

Text: John 16:23-24

Theme: Cast Your Needs on Jesus

Preacher: Rolfe Westendorf, St. John's, Montello

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What if you had Aladdin's lamp? Just rub it and the genie would appear to grant your every wish. Well, in a way you do. Jesus said, "My Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." Just ask your heavenly Father in Jesus' name and he will give it to you. Does that mean that God is going to give you whatever you want? The answer is both "No" and "Yes."

Perhaps you have read the childhood fable about the fisherman who caught a magic fish. The fish promised the fisherman that he would grant him anything he wished if he would throw him back into the water. Of course, the fisherman was skeptical, but he thought he'd take a chance. Instead of bringing a fish home for dinner, he threw it back in the ocean.

When he told his wife, she was furious. Now she would go hungry because of her husband's foolishness. She dared him to test the fish's promise, and to her amazement, it worked. She got what she wanted.

I don't remember the details, but the wife was never satisfied. She kept on asking for more and more until finally she was a queen in her own palace. But she and her husband were miserable. Finally the fisherman asked the fish to restore the simple cottage in which they had been happy. Instantly the wife was reduced to poverty, and the fisherman was happy again, and eventually his wife was too.

Whoever invented that story had learned something about human nature, that people are never satisfied. The more they get, the more they want, and eventually their greed leads to their destruction.

But we don't need childhood fables to demonstrate the point. The scandal sheets delight in reporting the miseries of the rich and famous. More than one big lottery winner has ended in ruin. In our own homes we can see the same tendency when we frequently give in to our children's demands so that they end up "spoiled rotten," unable to manage their own households and children

Jesus does not want to do that to us. He does not want to stimulate our natural greed to our self-destruction. When he says that the Father will give you whatever you ask, he is not giving us Aladdin's lamp. But just what is he giving us? That's the question we want to answer today, and in that answer there is a blessing better than Aladdin's lamp. For Jesus also says, "Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete."

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples on the evening before his crucifixion. He knew what lay ahead. In less than twenty-four hours he would be cold and dead in his grave. On the third day he would rise again, but he would not resume his familiar relationship with his disciples. He appeared to them often after his resurrection, but only for brief periods of time. Maundy Thursday was the last time he would share an in-depth conversation with them.

And then he would return to his Father's home in glory. A cloud would receive him from their sight, never to be seen again until his return to judge the living and the dead. "In a little while you will see me no more," he had told them. They would not be able to ask him questions and hear his answers. So what would the new relationship be?

Jesus said, "In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name." In the new relationship, nothing would be lost. They could no longer come to him in person with their questions. But they could ask the Father, and he would give them whatever they asked in Jesus' name. In fact, it would be better that way. Jesus said, "until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask, and you will receive, and your joy will be complete." Your joy will be complete.

Sounds like something better than the treasures that the fisherman's wife received, something better than Aladdin's lamp, something better than winning the lottery or the Super Bowl. Your joy will be complete.

Is this really true? Of course, it is, because Jesus said it. But in what way is it true? What does it mean to ask the Father in Jesus' name?

For the sake of the children in my confirmation class, I have explained it like this: Suppose a strange child shows up at your mother's door and asks her for a cookie. Most likely she would politely tell the child that he should really ask that of his own mother. But then you show up and explain to your mother that the stranger is your new friend who just moved in across the street. Then because he is your friend, your mother gives you both a cookie. She would not grant the request of a stranger. But she did grant the request when it was asked in the name of her son.

But there's more to it than that. You see, "Jesus" is not just a name. It is a name that represents all that he is and all that he has done. Prayer in Jesus' name is not just attaching those words to the end of every prayer. It means to pray because of Jesus, who he is and what he has done.

He is true God who humbled himself and came down to earth to be our Savior. He is the one who laid down his life to pay for the sins of the world, and your sins, and mine. He lived the perfect life that provides for us a righteousness that we never earned. To pray in Jesus' name is to ask for blessings that we deserve, because he earned them for us.

Sometimes we complain that God doesn't give us the things we deserve. We think we have done enough to earn some favors from God. That would be praying in our own name. But if we would see our sins and God sees them, we wouldn't dare to make such foolish requests. What we have earned from God is punishment, not rewards for good behavior. So we pray in Jesus' name and

ask God to bless us, not because we deserve God's blessing, but because Jesus has earned it for us.

But Jesus has done more than earn for us a favorable answer to our prayers. He has cleansed us from our sins and made us sons and daughters of God, joint-heirs with him of a home in heaven. By nature we are the sons and daughters of Satan and often show that by our behavior. But Jesus has given us a new identity. As children of God we really want to please our Father in heaven. This unnatural desire appears in our hearts when the Holy Spirit uses Word and Sacrament to convince us that because of Jesus we are going to heaven. Thus to pray in Jesus' name is to address God, not as children of a stranger, but as his own sons and daughters who want to please our Father with our requests.

The fisherman's wife wanted only to please herself. She was praying in her own name. When we pray in Jesus' name we will not ask God for fame and fortune, for profit and pleasure, for things that gratify our sinful flesh. Rather we will ask that God's will may be done, whatever our concerns may be, for we know that God wants only the best for us, even when that means that we must suffer pain and loss.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus explained that God answers our prayer with good gifts. Human parents try to give good things to their children. But sometimes they are unable to do that. Sometimes they don't know what good things their children need. But God does not suffer from such limitations. He gives only good gifts to his children, not necessarily what we ask for, but that which is best for us.

And when we pray in Jesus' name we have that very thing in mind. God knows what we need better than we do, and we trust him to answer our prayers in the best possible way. We trust him, not because we can always see the benefit that God intends for us. But we trust him because he loved us enough to sacrifice his Son for us. And such trust is a part of praying in Jesus' name.

And what is the result of such praying? Jesus said, "that your joy may be complete." Such joy does not come from the granting of every selfish desire. We saw that in the example of the fisherman's wife. This is not a party-time joy of sensual pleasure. It is rather a joy of peace, confidence and contentment.

It begins already with our faith in the atoning sacrifice of God's Son. He has made us God's children and given us the right to pray. So when we pray we have instant confidence that God will hear and answer that prayer. We don't have to wait to see the results. We know by faith that God has taken our request seriously and is planning for us the best possible answer.

That joy also includes the things that we will ask for in Jesus' name. Instead of praying selfishly, we will pray for the peace and safety of those around us, the people we love, the people we live with and work with. And what a joy it is to be surrounded by content and happy people.

Also when we pray in Jesus' name, we will be concerned about our spiritual needs, our assurance of forgiveness, our attention to the means of grace, our faith that we have a Father in heaven who

loves us. For we still live with a sinful flesh in a sinful world. And our faith is always under attack from the wisdom of men and the temptations that appeal to our sinful flesh. But the Father will give us what we ask in Jesus' name. So when we pray, we are confident that we will overcome and attain the final victory by the grace of God.

But Jesus said that our joy will be complete. And it is never complete in this life. It is a joy that is more complete and substantial than anything this world can give. But doubt and sin are constantly interrupting this joy as long as we remain in the body. But the time is coming when our joy will be totally complete, when we join with saints and angels in singing the praises of the Lamb who was slain to bring us to God.

We are not there yet. But even now the anticipation of heaven fills our hearts with joy that brightens our lives, even in our darkest days, just like Stephen who got to see his Savior in heaven as he was being stoned to death. And this joy of anticipation happens most frequently when it is called to our minds through the Word and Sacrament, especially in our worship services.

But one day the time of anticipation will be over, and we will experience for ourselves what God has promised us. We can all recall waiting for special events in our lives, perhaps a wedding, a long-planned vacation or a family reunion. And then one day finally the time of waiting ended and the future changed into the present. It is that way with the complete joy that awaits us in heaven. Now is the time of anticipation. But one day we will step into the reality of the complete joy that Jesus has promised to those who pray in his name.

We cannot tell now what that complete joy will be, because we have never experienced anything like it. But we have Jesus' word for it that our joy will be complete. And that adds to the imperfect joy that we by faith experience now.

So pray in Jesus' name. Ask for all the good things that you desire as a child of God. Expect to experience the joy that comes through faith in Jesus, until you experience the reality of the complete joy in heaven.

Dear Lord Jesus,

Thank you for giving me the privilege of prayer. Now teach me to pray in your name, and grant to me the joy that you have promised, both now and in eternity. In your name I ask it. Amen