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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
The Midweek Liturgy, Wednesday, March 20, 2024
Matthew 16:1-12
The Sign of Jonah

HOLY GOSPEL Matthew 16:1-12, RSV
Last week we read about Jesus healing many people and about the feeding of the four thousand. This evening we read about the sign of Jonah. Also Jesus asks us to beware of false teaching.

¹And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. ²He answered them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather; for the sky is red.' ³And in the morning, 'It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. ⁴An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah." So he left them and departed.

⁵When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread. ⁶Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ⁷And they discussed it among themselves, saying, "We brought no bread." ⁸But Jesus, aware of this, said, "O men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves the fact that you have no bread? ⁹Do you not yet perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves of the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰Or the seven loaves of the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹How is it that you fail to perceive that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees." ¹²Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I hope we will see as we go along that this reading about the sign of Jonah invites us into the mystery of prayer. The issue before us is what we are willing to count as an answer to our prayers.

What ails the Pharisees and Sadducees is that they legislate for themselves what will count as a "sign" for them. Jesus has already done many "signs." They were the kind of signs that fit with his compassion for people. And so he heals the lame, the maimed, the blind, and the dumb, and he feeds multitudes of people with only a few loaves of bread and a few fishes. These are tremendous signs. They are holy wonders. They testify to the divinity of Jesus.

Most times, the Pharisees and Sad'ducees were opponents of each other. But in their willingness to discount the miracles of Jesus they become united. They set aside their controversies about the resurrection of the dead. They set aside their class differences, with the Sad'ducees being the upper class and the Pharisees being devout laymen. They set aside their differences in order to agree in their dismissal of the miracles of Jesus and to insist upon a sign of their choosing.

We need to be careful about choosing for ourselves the kind of sign we want. A teenager, for example, might say to his parents, "If you love me, you will buy me a motorcycle." In connecting love with a motorcycle, the teenager would be repeating the error of the Pharisees and Sad'ducees. He would be discounting the substantial signs of love his parents have given him since he was a baby. He would be asking for a sign of his own making, and it might well be a dangerous sign. The parents have a legitimate right to answer, "It is precisely because we *do* love you that are not getting you a motorcycle."

The Pharisees and Sad'ducees say that they want a "sign from heaven." Maybe they are thinking of the presence of the LORD on Mt. Sinai. That was an awesome scene. Let me read it for you:

¹⁶On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. ¹⁷Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God; and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸And Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. (Exodus 19:16-18, RSV)

That would be quite a sight to see! So, I do not blame the Pharisees and Sad'ducees for asking to see something like that. They are not being bad people. They are not being impious. It is just that, in the end, we need to leave the concrete fulfillment of our prayers to the wisdom of our Triune God.

Martin Luther simply took Jesus at his word when Jesus asks us to pray confidently. In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says this:

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)

Luther believed Jesus and so he builds the teaching of Jesus into his daisy chain of four reasons why we should be people of prayer. Here are those reasons:

- 1) We are *commanded* to pray. It is not an option for us. Luther believed that the Second Commandment requires us to pray, lest we take the name of God in vain. And in the New Testament, we have St. Paul's exhortation to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17, KJV)
- 2) Jesus *promises* to grant the prayer — not just listen to it, but grant it:

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)

- 3) We know *how to pray* because we have the Lord's Prayer. We cannot complain that we are being asked to do something we do not know how to do.

And now we come to Luther's fourth point. It is an important point:

- 4) We should be people of prayer because the Holy Spirit *prays along with us*, improving our prayers so that they go to the heart of the matter. We have the Holy Spirit as our great Advocate and Intercessor. This comes from the teaching of St. Paul:

²⁶Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. ²⁷And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. (Romans 8:26-27, RSV)

It is this last point that should keep us from insisting too much on the sign we want. So, we should pray, laying our praises and requests before God the Father with all the honesty we can bring to prayer. But we should leave the *granting* of the prayer to our God. That He *will* grant the prayer is certain. And that we will see and be grateful for the granting of the prayer is also certain, though we might have to wait a while for the granting, and we might not fully understand till we get to heaven. Meanwhile, let us not insist too much as to what will count as a sign for us of God's love. The parents might decline the motorcycle for their teenager, but that does not mean that the parents do not love their child. Someday, the child might come to understand that.

Toward the end of our reading about the Pharisees and Sad'ducees, Jesus speaks of the "sign of Jonah." As it turns out, this sign is a tremendous sign. It fits with the request of the Pharisees and Sad'ducees to see a "sign from heaven." It is a sign pointing to the resurrection of Jesus. It is a sign pointing to Easter. Remember about Jonah, the way he encouraged the sailors to toss him into the sea, and the way Jonah was swallowed by the great fish. Jonah lay submerged in that great fish for three days, but then he was delivered safe and sound onto the seashore. This prefigures the three days Jesus was buried and then his resurrection. What a sign from heaven that was!

This is why we can be confident in our prayers. This same Jesus lives and is close at hand. He hears your every prayer and he resolves to grant it. Leave it to the wisdom and love of our God as to how the prayer is granted, but one day, we will see and understand and be glad that we prayed. It was not wasted time, our praying, thanks to the love and grace of our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory now and forever. Amen.