

17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

July 24, 2022

Do you ever wonder what your life would be like if you got everything you ever wanted? I know it sounds completely ridiculous. After all, life doesn't work that way, right? But just for a second, imagine it does. How would things have turned out for you? For the better? Are you sure?

I don't have to tell you that life is an assortment of all sorts of things - all sorts of experiences and all sorts of outcomes. Some good. Some bad. Some in-between. Some bring us happiness and some bring us sorrow. Some we rejoice in and some we lament. Some lift our spirits and some are just downright painful. And so, it makes perfect sense to wonder how our lives could have been "better" - makes sense to wonder what we would change if we could.

But think for a moment. What would have happened if our parents had let us eat candy or junk food absolutely anytime we wanted? What would have happened if our moms and dads had let us go to that one unsupervised high school pool party? What if we had gotten into our first college of choice instead of the one we eventually attended? What if the guy or girl we had a crush on a long time ago, felt the same way as we did? What if we got hired by the first company we applied to? What if? What if? What if?

It's impossible to know exactly how our lives would have played out if we had gotten everything we hoped for, if every situation turned out the way we wanted it to. And while it's easy to imagine how our lives might have been "better", it's just as easy to see how things might have been "worse" if everything had gone our way.

Maybe we would have had health problems as a child if our parents had given us the okay to eat whatever we wanted.

Maybe we would have gotten injured or in trouble had we gone to the pool party?

Maybe we would have struggled academically if we had gotten into our first college of choice? (And, of course, we certainly wouldn't have the same friends as we have today. That's for sure.)

Maybe we would have married the absolute wrong person if that boy or girl from long ago had said "yes".

Maybe we'd be miserable if we had gotten that job we desperately wanted (or maybe we'd be unemployed at this very moment).

I guess it's somewhat heartening to think that maybe my life and yours have unfolded exactly as they were supposed to, and that the ways we imagine our lives could have been better are just illusions. But how do we explain the really big disappointments, the ones that truly break our hearts?

The addiction our son or daughter can't beat. The countless marriages that crashed and burned. The parents suffering from Alzheimer's disease. A child with a serious illness. And the biggest of all - the death of loved ones - especially those who have gone at an unexpectedly early age and time. What are we to make of that? Are we not supposed to think that things would have been better if these things had never happened?

That's just too hard to contemplate. And probably wrong.

My friends, in many ways the experiences of our lives are like three threads woven together. One is God's will - those things God is actively working to bring about, things that reflect God's deepest desires for the world he created and sustains.

The second thread contains the experiences that come about through the choices we and others make, things entrusted to us by our loving God who never forces himself nor his will upon us. These "choices" we and others make can, of course, be aligned with what God wants or can run counter to his will. This is the stuff of life over which humankind has a certain kind of

“control”. Sometimes we do good with these choices, and sometimes we don’t. That goes without saying.

And the third thread is a kind of catchall for those things that don’t quite fit into the other two - all the other things that happen to us simply because we are creatures living in a “natural” world that has a certain amount of randomness built into it. All sorts of true accidents and natural disasters and such fall into this category.

And so, it can be nearly impossible to try to figure out exactly how these three things interact. And therefore, we can’t ever know with certainty how things might have been different had certain events in our lives gone a different way. It’s just not possible.

So what’s a believer to do?

Pray anyway.

If we look closely at the words of the “Our Father” - we’ll see that the prayer is really not about asking for “stuff” - really not about asking for particular outcomes. What does it contain? It starts with line of praise. Then we pray for the kingdom to come (and in another version, God’s will to be done too). Next we ask for our daily bread (i.e. the things we truly need). We end with asking God to forgive us to the degree we forgive others, and to keep us from temptation.

Hmmmm. That sounds so different from the way we commonly pray when we use our own words, doesn’t it? In other words, the “Our Father” seems to be all about letting God know that we are on board with what God wants for us and from us, not what we want from God. And that should tell us something.

Does this mean that we shouldn’t ask God for things? Should we not lay all of our needs at his feet and ask him to help us in every way possible? Can’t

we pray for a cure and a job and a faithful spouse and a child who knows right from wrong and all those sorts of things?

Of course, we can. Jesus makes that perfectly clear in the passage we just heard which followed the “our Father”. Ask. Seek. Knock. Be persistent. That’s a recipe God wants us to follow. But what does God promise us when we pray?

“ . . . how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.”

Bingo.

My dear friends in Christ, we will never know why one person gets a cure and another doesn’t. We will never know why some of us seem to have more than our fair share of sorrow or tragedy or disappointment. We will never know why some lives unfold in-line with the person’s desires, while other lives unfold contrary to the desires of the people involved. Put another way, we will never know the mind of God in that sort of specific, concrete way. Not even close. After all, we are creatures, and He is not.

But we pray anyway. Persistently. We turn to God with our needs. And we trust that he will provide, that he will give us our “daily bread” - even if we don’t understand the hows or whys about it, even if at times it makes no sense to us. Praying and asking and seeking and knocking are signs of faith. We should never abandon them. But there is one thing that God will always provide - no matter what - every time we open our hearts and minds and souls to him.

Himself.

What we truly need in this life, the only thing, is God - not a distant, disinterested God, but one who accompanies us every step of the way, guiding us and comforting us and sustaining us. It is this sort of intimacy, this sort of “communion” with the divine that will help get us through the

tough times, help us navigate every sorrow, every disappointment, every cross. It is the God within who will bring about a new day - a new Easter from whatever Good Friday we are experiencing.

That's the God we have, a God who never makes us go it alone.

So let's keep asking. Let's keep wondering. Let's keep "pleading" with God for every good thing, knowing that in the end, God's will is what a life of faith is all about. And part of that "will" (maybe the most important part) is his desire to live within us - and thereby change everything. Imagine that.

" . . . how much more will the Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him."

What a God we have!