. It felt like a taste of civilization for me. I loved my mother’s letters. And she always signed those letters in the same way: “With love and prayers, Mom.” I knew about her that she was indeed praying for me. So was my father. And I was awfully glad for those prayers. Even more so I am glad for the prayers of the Savior of my mother and father, Jesus Christ our Lord, our Great Intercessor.

Listen again to this morning’s Prayer of the Day. It speaks of the prayers of Jesus:

Almighty God, your only Son was taken up into heaven and in power intercedes for us. May we also come into your presence and live forever in your glory; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen

Jesus intercedes for us! As the Great Thanksgiving in our Eucharistic prayer puts it, Jesus is our great High Priest:

Join our prayers with those of your servants of every time and every place, and unite them with the ceaseless petitions of our great high priest until he comes as victorious Lord of all.

Now there is a great thought for us: Our dear Jesus intercedes for us with “ceaseless petitions.” He does not stop praying for us. He does not grow weary in praying. His petitions are ceaseless! That is why we can be happy on Ascension Day and Ascension Sunday. The Ascension of Jesus places him at the right hand of the Father where he can lean over to him and plead, “Please
remember the people of Immanuel Lutheran Church. Let’s do something good for them. Let’s save them!”

Why does Jesus pray for us with unceasingly prayers? Because he loves us. It was the same with my mother. She prayed for me because she loved me. So it is with our Savior Jesus. He prays for us always because he loves us always. We know that from the cross he bore for you, for me.

Imagine what kind of God we must have that he hears and grants prayer. It is a splendid thought. All of these prayers are ascending to him all the time. You pray, I pray, our friends pray, even our enemies pray. Our God welcomes prayer, and, wonder of wonders, promises to grant our prayers. Jesus says so:

7Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. (Matthew 7:7-8, RSV)

And so all of these prayers are ascending to God the Father. It is a great multitude of prayer, perhaps even a chaos of prayer, with some prayers that are contrary to one another, with the pitcher praying to strike out the batter and the batter praying to hit a home run. But our God is the kind of God who welcomes all prayer and is well able to adjust reality to fit the multitude of prayers reaching him. God the Father is aided in this by the work of the Holy Spirit who intercedes for us, and who takes our poor words and re-phrases them so that they really go to the heart of the matter and can indeed be granted by the Father.

And this is good. But also it is good that Jesus is ascended to the right hand of the Father and can lean over and whisper to his Father, “Sister Rachel needs our help. And brother so-and-so down there in Immanuel Lutheran Church in New York City needs our help. Let us help them. Let us cause all things to work together for their good. Let us so arrange reality that one day they will see that we have granted their prayers and will give thanks for that.”

As the liturgy says, worthy is Christ, the Lamb who is slain. Worthy is Christ to pray on our behalf. The prayers of my mother and my father mean a lot to our God, I am sure. But even more so the prayers of Jesus at the right hand of God the Father mean much to him. One day we will see with our own eyes that it was very good that we prayed, for then we will see that our prayers have been fulfilled.

You dear folks before me have your hopes and dreams, your fears and your disappointments. The very drama of your life is being played out before God at all times. You are precious to him. Isn’t it good to know that Jesus has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father and offers ceaseless petitions for us? Be this world ever so lonely, it is never so dark and dreary as to be silent. Never is it that – never is it silent – for Someone who
loves us is offering ceaseless petitions for us, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs to the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever, Amen.