



AS DEAR CHILDREN ASK THEIR DEAR FATHER

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Part 1 - God's family is a speaking family

A. God's Family Conversation

Just about everybody knows that *family life* and *speaking* go hand in hand. At the moment my wife and I usually have four children sitting around the table at the evening meal. Although there is a lot of eating that goes on (You don't want to leave your hand over the meat plate for too long in my house ... there are days when you could lose it), there is also a fair amount of chatter. It might get a little out of hand sometimes as some family members get a little overexcited but generally, it is a happy sound. These are joyful times for a father when I think about it - times that I should probably treasure more than I do because I know it won't be long before they will be gone.

There are other times, though, in family life, when there is not so much happy hubbub. These quiet moments normally come when someone has gotten into trouble or someone isn't getting along with someone else, or even when someone is in a bad mood. Thankfully these occasions are fairly rare in our house, although as in any home they are there now and again. The silence in these times tells you that something is wrong. You can feel it in the air. It is uncomfortable. Although not every family keeps up a constant banter over their evening meal, absolute silence normally suggests some problem in family life. Families talk. If they don't, they tend to be in trouble.

Family and conversation go hand in hand. In many ways speaking is born of family life. If a man and a woman are going to spend their life together, there has to be some talking ... some kind of conversation ... at least to get things started. There has to be some sharing back and forth of feelings and interest, or it's not likely that anyone will end up with a ring on their finger. He may not be the greatest talker in their life together, but the husband-to-be has to pop the question at some point (or at least to be ready to say "yes" when she finally puts it to him.) Life as a couple begins with speaking and, as even the world knows, talking needs to continue for it to be happy and healthy.

The gift of children to a husband and wife shows all the more how family and conversation go hand in hand. Parents speak to their children right from the beginning. The first communication might not be Nobel prize-winning material, but the tender words and noises that a mother or father make into their child's ears are the first beginnings of the speaking that will carry on for a lifetime. We learn to talk on our parent's knee. Certainly other people in our lives help out here, and it can develop in many ways, but life's usual pattern is that family life is the seedbed of our conversation. In the home we learn to say our first words and to express ourselves, even if it is just bickering with our brothers and sisters. Where would our politicians be without such essential training?

1) God's eternal conversation

Prayer, when it comes right down to it, is a conversation - a particular kind of conversation - but a conversation nonetheless. This speaking also finds its origins in family life. Not just any family, of course, but the First Family, from which all families receive their name and being - the family of God (Ephesians 3:14-15). This family is the source of all other families, as well as being the Image in which they all are made. God's family has existed from eternity, sharing One

Life of perfect love together. It is a perfect Union in Communion. One God in Three Persons. One Family Life with Three Persons who share it - the Father, His Only Begotten Son and the Spirit who proceeds from them. From eternity the Father has been a Father, and so eternally has had a Son. The Son from eternity has been a Son, and so eternally has had a Father. The Spirit, who from eternity has been the Spirit of God, and so eternally has proceeded from God. As there have always been Three Persons in this One Family, so there has also always been a family conversation.

In the beginning was the Word (John 1:1-2). From eternity there was talking within the family of the Trinity. As St John so beautifully reveals the identity of the Second Person of the Trinity as the eternal Word, He uncovers for us the mystery that speaking lies at the heart of God's eternal being. The eternal Word testifies to the truth that there has never been a wordless moment between the three Divine Persons. To be silent within Himself would cause God to cease to be - an impossibility for the eternal "I AM". Although at times sinful man may experience God's apparent silence (which arguably is due more to our trouble with hearing rather than God's speaking (Job 33:14)), God within Himself is never quiet.

Although many a husband may earn the silent treatment from his wife, the persons of the Trinity would never say anything dumb enough to be at the receiving end of what we husbands well earn from time to time. The only moment when we see such silence from heaven would be at that exceptional hour when the Son of God as man takes on our sin in all of its fullness on the Cross, and so lives in the true horror of our broken relationship with God. If you can grasp, even to the smallest degree, the depths of the communion between the Father and the Son lived out in their eternal speaking and hearing of one another, then you can begin to hear the true depths of the pain and suffering in Christ's heart-rending cry, "Eli Eli lema sabachthani" (Matthew 27:46). Although as God the Word Christ could never experience such unimaginable trauma, as man He can and truly does go through it for our sake.

2) God's knowing conversation that creates

Father, Son and Holy Spirit are ever talking with one another, but not so that they can get better acquainted or share unknown information. The Father doesn't need to ask the Son, "So what happened in your day?" As the Three-in-One, the Three Persons know one another as none other is known (John 17:25). From eternity They have known each other as One. As their communion is eternal, so too their knowledge of each other is eternal. There's nothing that They don't get about each other. As one God They're fully aware of what each Person has done, is doing, and will do. Such knowing of another is an idea that quite simply is hard for us to grasp - although many a couple might long for it with one another. Our lives are so fundamentally shaped by our inability to fully know others and be known to them that we can only imagine what such understanding of a husband ... a wife ... a child ... a parent ... a friend would be like.

Unlike our speaking, the eternal conversation of the Trinity doesn't reveal the heart of one of its Persons to another, but is born of the heart They share together. They don't speak to be known, but being known They speak. They don't speak to share a life, but sharing a life They speak. In our lives in this world we have to speak so that others can get what we're thinking. We cannot know or be known without revealing ourselves to each other. Such communication is not necessary in the Three-in-One, since the Son knows the heart of the Father from eternity (John

10:15) and the Spirit knows the mind of God (Romans 8:27) from before the beginning of time. Father, Son and Holy Spirit know each other to the very depths of the being that They share as one God. There were no “How do you do?”’s within the eternal “I AM” or any “You’d never guess what happened today?”’s either.

In our lives we still see glimpses of such knowing-based speaking. We do talk with people that we don’t know so that we might get to know them. This is how we make new friends at school, in our neighborhoods, at work, or in our churches. But there are also people that we are well acquainted with, whom we speak with because we know them. Husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends, neighbours etc. talk because of the relationship that they have with each other. Although their communication may continue to reveal new things about each other, their speaking together flows from the fact that they know one another. The conversation of a husband and wife is born of their intimate knowledge of each other. They speak in a knowing way because of the one life that they share.

Another essential truth about God’s speaking is that it is never a fruitless one. Father, Son and Holy Spirit don’t use any empty words. There is no mindless babbling in the heart of the Trinity. There are no nervous talkers amongst the Three-in-One. None of Them ever just tries to fill empty space. There are no awkward silences to fill, after all. Every word has a *purpose*. Every word *says* something. Every word *does* something (Isaiah 55:11). The Word of God is always an active, creating Word. For us as Lutherans this truth has always been very important for our lives in the Church. We hold firmly to the truth that God’s Word does what it says when it comes to such things as Baptism, Absolution, and the Lord’s Supper, as well as the living and active proclaimed Word of the Law and the Gospel (Hebrews 4:12). The speaking in the heart of the Trinity is a speaking of love that is ever creating Their life together. This active speaking within the heart of the Trinity is what God sent out to create all that was made (John 1:3).

B. Created to be in Conversation

In the beginning as God created us in His own image (Genesis 1:26), He made us as speaking beings. As the Trinity engages in an eternal conversation, we too were made to be in conversation with our Creator and one another. As we were born out of the eternal speaking of God, we were created to be a part of His ongoing communication. God spoke to create us. As we were spoken to that we might be, we were made to speak. The ongoing chatter of creation testifies to this truth. The early morning song of the birds, the whale’s sonic boom, the call of the loon, the cry of the wolf, the dance of the bee all testify to the foundational speaking that brought them into being, even as they echo it in their ongoing existence. Although God has set man over His creation, our shared gift of communication points to our shared beginnings in the heart of God, brought into being through His Word by His Spirit.

As God created man as both one and many in a mirror image of His own being, He created us as knowing and being known. As He created us as male and female united in the one-fleshness of husband and wife, He created us to know each other even as He knows Himself (Genesis 1:27). The speaking between Adam and Eve was a beautiful reflection of the ongoing conversation of the Three Persons within the Trinity. Their conversation was born of a full and complete knowledge of one another. They didn’t speak so that they could get to know each other, but being known to each other they spoke. Such an existence is hard for us to imagine as we live

under the effects of sin. Even the best of marriages is fraught with misunderstanding and conflict born of miscommunication between husband and wife. In the beginning no such misspeaking and mishearing existed. Adam and Eve knew and understood each other as a mirror image of God's own knowing of Himself.

As man and woman were created reflecting God's own perfection, they were made to share in His life. Although man would never know God as the Lord eternally knows Himself, he was created to know Him and be known by Him in time. He was not in on the original conversation of the Three Persons, but He was made to be a part of their ongoing speaking. As God created man out of His eternal divine conversation, He created us to be a part of it. God spoke to us that we might speak to Him. He began us with His Word, that we might live in that Word. As it was an eternal Word, it was intended to be an eternal conversation. Man was not equal to God. He had a beginning in time. His knowledge of God and His conversation would always be limited by this beginning; but as the true image of God he was made to speak and be spoken to forever.

As God made us out of His own active speaking, He made us to be a part of it. The image of God's fruitful speaking can still be glimpsed in human life, even under the brokenness of sin. Human speaking still has power to create. We do babel in ways that the Creator never intended. Our words are also often used to cause harm and give voice to the ugliness that has taken hold of our hearts in sin. Yet human speech has unquestionably created much beauty in poetry and prose. Great truths have been spoken and planted in people's hearts through human speech. Beautiful pictures are painted in the mind as well as on canvas through the speaking of the human heart. Our speech has also made beautiful music for our souls with the primal language of sound.

Of course, this creative power of human speech is seen at its clearest closer to home in the family life I mentioned earlier. The life of love between a man and woman is brought into being and maintained through our speaking with one another. God establishes the human home through the creative "I do's" that husband and wife speak to each other. From this creative word a new life is formed as the two are joined into one, so that according to God's will, they may give birth to new life in the gift of children. The life of love with these children is also born of the creative speaking of the heart from parent to child and child to parent. Our own children come into being through the speaking of one heart to another, and they are brought into being to be spoken to and to speak their own creating word.

To recap then: the Trinity is a family that speaks. God made us in His speaking image. We were created through His Word to share in His conversation. We were made to speak with Him and one another, just as we were spoken to in the beginning. This conversation that we were made to be a part of wasn't a mindless one, but a beautiful one intended to fill the creation with life.

1) Man leaves behind God's conversation

None can know the depths of grief that welled up in the heart of God when we chose to stop speaking to Him. As Adam and Eve chose to believe Satan's lies about God and His heart for them in Eden, they hopelessly flawed their knowledge of Him and so brought to an end the beautiful conversation that He created them in. Having forsaken the true knowledge of God, the intimacy of the knowing conversation came to an end. God became a stranger to man, though

God remained a Father to him. God did not stop speaking to man. He continued to speak His creating Word that brought man into existence and preserved him in it, but man closed his ears to God and ceased speaking to Him. And so we see God searching for Adam and Adam hiding from God (Genesis 3:8-11).

As man chose to forget his beginning and aspire to be his own god, he cut off his conversation with his Creator. Having been created in communion with God, he turned his back on Him to try to carry on a conversation of his own. Yet as true knowing can only come from the One who knows all (Psalm 36:9), any conversation undertaken apart from God will be hopelessly flawed. Disconnected from God, man can no longer truly know anyone - not even himself. Without true knowing there can be no true sharing of the heart. Having abandoned the speaking that he was created in, man lost its reflection within himself as well. A mirror can only show the image of the one that it is facing. Turn a mirror away from a face and it will no longer reflect it. As man seeks his own speech apart from God, he loses his ability to truly speak. A ghost of the image remains, but man miscommunicates far more than he communicates and misunderstands far more than he understands. Although a shadow yet remains, true knowing is lost, and so, true communication is lost with it.

This reality is the one that we live in as sinners. Procreated in the image of Adam, we are doomed to seek out our own conversation which can never live up to its forsaken origins. As sinners who insist on standing on our own apart from God, ever striving to be what we can never be, we can have no meaningful conversation with God. We don't truly know Him and so we can't truly know one another. We no longer understand Him and so we no longer understand each other. Although husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters, friends and neighbours can all more or less get to know each other, and can speak based on that knowledge, life in the world whether it is in the home, workplace or neighbourhood is ever troubled by our imperfect communication. At the root of most problems between people is almost always a failure to speak and hear rightly. We may all speak the same language and yet still live in a babbling world.

Family life under sin bears out this truth. You don't have to be married long to learn that our communication skills no longer reflect the image of God. A husband stands dumbfounded as his wife bursts into tears over his insensitivity. He's not sure if the trouble was what he said or how he said it (it was probably both). A wife tries to get her husband to talk but his true feelings remain as much of a mystery to her as they probably are to him. Parents believe that they have spoken clearly with their children and yet time and again the message seems to get lost in translation. They might as well have been talking to the wall. Brothers and sisters can really get their point across at times, but it's not exactly the kind of speaking that draws them closer together - "You're such a dough head!" - not being the verbal communion we are going for here.

Our messed-up communication with God and one another comes to its ultimate end in sin's final consequences (Romans 6:23). Brought into being by God's speaking, we were created to speak as we were spoken to that we might share our lives with God and one another. Destructive as sin can be on our daily interaction with one another, its concluding outcome is utterly devastating. Poorly as we may communicate with one another in life, death shuts down the conversation altogether. When sin gives us our final severance cheque, there's nothing left to talk about. The

dead do not speak. The widow may whisper her tender words to her husband lying in the casket, but he answers no more. The deafening silence of the marital home screams out the loss as a wife longs to hear her husband's voice and forgetfully calls for him. The dead speak no more, either to man or to God, as the psalmist laments (Psalm 115:17).

Death's silence shows that miscommunication is not the root of all our troubles in our life with God and one another - the root cause is sin - yet a breakdown in communication is an unavoidable consequence of sin. The reason we do not communicate well is because in the beginning we turned away from the Word of God. Without the Word there can be no true speaking. Many believe that the troubles of our world would easily be solved if only we learned how to communicate better. The world rightly recognizes one of the symptoms but misses the disease. Although there can be benefits in treating the symptoms, the disease cannot be cured by such treatment. Our communication troubles with God and so with one another can only be cured with the curing of sin.

2) God restarts the conversation

From that terrible day in Eden when sin devastated God's glorious creation, the Lord committed Himself to restore it. Even as His image was shattered in us with Adam and Eve's sin, God in His mercy set in motion His plan for our healing. He set that plan in motion with the very word of promise that He would save us from the serpent's power (Genesis 3:15). Although salvation would not be accomplished for many years to come, the setting in place of the plan itself opened up the way for us to be returned to life with God. Here was a Word that revealed God's heart for us. Here was a Word that opened up our own hearts to the truth of who this God was who had created us. Here was a Word that began our re-introduction to God, that we might know Him once more as He had created us to know and be known.

This first Word was only the beginning of a long conversation that would be carried on over centuries, as the Lord would speak through His prophets to unfold His heart to the world. The Lord spoke through the prophets, so that we might come to know Him, and in knowing Him be able to share in the knowing conversation that He had created us in and for in the beginning (Hebrews 1:1). All this time He was drawing man back to Himself, preparing for that day when He would reestablish our broken communion by sending His Son to become man. He continued to speak to us, and so we were able to speak to Him. Getting to know Him, we could call on His name and begin to speak to Him as One who is known to us. As we grew in our relationship with Him, He prepared us for the life He was planning for us in His Own Family.

When in the fullness of time the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth, the fullness of God's heart was laid bare before us (John 3:16). The Son came that we might know the Father as He knows the Father (Matthew 11:27; John 14:7). The Son came that we might share His life as Children of God (John 3:1; 10:10, 14:18, Ephesians 1:3-5). The Son came that we might receive the Spirit, so that we might abide in God (Galatians 4:6). The Son came to renew our lives in the Family Life of the Holy Trinity. The Son came to overcome the lie about God that the serpent had whispered into our ears and that we have believed ever since. He came to show us that God was not a grasping, demanding, overbearing deity but a loving, gracious and devoted Father. He showed this truth in all of its fullness, when on account of the Father's love He went up on the cross to spread out His arms and save the world.

The Son took on Himself all that divided us from God to bind back together all that sin tore apart (Ephesians 2:14-18). With His own life He filled the great chasm that separated us from God and one another. The Lord Jesus Christ entered into our silence on the cross (Psalm 22:1-2). As the eternal Word spoken from eternity, He could not be silenced; yet as true man on Calvary He entered into the silence of death to set us free from it. As the Son of the Father He could not break fellowship with God; yet as man on the cross He was cut off for us that we might be reunited with Him. While as very God of very God the Son must forever enjoy His eternal conversation with the Father, hanging on the tree as man He is cursed by God's damning silence, to bring us back into heaven's conversation. The Second Person of the Trinity, according to His human nature, goes through the fullness of sin's awkward silence so that through Him we might know the joyful communion of God's Family Table.

3) God returns us to His conversation

God returns us to His Family through the new birth that He gives us in the waters of Holy Baptism. Here God unites our lives with the life of Christ as He baptises us into Christ's death. As we are buried with Him in the water, we rise with Him from that watery grave to live a new life in Him (Romans 6:4). God clothes us with Christ so that through His Son we might be His children (Galatians 3:27). We are no longer strangers to Him in sin, but members of His own Family welcomed to His table and invited into His own conversation (John 14:23). God speaks His Word to us and welcomes us, even looking for our speaking in return. As children of God in Christ, the Father invites us in Christ to join in the intimate conversation of the Trinity.

As Christ makes His place our place in heaven (Ephesians 2:6), He also gives us His voice at the family table. The place Christ gives to us in the Father's own Family is not a servant's place. We are not brought in to stand behind God's chair in silence. We are invited in to take part in that intimate and active speaking that goes on in the heart of the Trinity. When the disciples ask the Lord Jesus to teach them to pray, He gives them His own prayer. Jesus gives them His part in the active speaking that goes on in the heavenly places. He gives them the prayer that He as the Son of God prays for us, and that as man He now also prays in our place (Hebrews 7:25). He invites us to speak with Him to His Abba as dear children speak to their dear father. He invites us to pray as He prays. He invites us to pray with Him.

Through baptism into Christ, the Lord's prayers become our prayers. We pray in His name and in His stead (John 15:16). His pleading for the world becomes our pleading. The point is not that Christ takes up our prayers according to our will. We are lifted up instead to the place where we get to take up Christ's prayers according to God's will. Here is true praying in Christ's name ... true praying in Christ's stead. The baptismal truth that God is our dear Father and that we are His dear children means that we are truly remade in His image. This means His will is now our will. His ways are now our ways. His heart is now our heart. His speaking now becomes our speaking. His goals are now our goals and His purposes are now our purposes. As God's true children we are being remade to think and act like our dear Father.

The speaking life that we are welcomed into in our prayers in Jesus is not about us imposing our will on God. Since we are true children of the Father, what God wants should be what we want. In our Baptism God rescued us from the abusive fatherhood of Satan and his ugly image. The

devil's will is self-centred and self-focused, looking to get all he can for himself. Satan as the adversary sets his will against God's will. In Christ, the Lord is setting us free from such a self-focused, self-centered will. The Lord is setting us free from such a rebellious will. In our new life as His dear children, the Father is renewing us in the truth of the goodness of His will for us. In our new life in Christ, the Spirit is schooling us in the truth that when it comes to God, Father really does know best. In the Christian life, our prayers are growing out of being ordered by how we see our needs, into how God sees them.

In the prayer that Jesus gives us to pray there's nothing about the million dollars so many confirmands want to know about when it comes to asking for things in Jesus' name. "Will I get it if I ask really believing?" There is also no request for the hamster that I so desperately wanted for my 5th birthday, and that I asked for with all my might day and night. I beat on the doors of heaven, willing and believing with all my childlike faith that it would be mine. What I got was a blue budgie that I named Jake. (Hamsters were seen to belong firmly in the rat family according to the upper management of my childhood home, and so were *persona non grata*.) Although the prayer that Jesus gives us does include our earthly needs, its overall tone rises above my youthful requests for a pet rodent.

Without question God heard my prayers and in love answered them in a way that blessed both my parents and me. Yet it was also God's will to draw me deeper into the prayer He gave me to pray. In the Our Father, Jesus invites us to join with Him in interceding for the life of the world. This prayer reveals the Trinity's family business as it addresses that business and engages in it. The Our Father shows us God's will for us and the world. As we pray for the hallowing of His name, for His kingdom to come and His will to be done ... as we pray for daily bread and for the work of His forgiveness in us and through us ... as we pray to be kept from temptation and delivered from evil, we are drawn into God's glorious plans for the world which reach so much further than what we would either think or dare to ask for according to our own will. For truly God has brought us back into His Family that we might be a part of His conversation, not so that we can make Him a part of ours. Since He is God, and it's His Family, He sets the topic for the family discussion. We get to talk about what He's talking about. Prayer is not about interrupting God with our more important ideas.

4) God brings us back into His own active speaking

As we join in Christ's speaking as dear children of the Father, we join in the active speaking of the Trinity. The words that we speak in Christ are not just spoken wishes or desires. They are words that do as they say. Through these words the Lord does His work in us and in the world, to fulfill His plans for all. When we take up these words in Christ, we speak them in and through Christ, which makes them power-filled words. This speaking then is not just a request or plea, but the very requesting and pleading is fulfilling what it is requesting and pleading for, according to God's own will. As our lips are opened with Christ by the Spirit to the Father, His name is hallowed, His kingdom comes and His will is done, just as the words themselves say. Their work begins in us as we pray them, and through us their work is being done in the world.

In this way, even the smallest child who takes up the Lord's word with Jesus gets more done in this world than the greatest and mightiest of men. Such a child does greater things than all the great heroes of human history. Even in the Church, we often tend to focus on or make much fuss

about a person's gifts when it comes to speaking or preaching or praying, as if in some way the Word of God is more effective because a given person speaks more eloquently or more dynamically than someone else. As Lutherans, we have always understood that the power lies in the Word, and in the Word alone. I am nothing when it comes to the Word of God. The Word does what it says because it is *God's* Word. I add nothing to it. I cannot make it more effective. God does not need me to cry it out; He could raise up stones to say it far more effectively than I do (Luke 19:40). It's sad and dangerous when there's so much emphasis in the Church on the mere dust that speaks instead of on the Word.

In the life of prayer, our hope lies in the Word of God that the Lord has given us to pray as God's own dear children. Baptised into Christ, and so praying in Christ, we speak Christ's own word in the sure and certain promise that we will be heard as He is heard. Focused on the truth of our baptism that we are God's dear children, we need never doubt that our dear Father will hear us, and will answer us as we pray with His Son Jesus. What we pray for in Christ is God's own will. When we take up His own Word as our prayer, there can be no doubt that He will do what we ask, since what we will be asking for is His own will. When we pray with the Lord's Word according to His own will, we are brought into God's own work and life. In our sinfulness we can lose sight of what an honour and privilege this is for us as God's children. Lost in the lie of our own "divinity," we can somehow think that it would be so wonderful if God worked according to our will. We don't get the real wonder that the Lord of heaven and earth is ready to make us a part of His work as members of His own Family (John 14:12-13).

Praying the Lord's own Word in the Lord's will is like being a paint-by-number artist and having someone like Leonardo Da Vinci take your hand and guide it to add a few brush strokes on the canvas of the Mona Lisa. Praying according to our will is like being a paint-by-number artist but wanting to take hold of Da Vinci's hand to direct his painting on the canvas. In the one case we get to be a part of something beautiful; in the other we would only mess up the creation of a great artist. In repentance as God's children, we know that the Lord is God and that we have nothing to add to His wisdom that will make it better for us or for others. Humbly we take our place as His dear children, in the sure and certain truth that our heavenly Father loves His creation and especially His dear children, beyond anything that we can imagine. From a sinful point of view, the child's place is a lowly one. When you want to be your own god, being God's child is no big deal; but when you are in repentance before almighty God, there could be no greater honour than being numbered among His own dear children.

D. As God speaks to us we learn to speak

As God's children, we learn to pray just as every other child learns to speak in this world. Every now and then we hear some tragic stories of neglected children who are discovered after years of abuse. In some cases these children have been cut off from almost all human contact with the sad effect that they don't know how to speak. We learn to speak as we are spoken to. In this same way, our prayers are shaped and formed by God's speaking to us - by His Word. If He did not speak to us first, we would not be able to speak to Him. Without His speaking to us, we would not know who to speak to in our prayer (Romans 10:14). One of the notable events in the life of God's people in the Old Testament is the revelation of God's name to Moses (Exodus 3:13-15). Calling on the name of the Lord was only possible because God gave it to them to call upon. The Lord heard His people's cries from Egypt even without that name, but the revelation

of His name brought them deeper into their relationship with Him, and so enriched and informed their prayers to Him.

As God's revelation continues throughout the life of His people, the conversation keeps on deepening and growing much as ours deepens and grows with our children in this world. There is a special moment in life when a child no longer goes off to play with the other children after a meal but wants to stay to hear and share in the adult conversation. I remember when it happened for me, even as I'm now seeing it with my own growing children. As the Lord spoke to His people of old by the prophets, He was leading them and preparing for them for the last days when He would speak to them through His Son. He was preparing them for the day when in Christ He would draw them closer to Himself, to know His full mind and counsel and be able to take up a full voice in His conversation.

On a personal level, we too are being led by the Lord into a deeper understanding of His work and will for us and the world. He is working in us to draw us closer to His own mind and heart. Early in faith we speak like children, think like children, and reason like children, but the Lord is at work to mature us in faith (1 Corinthians 13:9-13). When I was little, I prayed for my hamster. The Lord heard my prayer and answered it in His wisdom with Jake my blue budgie. Yet as the Lord has spoken to me through the years, He has brought me to know His mind for me and the world in ever deepening ways. He has taught me to pray for even greater things. His Word has come to frame my prayers, as He in love has continued to speak it to me, enriching my own conversation with Him through that Word. The Lord has taught me that prayer is *not simply about bringing my wants before the Father, but joining in the priestly work of Jesus for the life of the world.*

As God's children, we grow into God's active speaking for the life of the world. This intimate conversation begins in the Word that God Himself speaks to us. Just as a child learns how to speak by hearing his parents, God's children learn how to share in heaven's conversation by hearing the Lord's own speaking. From the beginning, the Word of God and our prayer have gone hand in hand for this reason. We cannot know who to pray to or what to pray for without God's saying something first. We as children cannot take up our proper place within God's speaking without first listening to His conversation. Otherwise, we would add in words out of keeping with what God is talking about. Without first listening, we can't take an active and informed role in the speaking. Without listening first, we can be like those people who make odd comments because they've only come in on the middle of a conversation, like the pastor who overheard two other pastors praising the president last night. Interrupting them, he told them that he thought that this president was an utter disaster. The trouble, of course, is that he thought they were talking about Obama, not our faithful Pastor Bugbee.

1) God's speaking keeps our joint speaking on topic

In the life of the Church, this essential relationship between our prayers and the Word of God is lived out in the Sunday morning service. The pattern handed down to us is that God's Word and prayer go hand in hand. We listen to what the Lord has to say, and then we speak back to Him based on that Word. Hearing from Him brings us into His conversation, where we get to reflect on what He is talking about, which then allows us to speak meaningfully with Him. His Word uncovers the needs of the world and sets forth God's answer to meet them. Hearing this Word

allows us to speak of those needs and pray for them in accord with God's answer. The Church has never simply gathered to speak uninformed by the Word of God. Such a one-sided conversation would quickly get off track. Ask any pastor what happens when his confirmation class is allowed to simply follow the whim of its students. Very quickly you are talking about how Jane got into trouble at recess for calling Chloe bad names, how Julia's little brother got into trouble for belting his sister with his tow truck in the sandbox, and how Murray's parents had to sleep in on Sunday morning because they were at a party on Saturday night.

As the Church has gathered to pray, she has always listened as much as she has spoken; in fact, she has listened far more than she has spoken. As sinners we are like that person who can't help but want to control the conversation. They only listen so that they can say what they want to say, when really they often aren't listening at all. They are simply waiting for the other person to finish so that they can say what they have already decided to put out there. They figure they've got some gem that they just have to pass along, and so they stand there like a dog pulling on its chain, just waiting to get it out. Sometimes they aren't even polite enough to wait, but simply blurt out what they are thinking, speaking over other people. How sad it is when we are so filled with our own importance that we don't really listen, but simply have to make our own point. Here is no true conversation, but a proclaiming from on high to another. Once again, our old god complex rears its ugly head.

As God's dear children in repentance, we should know that this is not the way to speak with our God. If the Lord is God, then who are we to proclaim to Him the way that things should be or what He ought to know or do (Job 38:2)? In our speaking with Him, we can only know what to say and how to say it by first listening to Him. In repentance, then, we know that what God has to share is far more important than anything we would have to say. In repentance, we would know that listening to Him should take up the bigger part of our conversation, because He has the important things to say to us and not the other way around. He has the wise things to reveal, not us. God wants us to speak. He invites us to speak. He even commands us to speak - otherwise what repentant person would dare to address the Almighty? Yet in repentance and in faith, we know that the Lord should be the one to lead the conversation, that wisdom is found first and foremost in listening, being quick to hear and slow to speak.

2) God's speaking keeps our private speaking on topic

In our private prayers then, there is a place to follow the pattern of the Church. The personal devotion, as well as the family devotion, is kept on point by first hearing the Word of God. Our prayers are kept on topic and within the will of God when we listen to God first, and then ask. His living Word, filled with His Spirit, opens our lips and teaches us to pray as we ought to pray. The Spirit in the Word brings our will into line with God's will. The Word opens our hearts to pray with confidence as God's dear children, by setting the truths of our baptism before us. The Word leaves us in no doubt of God's heart for us in Christ, and so teaches us to pray in faith that God's will is always the right answer for us.

Luther's daily prayer in the small Catechism follows this pattern. He instructs us to pray the invocation along with the sign of the cross as a reminder of our Baptism. The invocation is God's own name that He has given us as His children in Holy Baptism, so that we might be His own and so that we might call upon Him. This beginning is both a Word from the Lord as well

as a Word that we speak. Here is a Word that God spoke to us first when we were baptised, that we might speak it back to Him. With His name, God has brought us into His family and so made us a part of the family conversation. Every time we call upon the name of the Lord, we live out the truth of God's baptismal Word to us. We live out our identity as His own dear children.

Although it is an action, the sign of the cross that Luther commends also sets a Word from God before us. We claim that word as our own when we do it. The sign of the cross is an action Word that sets before us the "for you" truth of the cross of Jesus. The sign of the cross testifies to the truth that Christ died, and as I make it over myself it proclaims that He died on the cross for me. As I begin my prayers with this sign I am reminded of my baptism, when the benefits of the cross were made mine, and where Jesus said to me, "This is for you." Each time I make the sign of the cross, Jesus speaks that same word to me. As I trace the instrument of my salvation over my own flesh and blood, I am reminded by God that I am redeemed by Christ. As I cover my body with the cross, I am reminded of the truth that I have been baptized into Christ's death, and have risen out of the water clothed with Christ.

From the invocation, Luther then instructs us to confess the Apostles' Creed. Here also is God's Word that He speaks to us, that we may speak it back to Him. Here is the scriptural truth gathered together in all of its fullness for the children of God. Here is the testimony of all that the Trinity has done for me, is doing for me, and will do for me and the whole world. The creed is the ancient summary of the Christian faith, given that God's people might carry His Word around with them in their hearts and minds, that they might be able to confess it with their lips. When we confess the creed, God speaks His word to us that we might hold onto His truth and know His will for the world. From there, Luther has us go on to pray the prayer Jesus has given us, as well as the morning and evening prayers that He composed.

Now of course our life of prayer doesn't need to be limited to Luther's prayers, although they do beautifully lay out a godly way for us to pray, and are to be commended as a part of our prayer life with the Lord. We should be careful, though, not to look down on what has been laid out by someone else, thinking that we can somehow improve on it with all that we have to offer. The repentant heart does not think in this way, but humbly takes what it receives and rejoices in it, even though we may certainly add to that prayer by laying out our petitions in our own words. The prayers that our hearts compose, though, should not mistakenly be seen as being better in any way than the prayers that the Church has taught God's children to pray throughout the ages. Seeing prayer in this light would lead us to that sad place where some Christians have gone where even the Our Father is scorned. Prayer is not about what begins in us. We do not start the conversation. We are not God, despite what we might think in sin. The Lord began the whole conversation through His Word - that's who was there in the beginning. The child doesn't teach the parent to speak. Our life of prayer begins in God. He speaks that we might speak.

I remember a time as a child when I wanted to pray about the sunshine and butterflies. Somehow I'd gotten the idea that this was better because if I talked about what I wanted to talk about, then I was treating God like He was really there and really listening. While we should pray as though God is really there and really listening, we don't have to make up words or focus the conversation on what we want to talk about for this to be true. In fact, since God is really there and listening, this is all the more reason why we should talk about what He wants us to talk

about. When I wanted to talk about sunshine and puppy dogs, my father, the good German who says what he needs to say with as few words as possible, directed me back to the Lord's Prayer. He didn't shut down the sunshine and butterflies, but he did keep me on track with the glorious things that God had given me to pray for in this world. The time for sunshine and puppy dogs would come to an end, but the hallowing of God's name, the coming of His kingdom, His will being done and so on - that would carry on my whole life through.

Even as a four year old child, God had important work for me to do in this world. Even at four, I was His child. Even at four, I was one of the little ones, that Jesus did not despise, whose faith was to be used for big things. Even at four I was one of God's holy priests. Even at four, I was to share in Christ's work. Even at four, I was to be a part of God's people as they gathered on a Sunday morning to add my "amen" to their prayers, and join in them for the good of the world. As a shepherd boy and his sling taught us, God uses child soldiers to overcome His people's enemies. In fact, God specialises in using the weak and despised ones of the world to accomplish His great purposes in order to display the glory of His might (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). You only have to remember that God's greatest work began with a baby lying in a manger, and then finished with a bleeding dying man on a cross, to get refocused on how God works. As children of God we are never too small or too weak to join in the great works of God. It is just for this purpose that He has brought us into His family - to be about the Father's business.

E) As God's family we speak together

God's work in this world is a family business, and by His great grace through our baptism into Jesus He has made us all a part of it. In truth, as Christians we never pray alone. Baptised into Christ, we always pray with Jesus. Baptized with the Spirit, we always pray in the Spirit. For the Christian, prayers are never a one-sided conversation. They are not a monologue to God. Even as one speaks, others form a part of the conversation. Even as there is one voice, there is always more than one speaker - one in many - as it always is with the things of God. Even a solo in Christian prayer is always a chorus. In fact, even when we do not open our lips the Son is interceding in us and through us even as He intercedes for us (Hebrews 7:25). When we do not know how to pray, the Spirit still prays within us with groans too deep for words (Romans 8:26-27). Our baptismal reality is that we are a part of God's family in unity with the Son in the life of the Spirit. This means that day in and day out we are part of the Trinity's ongoing conversation, even as God is at work to draw us ever deeper into it.

1) We speak for each other

Christian prayer is always family prayer, which is why we ask others to join us in our prayers. On Sunday mornings the Church gathers in one place to do her great work of interceding for the world. Yet she also continues to pray as each of the many members that form her one body lift up their voices in their individual pleas. As one of God's children, or a group of them, runs into a particular need, the Church takes up that need together. She asks the children of God to keep that need in their prayers. Together we bring those needs before the Father, making them a part of God's active speaking to provide the answers that are needed in Christ. Of course, God already knows what those needs are and will provide the answer that He knows is best, yet in great grace He wants to make us a part of His speaking work in the world. In this way He uses us to bring these needs into the Divine conversation. As God's family then, Christians ask one

another to pray for each other, as Scripture clearly teaches us to do, inviting us to pray for one another that we might be healed (James 5:16).

We pray together that we might be one even as the Father and the Son are One (John 17:11). In praying together, we live out our communal life with one another. In praying together we live out the unity that God is recreating amongst us, as He overcomes the divisions of sin. In praying together we do not, however, gain more influence over God. We pray together because as God's children that is what we are called to do. Yet our heavenly Father listens to the cry of the poor lonely widow who weeps before Him in the dark hours of the night simply because she is His dear child and He is her dear Father. Contrary to what some believe, God is not moved to do what we ask because we get enough votes behind our petition. When tragedy strikes, we do not need to mobilise the prayer forces so that God will answer. What kind of dear Father would we have if He would only answer if we had enough popular vote? God doesn't take polls and certainly doesn't set heavenly policy by them. As a dear Father He always does what is best for His dear children.

We do not gather to pray or ask others to pray on our behalf because the prayers of many are better heard than the prayers of one. Only the priests of Baal had to yell louder to heaven in hopes of waking Baal up or grabbing his attention while He was away on a trip or relieving himself on the toilet (1 Kings 18:20-40). The God of Israel heard and answered when only Elijah was left to lift up his voice to Him. He did not need to yell. He did not need to get the numbers behind him. He did not need to get God's attention. His dear Father in heaven heard him simply because Elijah was His dear child. We ask others to pray with us because we are a family, and so share our burdens together even as we share in our intercession. When others ask us to pray, God provides another opportunity for us to be drawn into His work for the world. Praying for others is a great honour and blessing for us. The trials and needs of others, in a very Christ-like way, then serve God's purpose of drawing us closer to Him. Their suffering draws us closer to God as it leads us to pray.

2) We speak together forever

Now if God's conversation is eternal, carrying on forever across all time and space, that means that as His child I will be a part of it even after Christ takes me to His Father's house. Even in heaven God will continue to involve me in His active speaking for the life and salvation of the world. What God begins in me in this world is fulfilled in heaven. The speaking won't come to an end it will become all the richer and fuller. Every Sunday we clearly say that with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven we join in calling on the name of the Lord. God unites heaven and earth in His Word. In Jesus He undoes all that tears us apart. He joins heaven and earth as one; including their life of prayer. We pray together because in Jesus we are all a part of God's ongoing conversation. While the early Lutherans were rightly concerned about people being misdirected away from Jesus by being taught to pray to the saints, they granted that the saints in heaven pray for the Church on earth (Ap XXI, 8-9). The sad idea that you had to go to Jesus' Mom to get her to put in a good word with her somewhat testy and judgmental Son without question perverted the truth of the Gospel. Here was no real Saviour. Without a real Saviour, of course, there wasn't any dear Father in heaven eager to hear the cries of His dear children either. The early Lutherans granted that Mary, without question, prays for us (Ap XXI

27). She does it simply because she is one of God's dear children. She too has been brought in through Jesus into God's active speaking for the life of the world. If we are blessed with being a part of that active speaking on earth, then how much more would we be blessed when that continues in heaven. The Lutherans argued that Mary doesn't need to be asked to pray in heaven because, set free from sin, she doesn't need to be prompted to do this but simply fulfills her calling as she is meant to do.

The Church, after all, is not made up of living saints on earth and dead ones in heaven (John 11:25). The calling we begin on earth is not ended but fulfilled when we enter into the fullness of God's presence. The saints in heaven enjoy and live in the reality of God's love as they abide in and fully live out God's will in heaven (Romans 8:38). As God's heart is turned toward the world, and its needs and salvation, there can be no question that the hearts of the saints are turned with His toward this world. The saints in heaven are not in a joy that forgets the need of all others, turned in on itself like some Buddhist Nirvana. They do have peace in the truth, though, that all is unfolding according to God's plan and under His control. They do not worry and fret like we do, because they fully know and live in faith's truth that the Lord is God. They care for us in our troubles, but they are not anxious about them. Heaven's great cloud of witnesses are alive in Christ (Hebrews 12:1). They are not cut off from us. We remain united in Jesus. Death has no dominion over Him or over any who abide in Him who is the resurrection and the life. We are one family. Our needs continue to be their needs. They pray for us because they continue to care for us. The early graffiti in the catacombs calling on Peter and Paul to pray for the Church no doubt were based on this truth.

When I was going through seminary, the only part of the Lutheran Confessions that I found more shocking than the fact that we said that Mary was the Mother of God was when I read the passage that said, "we do not forbid prayer for the dead (Ap XXIV 94)." "What?" I thought. "What's this all about? Why on earth would I want to pray for the dead? I can see how I could use their prayers, but what on earth would I pray for them for? Don't they have all that they need already?" At that point I still saw prayer as something I did to get God to do something He wasn't doing or wouldn't do. As if I noticed a problem that escaped His attention and I had to say, "Ahem. God I think you missed something here." I didn't get the idea that in prayer God was involving me in His work. I still saw it as mine. Now I must confess that I don't make use of the freedom to pray for the dead that the Book of Concord allows me, other than to remember the saints that we remember throughout the Church Year. The early Lutherans allowed prayers for the dead without telling us we had to do it. Now of course they didn't mean that we could somehow pray people into heaven. Without question they knew that Jesus had that one covered. The allowance, rather, is built on the idea that even in heaven everything that we receive we receive by God's grace. When we get to heaven it's not like we've earned something that is ours by right. The life God gives us there will ever flow to us, but not because God owes it to us. That life is never truly ours, but is a continual gift from our dear Father in heaven.

Again we must understand that prayer is not about getting God to do something that He wouldn't do on His own. Prayer does not force God's hand against His will. It's not some sort of arm-wrestling match that we do with folded hands. Prayer brings us into God's own work for the world. It makes us a part of His active speaking. Prayer joins us in His will for His dear children. The saints in heaven enjoy God's blessings because He wills to pour them out upon

them. Asking Him to do that makes us a part of what He is doing according to His own will. As we pray for God's work to be done, we are reminded that He is doing it, even as we join in on it. Mary in heaven prays for us in accord with God's will, but she's not in heaven as though she made it on her own and now God owes her something. She enjoys God's blessings only by God's grace, and so, as we would pray for God's blessings on others, the confessors allowed that you could also ask God to bless her likewise. As heaven and earth pray together and for each other we see how beautifully God is bringing us all back together around His table to join in His eternal conversation.

F) A Dear Father hears His dear Children

When it comes right down to it, the way you see prayer is determined by the way that you see God. If you look on Him outside of Christ you can only see Him from the perspective of the law. Without Jesus you cannot see a dear heavenly Father. Your sin gets in the way. All you can see is a faraway God who is justifiably angered over your faults and failures. Outside of Christ you can only see God as an adversary, which shouldn't be a real shocker, since outside of Christ you can only see God from Satan's viewpoint. In Christ, though, you can see God from the perspective of the Gospel as a dear heavenly Father who delights to give good gifts to you. In Christ you can see a God who loves you, saves you and claims you as His own. In Christ you can see a God who welcomes you into His own family, giving you a place and a voice at the family table.

When we view God outside of Christ, prayer becomes an appeal to a distant God to do something for our good. From the viewpoint of the law, God is someone that we have to get to do what we want by begging or bargaining or convincing or coercing. Our prayers interrupt Him in His conversation, intruding on His time and thoughts to get Him to pay attention to our needs or troubles. Our prayers get Him to be bothered with us and take some time out of His regular business to deal with us, like a two year old knocking on the door of the bathroom to get their Mom's attention. We wrestle with God to get Him to give us something that He wouldn't give us on His own. We have to bend Him to our will. If we didn't pray, He wouldn't look after us. If we didn't pray, He would simply let everything go hurtling out of control toward hell. If we didn't pray, God would not work anything for our good. God's involvement in our lives would all depend on our asking. His help would hinge on our request for it.

From the viewpoint of the Gospel, however, God is a dear heavenly Father who has made us to be His dear children. He is watching over us, ever attentive to our every need and trouble. He provides even before we want. He answers even before we ask. He helps even before we call. Our prayers do not interrupt His thoughts. They do not break in on His conversation. As His children our voices are welcomed into the family dialogue. As His dear children, He makes us a part of His active speaking for the life of the world. He invites us to join Him in addressing the needs of the world and their answer in Jesus. He speaks to us in His word, that we might come to know Him and so learn to speak like Him. As He draws us into His own speaking, He unites us as one family in His own voice. As the children of God, we speak together for each other over space and time - heaven and earth are united in one conversation, and in one voice.

When our eyes are fixed on our sin, then we can only see God as an angry deity who needs to be appeased and somehow motivated to act for us. When our eyes are fixed on our sin, we cannot

know God or call on His name as dear children would call to their dear father. But with Jesus before our eyes, and the truth of our new birth in Holy Baptism, all that we can see is a God of love who is our dearest Father, who delights to hear His children and answer when they call. In the greatest act of grace, this dear Father welcomes us into His family, inviting us to call on His name. He opens our lips to join in His own speaking for the life of the world. Truly no man could ever imagine what God had in mind for us in Jesus. What great grace is given to us that we should be called children of God, to be given such a voice at the Lord's own family table!

Part 2 - Speaking Life in the Family of God

A. God hears our speaking because we are His Children

At our supper table my children all take a part in the family conversation because they are members of the family. Each one has their own chair at the table - as they were born my Dad made them one. They have not earned these places. They are theirs by birth. As a father, I listen to them because they are my own dear children. They are all heard on this basis, whether it is the oldest teenager or the youngest kindergartener. I am thankful for this daily meal time together as it connects us and forms a major part of our family life. It is one of the few times that we are all together and get to live out our life together. Throughout the day we are all off at our various callings, but most evenings we gather to share our meal and our lives as we speak with each other.

Now I don't want to paint too idyllic a picture of life around the Reinhardt family table. At times I may have to refocus the conversation, or tone it down a bit or even a lot. There are other times when you have to drag the information out of some of the members. (I don't know how you can spend a whole day at school and do nothing.) Our family table is a sinners' table, and so it is far from perfect, but it does give a picture of what goes on in God's family conversation. It is an image of that conversation after all - a shattered image but an image nonetheless. As my children have a place at my table because they were born to me, and as I listen to them because I am their father, so too we have a place at God's table, and our heavenly Father listens to us simply because we are His baptized children (Titus 3:4-7).

1) Our Father does not hear us because of our holiness

Prayer's power lies firmly in the Word of God, as poor sinners' mouths are opened to pray it with God's Son. God does not hear us based on how good or bad we've been. Without question sin makes it harder to pray. Like any other kid who gets into trouble we can want to avoid our Father's gaze. Our sin gets in the way of seeing His love. This is why regularly receiving God's forgiveness is so important for a healthy prayer life. God's forgiveness turns our eyes away from ourselves and our sin to keep them fixed on God's love for us in Jesus. God will still hear your prayers when you've been bad, which is a very good thing because if we're going to take God's word for it we're not the best kids. Thankfully being good or bad doesn't make you God's child. Being good or bad just makes you a good or bad kid. A bad kid is still a kid nonetheless. Our prayer is heard and answered not because of our own goodness, but according to God's goodness (Psalm 4:1; 69:13, 16). The prayers of the righteous are heard and answered not because of their own righteousness, but according to God's righteousness (Psalm 143:1-2). The power of all prayer lies in the Word of God, and not the person who speaks it. So too, we do believe that there are holier people in heaven or in our midst who will be heard better because of their holiness. The only holier One we bring our prayers to is Jesus, and He is the One who sets all of them before the Father.

St. James rightly says that the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16). Keeping in mind the truth that none is righteous, because we all like sheep have gone astray (Isaiah 53:6), we see that he can't be thinking about the personal righteousness of anyone but Jesus here. Jesus is the righteous One who was heard in His many cries (Hebrews 5:7) and is seated at the right hand of God to make intercession for us (Hebrews 7:25). In Christ we are

God's children, and in the righteousness that He gives us and in His righteousness alone do we make our appeals to the Father. The righteousness that we receive by faith is the righteousness of Jesus (Romans 3:21-26). Faith in itself does not make us righteous. *Our* act of believing does not make us righteous in God's eyes. Faith to be faith has to be faith in something. Faith in faith is no faith at all. Saving faith is always faith in Jesus. Faith receives the goods, but it is not the goods. Christ is. Faith is essential. Without faith you can't hold on to the goods. Faith in Christ keeps us abiding in Christ. Faith has us standing in Christ and Christ alone. Through baptism into Christ we become God's children; or, as Luther said we become "*little Christs*" (*Freedom of the Christian 1520* - this particular term was popularized in English by C.S. Lewis in his work *Mere Christianity*). Clothed in Christ, God hears us as His dear children because we pray in Christ's own righteousness. When it comes to holiness then, we are all heard based on the same holiness. We are all heard because of Jesus.

2) Our Father does not hear us because we pester him

As our own holiness will not move God's heart toward us in prayer, we also must understand that God's heart is not moved by constant pestering. Would a dear Father in heaven who opened up His heart to give us His only begotten Son while we were yet sinners, be deaf to our cries until we bugged him enough to get the answer we want? Such pestering for success in prayer again sounds a bit like the taunts that Elijah made towards the prophets of Baal. We will not get God to do what we want by irritating Him to the point that He gives us what we want. When Jesus gives the example of the poor widow who pesters the unjust judge until she gets what she needs (Luke 18:1-8), He is not describing the way God works. Here is one of Christ's negative examples. If even the unjust judge will hear when the widow cries, how much more so will the Just Judge who is a dear Father hear and answer when His children cry to Him!

Jesus calls His disciples not to give up in prayer, but to continue in their requests to God in faith that He will answer out of His goodness. Jesus is encouraging His disciples to continue on in the family conversation of the Trinity that deals with the needs of the world. In the right moment and right way God will answer these needs according to His plans. As Jesus encourages us to continue to lay these needs before God, He is encouraging us to live out in repentance the truth that the Lord is God. Our tendency as sinners set on being our own gods is to try to pick up and carry God's own burdens. We take on things that are not ours to bear. In a recent conversation with someone worried and wearied with all the troubles in their family life, I told them "I've good some great news for you today! You know what? You're not the Lord. This is not something that you have to carry or fix. God, believe it or not, has got this covered."

As the Lord allows us to continue to lay the same burdens down before Him, He schools us in the way of repentance. Needs that remain from day to day show us that we are not the Lord. Having to ask for help repeatedly for the same need frees us from the idea that we can handle life on our own. The time God uses to unfold His answer to our prayers serves His good purpose of teaching us to cast our burdens upon Him. When you have to face the same problem over and over again, like St. Paul, you learn the sufficiency of God's grace for you (2 Corinthians 12:9). The problem that you cannot overcome teaches you your weakness, even as it turns your eyes toward heaven for help. We are allowed to repeatedly ask so that we can grow in asking, and so be made ready to receive. Repeat praying draws us deeper into the truth of faith that help can only be found in the Lord. Repeat prayer breaks down our own will, that we might learn to pray

all the more according to God's will in faith and trust in Him. Repeat prayer does not batter down the doors of heaven it batters down the doors of my own sinful heart.

3) Our dear Father does not hear us because of our commitment

The prayer of faith is not heard on account of my faith, where faith is my commitment to or belief in my own will. The prayer of faith is the prayer of trust which lets go of my own will and simply and wholly rests in God's will for my life and the life of others. I do not approach God believing with all my might that He will do what I want Him to do. My might will not bend God to my will. I am not my God's god, after all. In repentance I recognize that the Lord is God, and so faith in prayer is all about submitting my will to the Lord's will - resting in His might, and not trying to force my will upon Him. Sadly, many believe that faith in prayer is all about my personal commitment to my will, along the lines of: if I truly believe that God will do what I want, then He will do it; but if I am hesitant about this, or only halfway committed about that, then He won't hear me. I give good gifts to my children not because they really believe that they should have them, but because I believe that they will be good for them. Even though my oldest is completely committed to having endless hours on the X-Box, out of love for him the answer is one hour once a day. On the other hand, I don't demand that he prove that he really wants his supper (not that that's ever in question) before I put his food before him at the proper time (Luke 11:10-13).

Prayer is not some spiritualized form of the power of positive thinking - where if I really believe with all my heart then I'll get what I am asking for. God does not hear my prayer because of my commitment to it, or for that matter on account of my commitment to Him. God hears my prayer because of His commitment to me. He hears me because in Christ He has chosen me to be His child through my baptism. In the family relationship, a child's devotion to his parents may follow the parents' devotion to the child, but the parents' devotion always comes first. There would be no child without Mom and Dad's commitment to have a child in the first place. A parent's commitment to their child is about their love for that child, not the child's commitment to them. The commitment of God is what gives birth to my own commitment to Him. God loves me first in Christ and only through that love am I able to love Him back (1 John 4:19). As God chooses me in Christ, only then am I able to choose Him back. Only as God commits to me in Christ am I able to make a commitment back to Him. God hears and answers me when I pray because He is committed to me. He has promised to hear and answer.

My promises do not move God's heart toward me in prayer. Kids may promise to clean up their rooms so that their parents will let them do what they want (in our house it normally involves staying up for the hockey game), but our heavenly Father doesn't look for such bribes and He certainly doesn't respond to them. If we had to clean up our lives before God would answer we'd be waiting an awfully long time. God simply responds to us according to His promise that when His children call He will answer (Isaiah 65:23-24). He has promised to hear us because we are His children. As the Father He can't do anything but hear His children. To not listen to us He would have to deny Himself as Father. Since we have been brought into God's own family, God could ignore our prayers as much as He could ignore the prayers of the Son or the Spirit. As He listens to them, He listens to us. In our Baptism we have been made one with the Son and we have received the Holy Spirit. When we pray in Jesus in the Spirit, the Father hears us with Them and hears Them in us. When His children pray according to His Word, God hears

because He is true to Himself. He is true to His promise. He is true to His Word. God doesn't listen to you because of your promises, but on account of His promises, which is a very good thing, since poor sinners like you and me aren't very good at keeping our promises to God.

4) Our dear Father does not hear us because of our many words

The eloquence of the words does not make a prayer more effective either (Matthew 6:5-7). Beautiful prayers are truly beautiful because of the beauty of God's Word. While we may recognize the gifts that God gives someone for the poetry of words or clarity in speech, this does not make the prayers more effective. The most beautiful prayer that any Christian can pray is the prayer that Jesus Himself has given us. There is none more beautiful in the ears of the Father. Here there can be no question that we are praying the Lord's Word in accord with His will. These words and this will are without doubt the words and will of the Holy Trinity as the Son Himself has given them to us. Sadly, though, we can disdain this most perfect and beautiful of prayers while we focus on some words that we or someone else has chosen instead. This is not to say that there cannot be much beauty in other prayers, yet their true beauty lies not in what we bring to them but in the Word of God that they speak.

When my children announce that they are hungry and ask, "What's for supper?", they are not required to put it into Shakespearean poetry to get something to eat. They might be reminded of their manners, that they should say please and be patient while my wife or I get it ready for them. They may be told not to turn their nose up at what is put on their plate accompanied by the parental go-to story of starving children in Africa. They will be encouraged to ask for their daily bread with thanksgiving, but the reason why it will be put on the table is simply because my wife and I are their parents and it is our love-bound duty to provide for their needs. No matter how beautifully they were to put it, they would not get chocolate with their breakfast - unless of course you are our youngest daughter Sofia - and you bat your eyes and cock your head as you ask - but she doesn't count because we had her too late in life and we have already slipped into grandparenting mode with her. (She is God's special gift to my older children to save them from growing up under the tyranny of the idea that somehow life is fair.)

Now although my children do not make their requests for pizza in Shakespearean sonnets, they do make their requests in the language of the family home. There are certain ways that we speak to one another because of who we are as people and how our family works. In its own way each family has its own language and ways. When it comes to God's family the same is also true. Now of course God hears the prayers of all His children in Christ and will answer them. He will provide for them when they call because He is their dear heavenly Father. Our life with God, though, is not about bringing God into our family but about us being brought into God's family. Our life with God is not about teaching Him our language but about Him teaching us His language. My prayers are not heard better by God because they are said in beautiful prose or poetry just as they are not heard better because they are spoken really plainly or in rap. My prayers are heard because God is my dear heavenly father and I am his dear child. Yet there is a family language that the Lord is teaching us in His Word - a language shaped by repentance that humbly but boldly calls on the name of the Lord. We come as foreigners into God's house and as we by God's grace grow in the family life we do move from - "Hey God, toss me some bread" to "Dear Father, give us this day our daily bread."

5) Our dear Father does not hear us because of our feelings

Although this Word of God should be prayed as though we mean it and not simply rambled off without thought, our prayers are not heard because of the emotions that are behind them. Prayers are not to be rambled off like some kind of spell or incantation. Prayers are to be offered in faith, but faith and feeling are not the same thing. While I may be aware of faith with my feelings, feelings should never be the proof test for faith. To say that I feel like I believe, therefore I believe is a lie that has robbed many of the life Christ has for them. Not feeling as they think they should feel, they assume that they have lost faith and so walk away from God. When it came to the question of faith, the Lutherans refused to turn people in on themselves to find proof of its existence in their feelings. They simply continued to point people to the Word where they knew faith was created. They directed people to God's promises in the Gospel and God's living out of those promises in their Baptism, Absolution and the Lord's Supper.

The Reformed teachers like Calvin wanting to find proof for lasting faith in themselves turned people in on their own emotions asking them to check out whether they were aware of faith and its fruits in themselves or not. Luther knew from his former life that no assurance of faith could be found within himself. He knew that his feelings were not to be trusted. We all know that feelings are notoriously unreliable. The newest term I heard lately to do with feelings is the word "Hangry". After much study science is now able to tell us that couples fight more when they're hungry - so the term "Hangry" You're angry simply because you're hungry. If the scientists had bothered to ask any parent, they probably could have told them about the "hangry" phenomena and saved them all the time and money. Any parent whether their child is two or sixteen would testify to the "hangry" phenomena. A piece of undigested meat can make us feel all kinds of things even as Dickens' Scrooge points out, it can even make us see ghosts.

Luther knew that he could only believe in God as His heavenly Father if the heart of that God was continuously held up before him in the Son that He gave to save him. Faith is never something that is possessed but something that needs to be continuously created and maintained. Faith needs the Gospel every moment of every day or it will die. Turning us in on ourselves tears faith away from its object and so kills it. Our eyes are no longer fixed on Jesus but on ourselves instead. Resting on our feelings about Jesus is not the same thing as resting on Jesus. As Lutherans we know that anything that we bring to table is going to make a mess of everything. When it comes to the life of faith, it has to be only and ever about Jesus. As sinful human beings our feelings cannot be trusted. Sin has put them all out of sorts.

The prayer of faith is born of God's truths set before us in Jesus - that because of Christ we have been brought back into God's family. The prayer of faith is founded on the reality of our baptism. With our baptismal rebirth set firmly before us, there can be no question that we are speaking to our dear heavenly Father as His dear children. As in any other family, certainty of membership in the family is founded on the truth of birth or in some cases adoption. At times in our lives as children, we may feel like we don't belong to our families. We may have behaved badly and so feel like we don't deserve to belong. We may feel out of sync with our family because of their behaviour or our own. Yet our birth stands there testifying to the truth despite our feelings. So too in the life of faith and our place in God's family, our baptism speaks to the truth even when our feelings fail us.

The prayer of faith is the prayer that approaches God as our heavenly Father and we as His dear children simply because that is the truth whether we feel it or not or for that matter whether we believe it or not. Just as my belief in God does not make God God, neither does my belief that I am God's child make me His child. I am His child because of my baptism whether I believe it or not. The atheist's unbelief in God does not knock God off of His heavenly throne and overthrow the Divine Majesty. The atheist can sit and close his eyes and pretend that there is no God. Yet despite his personal beliefs, God exists. So too my belief that I am God's child does not make it true, neither does my unbelief make it untrue. My unbelief will rob me of my birthright's benefits. If I don't believe that I am God's child, I will not approach Him as a dear child approaches a dear Father or count on Him as one even though that is what He is and remains to me.

The prayer of faith, then, is not the same as the prayer of feeling. I may feel very deeply when I call on the name of the Lord but my prayers are not heard better because of how I am feeling. I may not feel much at all when I am praying and yet my prayers are still heard by God because He is my heavenly Father. The prayer of faith simply calls on God because of the truth of who He is to me through my baptism into Christ. I do not feed my children because they ask me for their food with feeling. I give them their food at the proper time simply because they are my children and it is my duty to give them their food as their father. The prayer of faith is prayed in the truth that God truly is my heavenly Father and He will hear me because I am His child. What brings me to believe this is not my feelings but God's Word that proclaims this truth to me in the reality of my baptism (1 Peter 1:3-5).

6) God hears us because He is our dear Father

Will God hear me when I pray? Of course He will, because I am baptized. Will God answer me when I pray? Of course He will, because I am baptized. In faith I can even go so far as to say God must hear ... God must answer ... because He will always be true to Himself. I am not saying here that the Almighty isn't free to do whatever He wants, but God has shown us clearly in Christ what He has freely chosen to do for us. He has shown us in Christ that He has made us His children and so He has freely chosen to bind Himself to hearing and answering us. God has to hear and God has to answer because He has chosen to promise to do so and He is one who will not go back on His Word. Can He change His mind? As God of course He can, but He has chosen and promised not to. Even when we are faithless, He is and always will be faithful because He will always be true to Himself (2 Timothy 2:13).

The prayer of faith that God has promised to answer, then, is the prayer prayed according to God's word under God's will. The prayer of faith is the prayer that asks God to do what He will do. Learning to pray faithfully is all about being brought by God deeper into the truths of His Word and then asking Him to fulfill His purposes for us and others. From outside the family, prayer that simply asks God to do what He is going to do could seem like a bit of a cop-out. What's the point of that? If praying to God isn't about getting Him to do what you want Him to do, why bother? From outside the family you don't see God as a dear heavenly Father who will only ever do what is best for His children. You either see Him as some distant deity that you have to somehow finagle or butter up enough to get what you want, or you see Him as some rival that you have to overcome or persuade to your way of thinking.

From inside the family, though, we can come to know the truth of God's fatherly divine goodness and mercy toward us that does wonderful things for us without any merit or worthiness within us but simply because He is our dear Father and we are his dear children. Knowing and growing in the truth of our Father's goodness leads us to pray ever more for God's will to be done. Wrestling with the will of God gives way to a peaceful surrender to His plan for our lives and the lives of others whether we understand it or not. From the Word of God we learn to know our real needs and the needs of others and in faith we grow in laying those needs before the Lord without prescribing to Him how He should provide for them. As dear children we learn from all that our dear Father has done for us in Christ to trust Him. As the Spirit teaches us through the Word to know our Saviour and the God who gave Him to us, He opens our lips to pray, "Not my will, but thy will be done."

For truly indeed the only prayers that are answered are those that are prayed in accord with God's Word and under His will. God's will is the only right will. His way is the only right way. Not because God is some overbearing parent who has to always have His way but because He truly is the Lord and knows what is best for us all. The Father answers all prayers offered in the name of Jesus but only prayers that are in accord with God's Word can be prayed in the Word's name. The Spirit will not take part in prayers prayed against the will of God. The Son will not take such prayers upon His lips before the Father's throne. The Father's will is one with the will of the Son and the Spirit. We must remember here that the Lord in mercy and grace is inviting us into His active speaking with our prayers. We are not bringing Him into *our* will but He is bringing us into *His* will. He gives us the privilege of bringing the needs of the world before Him that He might answer them.

As Luther repeatedly says in the small Catechism, God will do what He wants to do even without our prayers. God is not bound to our prayers. He as Lord does what He will when He wills according to His own good purposes. We do not alter God's will with our prayers or strong-arm Him into our way of thinking. There are without question times in Holy Scripture where God's people seem to be trying to sway God from His set path. These times, however, are not so much about changing God as they are about changing those who pray. As God moves people to intercede and draws out their intercession, He brings them closer to the mind of Christ. As Christ spurs the Canaanite woman on in faith by making reference to the fact that it is not right to feed the children's bread to the dogs (Matthew 15:21-28), so too God at times pushes people on to plead all the more for what He wants to give them. Here He leads them ever deeper into His own will for the world.

B. What our dear Father does through the prayers of His Children

Since the Lord is God and will do what is best for the world and us apart from our prayers, the question could be asked why pray at all? And if God is going to do what He wants anyway do my prayers do anything? Do they matter? These questions even though they are natural ones come from an adversarial way of seeing God. In repentance and faith we need to be reminded that God is not the adversary; someone else has that job. When we see God adversarially we are seeing Him from the wrong side of our baptism. At that moment we're standing in someone else's shoes. Someone whose shoes Christ has saved us from standing in when He delivered us out of the kingdom of darkness into His marvelous light. Our prayers are not about moving God but moving us to embrace and live in His will and His work all the more fully and deeply.

Through our prayers God makes us a part of His work. He honours us with a place in the family salvation business. He treats us as His true children as He gives us a share in the Son's work. Why do we pray, then? As God's children we must be about our Father's business.

1) Our dear Father draws us deeper into His family

Now if God is going to do what He wants anyway, do our prayers do anything? First of all, without question the very act of praying does great things for us in our life of faith. Prayer is born of the life of faith but it also serves the life of faith. We pray because we believe but we also pray that we might believe. Prayer leads us deeper into our relationship with God. Just as communication in our human relationships deepens our bonds with one another, so our relationship with God is deepened through our communication with Him. As the Lord shares Himself with us through His Word, so too through our word we share ourselves with Him. He comes to us that we might come to Him. God could grant all that we ask without our speaking a word to Him, but He draws us deeper into our lives with Him by giving us the opportunity to share ourselves with Him. He draws us closer as He invites and enables us to bring all our needs to Him.

Although an infant has a relationship with his parents from the moment the child is born to them, that relationship deepens and grows as the child grows and learns to communicate with his parents. In the beginning they share all with him but through their speaking to him he learns also to share himself with them. They know him from the start but his knowledge of them grows through his communication with them. His relationship to them deepens as he learns to share himself with them. So too in our life with God, from the moment of our birth as His children in Holy Baptism we have a relationship with Him. He is our dear Father and we are His dear Children. As He shares Himself with us through His Word, He also teaches us to share ourselves with Him. As He speaks to us, He opens our lips that we might speak to Him.

In prayer we live out our relationship with our heavenly Father. As we encounter need in this world (our own need and the needs of others), the Lord opens our lips through faith to bring these needs to our heavenly Father. As these needs bring us to call upon the name of the Lord they lead us to live out our Father-child relationship with Him. We pray to Him because He has revealed Himself to us in His Son Jesus to be our dear Father in heaven. As we act in faith on this revelation we confess it and so are confirmed in it. I call out to God because He has shown me in Jesus that there is no other God who can save like Him. As I call out to Him in such faith I exercise that faith and it is built up and strengthened.

Here is the reason that God allows need in my life and why He doesn't always take it away immediately. Here is the reason why He allows suffering and trial in life. That I might learn to pray. He allows these needs to come upon me that I might be turned toward the Lord and call upon His name. He allows these needs to come upon those that I love that I might learn to spread out priestly hands with Jesus and intercede for them. He allows need to come upon the world that I might cry out to heaven for it. He allows people to persecute and hurt me that I might learn to pray "Father forgive them." The Lord could provide for all of my needs without my prayer as He does with the rain and the sun for the whole of creation. Yet by drawing me through need to call upon Him in prayer He leads me to live out the truth that He is my heavenly Father. God will grant whatever He wills to grant for me even without my prayers but by

enabling me by His Spirit to ask for these things He draws me ever deeper into the truth that He is God.

2) Our dear Father involves us in His work

Now our prayers serve an invaluable role in our life of faith but they do also accomplish great things in the world. In them as I mentioned earlier we take part in God's active speaking in the world. God could without question accomplish His will without our prayers but He chooses out of His great grace to involve us in His work as His true children. Our prayers as they are prayed to the Father in the Spirit through the Son truly take up their place in the ongoing creative and active speaking of the Holy Trinity. God wills to do this out of love for us because we are His children. Through our prayers God wills to provide for the needs of others. He wills to keep evil at bay in the world. He wills to prosper His Gospel and expand and strengthen His Church. Through our prayers God wills to accomplish His good and gracious will for the world. As we pray with Jesus in God's will, the Lord does some of His mightiest work through us.

If we were to fully grasp this truth we can see how quickly we would take up St. Paul's encouragement to pray without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:16). In our sinful tendency to see ourselves standing on our own two feet independent of God we do tend to lean towards our own action when it comes to the needs we run into in the world. At times we treat prayer as a last resort when our own strength fails us. We treat prayer like little children who only cry out for their parents' help after trying to do something on their own until they finally break down in frustration and tears. I know I've caught myself saying, "Sometimes all that we can do is pray" as though prayer was the lesser of those things we can do as God's children instead of the greatest thing that we can do. At times God allows us to face such overwhelming trials and troubles just to leave us without anything but those most powerful words, "Lord have mercy."

When it comes to our lives as God's children we need to know that growing up does not mean growing out of our dependence on Him but growing into it. The life of faith is about becoming more child-like (Mark 10:15) not about being big and strong and independent. In school its frowned upon when little Johnny shows up with his giant life-like erupting volcano to demonstrate the real time flow of lava to his fellow 4 year olds in kindergarten because it's clear Dad had a hand in little Johnny's work. Not so when it comes to our work as God's children. Our work as God's children is meant to have our Father's handprints are all over it. It's at its best when it does. We get to be a part of truly beautiful things when we fold our hands so that the Lord's hands might be at work in us and in the world. When our hands are busy mucking around we might be able to proudly say we did it on our own but the volcano is just a lump of grey plasticine with a hole in the middle and some shredded construction paper sticking out of the top. Yea we did it. All by ourselves. But it lacks the wow factor that's there with the one that Dad had a hand in.

The wow factor of the project we're invited to take a part in can be seen in John's vision of the multitude from every tribe and nation and tongue standing before the throne of the Lamb waving their palm branches and crying out their praises to the Son of David who has saved them (Revelation 7:9-12). The will of the Father is the salvation of the world. He does not desire the death of any sinner but that he repent and live (Ezekiel 18:23, 32). He wills that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in Him should have eternal life and be raised up on the last day

(John 6:40). He does not desire that any of His little ones should perish. God's will is to work all things for that good purpose - whether it's joys and blessings or a thorny crown and a cross. God wants to save us. God wants to save all. This is the will of God that is the ultimate goal of all our prayers - that the Lord would save the world (1 Timothy 2:1-6). This is the sum total of what is prayed for in the "Our Father." Christian prayer at its heart is always a mission prayer. The end goal is always the multitude with each one of you as a part of it.

As God's children born anew to Him from above in the waters of Holy Baptism we are being reshaped into His image. All that we will be is already conceived within us but its truth is being unfolded in our lives by the work of the Spirit. Although we might not be able to see it very often, as His true Children our Father's will is our will. Our old sinful man may struggle with that will on the outside, he may even rage and fight against it at times, but the new man in us embraces it with joy even if it means a cross for us. God in His wisdom knows what is best and we as His true children desire the same. With Jesus we learn to pray in hard times, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will (Matthew 26:39). I hold on to the truth that you are my dear Father and I can trust you to do what is best - what is best for me and others." Through the Spirit's work we can even be brought to the point of praying with Jesus that whatever is best for others is best for me even if it means a cross.

C. The Goal of the God's Family Conversation

As dear children of the Father, praying for the salvation of the world is what we are to be about. This does not exclude praying for all the things of life in the struggles and joys that we meet from one day to the next but it does mean being brought to see these needs in light of this ultimate and greatest goal. A good case in point would be our prayers for the sick. There's perhaps nothing that can move us to pray more than a diagnosis of cancer for ourselves or someone that we love. We are right to ask God's healing hand to be at work to restore this person to health, yet our ultimate goal is that they be eternally healed through faith in Christ. Christ's healing miracles in the Gospels after all are never end goals in themselves but signs that the kingdom of God has come near (Luke 10:9). They are there to point to the greater healing that the Son has come to bring. While we are right to pray for healing of the sick, our focus should be on their salvation. I know for myself this does not come naturally. I have no problem with committing myself wholly behind a loved one's physical healing while their eternal salvation gets far less attention. Perversely I can even think that focusing on the person's eternal salvation shows a lack of commitment to their physical healing. As though my dear Father in heaven would only grant such healing if I was fully committed to it!

When it comes to physical healing, I have seen many things over my time serving Christ's people as a pastor. I have seen a widow in her seventies miraculously recover while a far younger man died of cancer. The older widow was all alone and ready to be with the Lord. The younger man had a large family that still needed him. There seemed to be no sense in what happened. But some years later the older widow married a man who got to hear the Gospel because she married him. The younger man who died ended up bringing hundreds of people to Church to hear the Gospel at His funeral. There would have been a far smaller crowd at the service had he followed the rest of his family in living into old age. If only one of those people is helped on their journey to heaven through his death I know he would be humbled and blessed by the honour of being a part of that. I have seen a young baby recover from certain death to

bring her siblings and parents into the church while I've seen the death of a man in his fifties that without question has cemented his family's life in the Church. I have seen a man die from cancer far before his time but end up dying in faith because of it while before the illness he was convinced he was going to hell.

While we might have ideas about how we think the Lord should unfold His answer to the trials of our lives He alone knows how all the pieces fit together into His great plan for the world. He alone knows how each detail of my life is to be used for my good and the good of others. As God's children we need to understand that we truly have been invited into this great work of the Lord which in this world is normally accomplished through a cross. Through our baptism we have been united with Christ and so made a part of God's salvation plan for the world. God gave His Son to save His enemies. He has baptized us into that Son and so we are brought into that life of sacrifice. While I lay my needs before the Lord when they come upon me, the heart of my prayer as a Child of God is that He would use my life as His Child for the good of others whatever that may be. I may have my heart set on physical healing yet if my death were in any way to serve to help someone along their journey toward heaven that would be an honour and privilege far beyond what I deserve. If someone should stand before the Lamb in eternity because in some small way God used my life or death to connect that person with Christ could there be any better way to spend my earthly life?

1) Our Joint Speaking for God's Great Goal

Through Baptism into Christ we are God's children and so are a Royal Priesthood, as St. Peter tells us (1 Peter 2:9). We are called into the sacrifice of Jesus, being asked to take up our crosses and follow Him for the sake of the world. We are also called into His intercession ... His pleading ... His active speaking for the life of the world. We do that both together and on our own. When we gather on Sunday mornings we come to the family table to share in the family meal and we join in the family conversation. We hear the Lord's Word and we join in its speaking with our prayers. As God through His law sets our needs and the needs of the world before us and in the Gospel reveals and gives the answer to those needs, we pray in the light of that answer for our needs and the needs of others. The pattern is set down by Jesus on the night when He was betrayed where as our great High Priest He prays for His disciples in those very hours where He gives the Church the heart and centre of her weekly meeting in the gift of His own presence in His body and blood.

At the family table we join in the family conversation. We join in God's active speaking for the world's salvation. Often in this place the pastor as the servant of Christ takes up the pleas for all and all speak through him as they join him with their amens and responses. Here we live out in figure the truth of how our prayers enter into the heart of the Trinity. We are only God's children through Christ and so we only enter the family conversation in Jesus. As the Pastor speaks to us for Christ, so through the Pastor together we speak to the Father through Christ. While God can and will do His will in this world even without our prayers, He in great mercy has chosen to work through our prayers to accomplish His good and gracious will. When the Children of God gather together to call on the name of the Lord, great things are happening. As I have already said these prayers do not have more value in being prayed together but in them we live out our family life together as Children of God. As we open our lips together we are

reminded that we never pray alone as in faith we never stand alone but are ever a part of a great whole that the Lord is making one even as He is one.

Throughout her life the Church has had a rich life of prayer. As we are told in the book of Acts, from the beginning the disciples devoted themselves to the prayers which in all likelihood were the daily prayer services at the Temple (Acts 2:42). In the freedom of the Gospel the Church has set hours for prayer laying out services where the Word of God is paired with praying. This custom has fallen out of practice for the most part in our midst. We have the services in our hymnal but the daily prayer services aren't for the most part prayed in our congregations on a daily basis. Our modern world leaves little room for such gathering and group praying. With a deeper understanding of what God does through our prayers there may be a place for our congregations to set some such times for joint praying. It may only be the pastor who can be there. He alone may be speaking for all but his praying for all in that hour accomplishes great good nonetheless and emphasizes for the whole congregation that truly this is the Father's business that we should be about. Could there be any greater blessing for the people of God than to look in the Church throughout the week and see their pastor on his knees before the altar praying for them?

As our churches are placed in our individual communities throughout this country that the light of Christ might shine in their midst in the good news preached from their pulpits, they are also placed in them that they might be a blessing to them in prayer. In recent years we have revived the custom at Trinity of tolling the church bell with each petition of the Lord's Prayer. As each toll of the bell rings out over the farms and fields around the congregation it announces the truth that in that moment the children of God are calling on the name of the Lord in the petitions of the "Our Father" for the good of our community. As the wind carries each resounding toll across the land the Spirit bears our pleas to the Father through the Son for the salvation of those all around us. In this we, as the Lord's children, are also reminded that our prayers are not just for our own good but for the good of all. We are reminded in this way that our prayers at this moment are joining us in the heart of the Father for all those around us. While without question we pray for the good of the whole world there is a truth that God places His children in specific places and callings that He may do His work in those specific places.

2) Our individual speaking for God's Great goal

As this is true for us a whole it is also true for us individually as well. God has placed each one of us in a particular place amongst particular people that He may do His good work there for those people. As we call on the name of the Lord for ourselves and our own needs God also invites us into His active speaking for the good of all those around us. Our vocations in this world give us those that God wants to serve through us. One of the greatest ways that God does this is through our prayers. From childhood on we learn to pray for God's blessing upon our families. As we grow in years God gives us greater opportunity to pray for them as He opens up our eyes to their needs in new and greater ways. At the heart of our prayers as God's children naturally is the salvation of those that God has brought into our lives. We pray for His work through trials and troubles and blessings and joys to draw them closer to Him. At home, at work, at school, at Church God gives us all kinds of people to keep in prayer. Even in our trips to the grocery store or the mall there are people that God brings into our lives that we can ask for His mercy for them. Yes... you can even pray for the Police Officer who has pulled you over on the

side of the road to give you a speeding ticket. These prayers do not need to be long drawn out affairs. Like the modern practice of texting they can simply be a plea for the Lord's grace for the person and His blessing upon them.

Now as we get to pray for others as we live with them or meet them in our day to day journeys we also have a special place as God's people to bring them with us to Church on Sunday. Obviously we would like to bring them physically with us to share in Christ's gifts yet we still can carry them with us even when they themselves don't come. Dr. John Kleinig has a beautiful way of applying the Gospel account where the four friends carry their paralyzed friend to Jesus (Mark 2:1-6) to our prayer life as God's children. In the account the four friends in faith carry the man to the house where Jesus is and when they can't get him in they make a hole in the roof and lower him down. Notably Jesus connects the friends' faith with the miracle. Just so Dr. Kleinig says we can carry our friends to Jesus when we come before Him on Sunday morning. They have no faith to bring them and so we in our faith carry them to the Lord and leave them with Him. Here is a place where we can especially bring all those in our lives who have known the Lord but have left behind the safety of the Father's house. As we come before Jesus as He stands in our midst in His flesh and blood we can carry these dear ones in our hearts and lay them down before Him there that He in grace might grant them to rise up and return home in repentance and faith.

3) Our enemies included in God's great goal

Both as a Church and as individual children of God we without question can never hear often enough our Lord's word to us to pray for our enemies (Matthew 5:44). In truth those who persecute us and hate us are in need of prayer far more than anyone else in our lives. If we were to divvy up our prayer time our enemies probably should get far more attention than our friends. Although our dear Father of course doesn't hear our prayers on the basis of how much time we devote to them, the time we devote does reveal the direction of our hearts. Praying for our enemies is not something that we easily take up but it is the way of the Lord's heart - the way He has invited us into as His children. In our daily lives at any given time we may be at odds with someone. It may be in our families, at work, in our neighbourhood, in our schools, and even in our Church. Sometimes we can without question say that this person is our enemy. Other times we may want to shy away from that term even if we know that the relationship isn't all that it could be. In any case these are the people that need our prayers for their sake as well as our own. Now this praying of course is not the prayer that calls on God to straighten them out but the prayer for God's blessing upon them and a healing of the trouble. Praying for them in this way keeps us in God's heart for them and guards us against falling into sin's way of hate. The help for this person begins first and foremost in the healing of our own hearts toward them.

When it comes to life in the Church we especially need to hear our Lord's word about praying for our enemies (1 Timothy 2:8). In any congregation at any given time there will always be some that are having a hard time getting along with others. Sometimes these divisions can be quite severe while at other times they can be relatively minor. The Church is without question the family of God. The members of the Church are the Lord's own children - the brothers and sisters of Jesus and so brothers and sisters of one another. This family life is to be a life of love but the Church is also the place where the sinners gather. I tell people at home, "If you're looking for the good people don't come here. The good people don't need to be here. Only

sinners come for what's given out in this place." God does great things amongst His people in the Church but they are still sinners and so they still sin against each other and though there ought not to be there can be divisions among them. They might not want to call someone their enemy but they do act like it toward them. Here again the Lord wants to draw us into His own heart. He calls and encourages us even as He through His own forgiving love enables us by His Spirit to pray for those within the Church that we struggle with. In praying for our enemies we should be especially cautious about coming to God with the answers that we think are needed in this situation - how He ought to straighten these people out. This is not a place to call down fire from heaven upon them - as James and John found out, Jesus isn't in to that kind of praying (Luke 9:54-55). We are best in these places to call on the name of the Lord for their well-being and blessing as we ask the Lord to lead them in the same life of repentance that we seek from Him for ourselves.

When it comes to divisions in the Church our Lord's word to pray for our enemies without doubt needs to be heard and take root amongst us. Although we as a Synod have so much that unites us, there are without question some divisions amongst us. This is the way of sin after all and as each congregation is made up of sinners so is our Church body. As God's children I know we all lament these divisions and long for their healing. Sadly, even in the Church we can come to see others on one side of a debate or another as enemies or at least treat each other as such. Debate needs to happen in the Church. The Reformation showed us clearly the truth can never be taken for granted but must constantly be upheld and defended. Teaching and practice must ever be examined in light of the scriptures or it doesn't take long for us to get off track. Yet in this debate the enemy is ever crouching at the door waiting to take hold of our hearts and lead them away from love. How important it is then to take up the names of those that we see on the other side of such a debate and earnestly pray for their well-being and blessing that together in love we may work through these questions as children of God.

As we pray for those within our Church body that we don't exactly get along with we should also remember those outside our body that are lost in error whether it's those who are also seeking to follow the Lord or those who have embraced false gods altogether. As the Lord brings the nations to our front doors with all of our international immigrants we couldn't get a more Pentecost-like environment if we tried. Stepping out your front door these days brings you in contact with the whole world. Here again is a place for God's children to pray for those that don't know Christ. When the Jehovah's Witnesses come knocking and you're hiding in your house and pretending that no one is home here is a perfect time to pray for them. As you drive by the Mosque that sprang up on the street corner in your neighbourhood here again is another opportunity to call on the name of the Lord. As the CBC has yet another programme featuring someone who is pushing the LGBT agenda here is another time to pray for God's mercy on someone. When you see the depraved criminal on TV who just finished killing umpteen people in some school or workplace here again is a place to pray for mercy. And yes ... we can pray for a messed up young man who killed three men who devoted their lives to protect us, even as we remember their families and fellow officers in their great grief.

If you're ever worried about not being useful in this world you only have to watch the evening news to know that God's got plenty of work to keep you busy. As God's children the Lord has wonderful things that He wants to do with our words. As our dear Father He is ready and willing

to answer His dear children every time we call. We have the Lord's name not so that we can curse our enemies. We have the Lord's name that we might call upon it to save them. There is without question a lot to be angry about in our world. So many are turned against the Lord and His ways. The temptation is ever there to rise up in judgement against them. The temptation is ever there to run them down with our tongues but this is not the way for the dear children of the dear Father. He has much greater things for us to do.

D. The Family Conversation - the great work of our lives

As a child I prayed for my hamster and I got my budgie. I wanted to talk about sunshine and butterflies instead of asking for things that didn't seem to matter as much to me. Without question God delighted in my prayers. I was living out my life of faith in my simple way but God did have greater things in mind for me. He wanted to make me a part of His things. Greater things ... yes there are many greater things ... that God would have us be a part of ... in our world ... in our country ... in our communities ... yes ... even in our Church. I know you know the horrors that surround us out in the world and at home. I know you know how more and more are abandoning any kind of true morality to embrace whatever is right in their own eyes. I know that you know that people are being ever turned in on themselves and being overcome by hopelessness and despair. I know that you know how fewer and fewer hear the Word of the Lord and call on His name. I know that you know how many who once proclaimed the name of the Lord have abandoned the truth to proclaim the lie. I know you that know how the persecution of the faithful is on the rise in the world and even here at home. I know that you know that so many of our congregations are ageing and shrinking.

There is no question that there is a raging sea of need all around us. There are times when its towering waves and bottomless depths overwhelm me. There are times when I'd rather not face it or think about it. I feel so small and useless in the face of it all. These of course are the times when I forget that these troubles are not mine to solve or carry. These are the times when I am living out my own god-complex instead of living in the truth of my Baptism. There is only one who can deal with all the wounded brokenness around us. God and God alone has the answer for our world. He knows what it needs and He knows how best to give it. I cannot and never will be the answer to anyone's needs but in His great grace my dear Father wants to make me a part of His answer. He wants to use my mouth and my voice to take up His Word and call on His name and be a part of His work in this world.

Dark times? Yes, we are living in very dark times. Times not unlike the first centuries of the Church. Are we oppressed? Yes. Of course we're oppressed. Christ is with us, after all, and we wouldn't expect the world to be for us, would we? Are these frightening times? Terrifying. Satan is having his way with so many around us. But God in His wisdom and the greatest of grace and mercy has honoured ... honoured you and me with the privilege of living in these days my friends. I know we tend to cry out in dismay at all the horror of our world and wring our hands over the sad state of affairs in the Church. I know when we look back to the glory days of the 1950's and 1960's of our Church body here in North America we might not see these days as a great time for God's people. But you and I have been granted the great privilege to stand with the few in these dark times that the Lord might show the surpassing greatness of His power and shine His glorious light into this dark night. In His mercy God has asked us few to stand with his Gideon against the overwhelming hordes that are rising against us.

The challenge is so great that it leaves us in no doubt that we have nothing in ourselves to win it. All we have are the trumpets of our voices and the name of the Lord. These may not look like much in the eyes of the world and sadly we too may despise them at times leaving them to lie in a corner while we try all kinds of other means to win the victory. In these dark days there is no question that the Lord wants to renew His people in the special place He has given them as His children to call on His name for the life of the world. He in great grace and mercy continues to give us more and more to pray about. These things are not allowed to come to pass that we might throw up our hands in the air in dismay but that the Holy Spirit might fold them together instead and teach us to pray. Are we being humbled in this time? Without question. But whatever humbles us is good for us as it takes us out of our pride to stand in the Lord and in the Lord alone. Like Jesus on the cross our hands and our feet are all being nailed down, my brothers and sisters. All that is being left free is our tongues that we might cry out with Him for the life of the world.

Conclusion

Family life and speaking go hand in hand. As God's dear children born again in the waters of Holy Baptism the Lord has brought us into His own family that He might speak to us and we might speak to Him. He has made us a part of His family conversation. He speaks His word to us. We respond to that Word in our prayers. God involves us in His family speaking about the family business. This business as revealed so clearly to us in Jesus is the salvation of the world. As God involves us in this business through our prayers He hears us as His dear Children simply because He is our dear Father. As His children, our speaking becomes like His speaking. Speaking His word according to His will in Jesus, our speaking becomes an active speaking that does great things in the world. All of this depends on God and God alone and has nothing to do with any worthiness or merit in us. God simply does this out His own fatherly divine goodness and mercy because He is our dear Father and we are His dear Children. The Lord hears and answers all His children young or old solely based on His Fatherly love for us in Jesus.

Our whole life long the Lord wants to draw us ever deeper into this truth that in the good news of the Gospel we would come to see God ever more as such a dear heavenly Father rather than as a distant God that we have to sway to our will. Learning in the good news of the Gospel to truly know Him we by grace can be matured into believing and praying in the truth that Father does know best. As Jesus told His disciples, the Lord has great works that He wants to do through us. He has honoured us as His dear children to be a part of the great unfolding of His salvation in the world in these dark days. May our dear Father in heaven be at work in our lives as individuals and as a Church to open our lips that we might call upon Him and so fulfill this great calling to the glory of His holy name.